

How the Grammys Descended into Behind-The-Scenes Chaos

 time.com/5770558/deborah-dugan-grammys-controversy

When Alicia Keys hosts the 62nd Annual Grammy Awards on Sunday, she will likely try to keep the mood as upbeat as she did last year. But a dark cloud hangs over the proceedings. The Recording Academy is currently locked in a vicious battle against its former president and CEO Deborah Dugan, who had led the organization for not quite half a year before being placed on administrative leave on Jan. 16. Since then, accusations of harassment, corruption and conflict of interest have whizzed back and forth, with the rancor seemingly only escalating by the day. On Jan. 21, Dugan filed a 44-page complaint to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accusing the Academy of retaliation and voting irregularities; in a public statement, the Academy accused Dugan of being “abusive and bullying.”

And while the dispute centers on one woman, its implications go far beyond her, shedding light on the Grammys’ gender imbalance and the larger music industry’s issues of inequality and reported backdoor dealing. In an interview on *Good Morning America* on Thursday, Dugan claimed that the Grammy awards are often rigged by board members: “There are incidents of conflict of interest that taint the results,” she said—sparking a denial from the Academy.

Whether or not her accusations are true, the controversy is a huge blow for the Grammys, an organization desperately trying to shake off its stodgy reputation and turn the corner on a troubled era in which high-profile artists like Drake and Frank Ocean have renounced them. Here’s what you need to know about how the Recording Academy arrived at this tenuous position, and what’s at stake.

In 2018, a Firestorm Erupts Over Representation

Four days before the 60th Annual Grammys, a study on the music industry was released by the University of Southern California’s Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which found that just 9 percent of the 899 people nominated over the previous six Grammy Awards were women. In addition, barely any female producers or songwriters were credited on the country’s top-charting songs. “When it comes to women’s ability to contribute and to lead, they’re being shut out of the process,” Stacy Smith, the professor who led the study, told the *New York Times* in 2018.

At the awards show four days later, only one woman, Alessia Cara, won a solo Grammy on air. In a backstage interview at the show, Recording Academy president Neil Portnow told reporters that women “who want to be musicians, who want to be engineers, producers,

and want to be part of the industry on the executive level” need to “step up.”

While Portnow later said he regretted the unfortunate turn of phrase, which put the onus on women rather than the institutional obstacles that held them back, the damage was done. His comments were met with a fierce backlash across the music industry, with #GrammysSoMale exploding as a trending topic on Twitter; many prominent female artists called him out on social media and demanded his resignation.

I wish the #Grammys would return to female/male categories. Who will young girls be inspired by to pick up a guitar and rock when most every category is filled with men? I'm not sure it is about women needing to “step up”, (as said by the male in charge).

#GrammysSoMale <https://t.co/v1rvbT3pCC>

— Sheryl Crow (@SherylCrow) January 29, 2018

Dugan Attempts to Turn the Page

Portnow stepped down in July 2019 at the end of his contract. To replace him, the Academy tapped Deborah Dugan, an executive who previously served as the CEO of Red, a nonprofit founded by Bono and Bobby Shriver with a mission to eradicate AIDS.

Dugan pledged to fight inequality in the organization by enacting wide-sweeping changes. “All the issues that Neil has addressed have led us to a larger conversation, and that is a conversation, of course, that we need to have about women and diversity in music,” Dugan told the Los Angeles Times in May 2019.

Dugan’s goals were buoyed by the Recording Academy’s first Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion, which was hastily assembled in the wake of the Annenberg 2018 report. In December 2019, the task force, led by Times Up president Tina Tchen, filed a 47-page report documenting the representation shortcomings of the organization—including the fact that just 22 percent of Grammy voters are female—and issued 18 demands for the Academy to meet. Dugan announced that she would take up all but one of the recommendations.

“We’ve known as an industry for a long time that we have a monumental problem with gender issues,” she told NPR in December. “This is a major restructuring to allow for immediate diversity.”

Dugan clashes with Academy insiders

As Dugan strove to implement changes, she found herself at particular odds with two people at the Academy: Joel Katz, a powerful industry lawyer who represents the Grammys, and Claudine Little, Portnow’s former assistant. Dugan alleges that prior to her hiring, Katz

propositioned her and tried to kiss her at a dinner. Katz, in a statement issued by his lawyer to TIME, “categorically and emphatically denies her version of that evening.”

Little and Dugan also clashed as Dugan settled into her job. Dugan claimed in the EEOC complaint that Little, who worked at the Academy for over 19 years, “was not up to the task” of being an assistant: that she didn’t know how to use an Outlook calendar and received complaints about her conduct. (The original version of the complaint stated that Little was criticized by Barbra Streisand’s manager. But Michael Willemin, one of Dugan’s lawyers, said that it was actually Streisand’s “executive producer” who made the comment.) Little, in turn, accused Dugan of being verbally abusive and creating a hostile workplace environment.

