

The Grammys Cannot Ignore Deborah Dugan's Complaint

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According to one [Recording Academy official](#), the reason that the CEO of the Grammys was fired after just five months on the job is this: "What we expected was change without chaos." Facing [years of public criticism](#), with its president stepping down after more than a decade and a half in the position, the academy hired Deborah Dugan—previously the head of Bono's HIV/AIDS charity—with an implied mandate to make music's top awards-giving body more inclusive, fair, and relevant. Dugan says her attempt to break up the Grammys' "boys' club" led to her retaliatory ousting. Grammys defenders say she was a bully, and one employee accused her of abusive management. One way or another, the "chaos" now unfolding would seem to make change inevitable.

After the board terminated Dugan on January 16—just 10 days before this Sunday's Grammy Awards—Dugan filed a scorching complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The polemically written [46-page document](#) lays out a narrative in which the new CEO discovered corruption and malpractice and attempted to remedy it, only to be stymied. It also recaps the public evidence that critics have long cited against the Grammys—and argues the organization is even more sexist, racist, and self-dealing than it has appeared to be from the outside.

The complaint's most shocking allegation is that Neil Portnow, Dugan's predecessor who'd led the Recording Academy for [over 16 years](#), was accused of rape by a musician after a Carnegie Hall performance. Details are sparse, but Dugan claims the board of trustees knew of an accusation by a "foreign recording artist" against Portnow. Dugan also claims that Joel Katz, a lawyer for the Grammys, sexually harassed Dugan shortly after she was hired. Portnow has [since called](#) the rape claim "ludicrous" and "untrue" and asserted that an internal Grammys investigation into "my conduct referenced in the EEOC filing" found him innocent. Katz [denies](#) Dugan's allegation that he harassed her. The complaint additionally cites other female employees' complaints of harassment and retaliation for whistleblowing at the organization, and mentions anonymous targets of racism there as well.

Such instances of alleged misconduct are presented in Dugan's complaint as part of a larger, systemic indictment of the Recording Academy. The document runs through many known facts: that only 9.3 percent of the nominees in five of the most prestigious Grammy categories from 2013 to 2018 were women; that Beyoncé, Kendrick Lamar, and other major artists of color are routinely snubbed for major awards; that the Academy's 12,000-person

voting membership is “overwhelmingly” white and male; that Frank Ocean and Drake have openly criticized the organization. Dugan then adds to this public record with allegations about how the awards-giving process really works.

According to Dugan, the board of trustees is able to add artists to Grammy nomination lists even if those artists didn’t receive enough votes in the regular selection process. She also claims that nomination committees—which whittle down nominees from a list of 20—often include artists eligible for awards or people who work with such artists. Duncan alleges that the conflicts of interest led to a musician on the 2019 Song of the Year committee ensuring their own work was nominated, even though it had ranked poorly in the general voting process.

The picture that emerges from Dugan’s complaint is of an organization encrusted by years of self-dealing and mismanagement by a small group of players. Dugan alleges that she was asked to sign off on a \$750,000 consulting contract for Portnow, and she claims that producer Ken Ehrlich—who has orchestrated the Grammys telecast since 1980—had a hand in selecting nominees for awards. Her complaint also criticizes the non-profit Recording Academy for paying millions of dollars to outside lawyers with conflicts of interest rather than hiring an in-house counsel (Katz is the former chair of the board, and the Academy’s lawyers also represent individual board members and recording artists).

The Recording Academy’s defense thus far has been to portray Dugan as self-interested and problematic. “It is curious that Ms. Dugan never raised these grave allegations until a week after legal claims were made against her personally by a female employee who alleged Ms. Dugan had created a ‘toxic and intolerable’ work environment and engaged in ‘abusive and bullying conduct,’” the Academy said in a [statement](#). According to Dugan, that female employee was Claudine Little, the former executive assistant to Portnow who Dugan tried to place elsewhere in the organization after she claims Little failed at some basic office tasks. The Academy [has alleged](#) that Dugan asked for a \$22 million payout to step down quietly; Dugan denies that account.

Dugan laid out her allegations on *Good Morning America* today, but as she told George Stephanopoulos, “I’d much rather be here talking about the artists and the music.” What seems clear, now, is that it’s going to be hard for anyone to talk about the music of the Grammys without also talking about the behind-the-scenes drama—because Dugan has made her firing about something bigger than herself. Are there conflicts of interest in the nomination committees? What was the substance of the allegation against Portnow, and what did the board’s investigation of him entail? Was Dugan right to argue that a non-profit should have in-house counsel rather than paying millions to outside firms? It seems likely that some artists called on-stage at Sunday night’s Grammys will raise such questions. The already-ailing credibility of the Grammys will depend on the answers.