“Ms. Dugan’s choice to litigate in the press and spread a false narrative about the Academy and me and my colleagues is regrettable, but it is also emblematic of Ms. Dugan’s abusive and bullying conduct while she served as the Academy’s President and CEO,” she wrote in a statement to TIME.

Dugan is ousted

Ten days before the 2020 Grammys, the Recording Academy released a statement announcing Dugan was out: “In light of concerns raised to the Recording Academy Board of Trustees, including a formal allegation of misconduct by a senior female member of the Recording Academy team, the Board has placed [Dugan] on administrative leave, effective immediately.” The record producer Harvey Mason, Jr. was named interim president.

The “senior female member” in question was Little, who says she filed the allegation of misconduct—which Dugan characterized as an allegation that she “acted in a hostile manner” towards Little—on Dec. 17. However, Dugan said in the complaint that Little’s allegation was a smokescreen for the academy—and that her dismissal actually stemmed from a harshly worded note she wrote on Dec. 22 to the Academy’s head of human resources.

In that note, she recounted Katz’s alleged harassment and claimed that board members approved payments to themselves and were plagued by conflicts of interest. She also wrote that Portnow had been accused of rape by a female recording artist—and that Dugan had only learned of the accusation after she agreed to be CEO. Portnow, in a statement, responded that “the allegations of rape are ludicrous, and untrue”—and added that after the accusation was made, “an in-depth independent investigation by experienced and highly regarded lawyers was conducted and I was completely exonerated.”

The Dispute Spills Out Into the Open

In the week in between Dugan’s dismissal and the Grammys, a media firestorm has erupted, with each side releasing a volley of statements to the press. On Jan. 20, Mason, Jr. alluded to

Dugan's creation of a "toxic and intolerable" and "abusive and bullying" work environment—and said that when she was asked to step down, she asked for millions of dollars to withdraw her own allegations. "I'm deeply disturbed and saddened by the 'leaks' and misinformation, which are fueling a press campaign designed to create leverage against the Academy for personal gain," he wrote.

On Jan. 22, Dugan responded by filing an explosive complaint in which she claimed that her dismissal was the result of her efforts to uncover a range of misconduct at the Academy that was "all made possible by the 'boys' club' mentality and approach to governance." Dugan says she was asked to sign her name on misleading tax documents; that other high-ranking women at the Academy had been harassed and silenced; and that the organization had tried to make her hire Portnow as a consultant for \$750,000 following his dismissal.

The Academy responded to the complaint in a statement: "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.' Ms. Dugan was placed on administrative leave only after offering to step down and demanding \$22 million from the Academy, which is a not-for-profit organization. Our loyalty will always be to the 21,000 members of the Recording Academy."

Willemin, one of Dugan's lawyers, denied this claim in a phone call with TIME. "It's clearly a narrative the Academy is pushing to make her look terrible and besmirch her even more," he said.

Dugan's complaint also waded into the Grammys' voting process. Dugan claimed that board members use shadowy and unsupervised nomination review committees "as an opportunity to push forward artists with whom they have relationships." For example, she said that in the race for the 2019 Song of the Year, an artist who initially ranked 18th out of 20 in the category garnered a nomination because they were not only represented by a member of the Board, but also allowed to sit on the nomination committee itself.

In a statement released on Thursday, the Academy refuted these claims. "Spurious allegations claiming members or committees use our process to push forward nominations for artists they have relationships with are categorically false, misleading and wrong. This process is strictly enforced with everyone involved and has no exceptions." The statement added that while artists may serve on a committee in which they have received a nomination, they are not allowed to vote in that category.

Battle Lines Are Drawn

Several high-profile artists have come to Ms. Dugan's defense, including Chuck D and Sheryl Crow. "I salute Deborah Dugan for her truth and courage to try and effect change. As always, a bunch of ignorant, testosterone-fueled, usually old white men stop progress and screw it up," Chuck D, from Public Enemy, wrote on Instagram.

A group of four women on the Academy's executive committee released their own statement on Facebook. They pledged to investigate all claims but also defended the culture at the Academy, writing, "We would not have taken precious time away from our families and careers if we felt that it was a 'boys' club.'"

On the evening of Jan. 23, the Recording Academy Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion weighed in to express disappointment and demand swift changes from the Academy—including the appointment of a Diversity and Inclusion Officer. "We are deeply disappointed at the level of commitment by some of the Academy's leadership in effecting the kind of real and constructive change presented in our report," the statement read. "These are changes that need to be made at the highest levels and institutionalized so that they outlast any single leader."

Portnow and Mason, Jr. did not respond to requests for comment.

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