


The 2020 Grammys' sexual harassment and corruption controversy, explained

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Deborah Dugan on ABC's *Good Morning America*.

The music industry is set to celebrate its brightest stars, showcase its breakthrough new artists, and honor musical legacies at the 62nd Grammy Awards on Sunday, but the star-studded ceremony is taking place amid controversy and explosive allegations that paint the Recording Academy (which oversees the awards) as a corrupt and sexist institution.

Earlier this month, the Recording Academy's board of trustees abruptly placed CEO Deborah Dugan on leave after the Academy said an assistant had accused her of bullying. She had only held the position for five months.

Dugan has denied the charge and filed an extensive complaint to the Los Angeles Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, saying she was suspended in retaliation for uncovering misconduct and corruption within the Recording Academy. The complaint says that the Academy's general counsel sexually harassed her; that her predecessor as Academy CEO, Neil Portnow, had been accused of rape by an artist (a charge Portnow has denied); and that the Grammy nomination process had been unfairly manipulated.

The result is that, on a night that's supposed to be about music's most important achievements and influential artists, the biggest story is about the people behind the glamorous awards show and whether or not they deserve that privilege.

Deborah Dugan vs. the Recording Academy, explained

Dugan's conflict with the Recording Academy came to a head just five months into her tenure as CEO. Dugan had replaced prior CEO Neil Portnow, who had been with the Recording Academy for 17 years; the announcement was in April, and Dugan took over the role on August 1. Dugan was the first woman to ever serve as Recording Academy CEO, and her appointment was seen as a step toward modernizing the organization, which historically has had a poor track record regarding diversity and inclusivity.

On January 16, less than two weeks before the Grammys, the Recording Academy's board of trustees placed Dugan on administrative leave, which the board said came "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 said it had hired two independent investigators to look into the matter, and it’s expected, according to Billboard, that the investigation will conclude in early spring.

In response, Dugan filed a 44-page complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission saying that her suspension was actually retaliation for fighting wrongdoing “made possible by the ‘boys’ club’ mentality and approach to governance at the Academy.”

Dugan’s complaint says that the Recording Academy staffer who accused her of bullying had previously worked for Portnow. Dugan also alleges that the staffer’s work was not up to her standards, and that she had offered the staffer a new position. She says that board members responded to these allegations by taking away Dugan’s administrative powers within the Academy. The New York Times reports:

Harvey Mason Jr., a record producer who is the board chairman, sent Ms. Dugan a letter on Dec. 9, informing her that she was no longer permitted to terminate staff members without board approval, and could not assign any new initiatives or choose any outside counsel for the academy’s legal work.

Dugan’s EEOC complaint also says that on December 22, 2019, she sent an email to Shonda Grant, the Recording Academy’s head of human resources, saying she had been sexually harassed by a lawyer who represents the Academy, while also alleging corruption and favoritism within the Grammy nomination process.

Perhaps the prime example of the alleged corruption was 2019’s “Song of the Year” award. Dugan said that an artist was allowed to sit on the nomination committee, and even though that artist was ranked 18 out of 20 in the category, they still ended up with a nomination. The complaint reads:

This artist was actually permitted to sit on the “Song of the Year” nomination committee. Incredibly, this artist is also represented by a member of the Board. As a result of the foregoing, it is not surprising that many high caliber artists who could have taken home the award in a specific category, have, at times, not been nominated at all.

Dugan’s complaint also says that the chair of the board was trying to ensure a \$750,000 parachute for Portnow’s departure, by contracting him as a consultant after his exit — an exit the complaint says happened because of a rape allegation against Portnow:

In addition, the email complained that Ms. Dugan had been asked by the then-current Chair of the Board, John Poppo to hire former CEO Neil Portnow as a consultant for the hefty sum of \$750,000. Mr. Portnow bowed away from the Academy in disgrace after making misogynistic remarks about woman recording artists. As Ms. Dugan came to learn after she agreed to take the CEO position (for which she was paid substantially less than her two male predecessors), Mr. Portnow also allegedly raped a female recording artist, which was, upon information and belief, the real reason his contract was not renewed.

On January 25, Dugan gave an extensive interview to [the Los Angeles Times](#), in which she explained that her EEOC complaint was not about the Grammy Awards but about the Academy.

“The ceremony is about the musicians and the fans. I don’t want to taint that,” Dugan said. “This is about the Recording Academy. The Recording Academy must change. To bring the Grammys down because of a few bad eggs [at the Academy] wouldn’t be fair to the artists.”

She continued: “This is not something I would bring on myself and try to grab the limelight right before the Grammys, but I feel like there was a series of events, that I had to defend myself.”

Taylor Swift has reportedly canceled a surprise performance at the Grammys in solidarity with Dugan

As Dugan’s fight with the Academy has unfolded, many artists have remained silent. But some have publicly expressed support for Dugan, as have some staffers within the Recording Academy.

The Recording Academy Task Force on Diversity, [formed in 2018](#) to improve diversity and inclusion within the Academy, [released a statement on January 23](#) voicing its shock and dismay over Dugan’s allegations. It called upon the Academy’s board to implement a series of system-wide changes, including equal representation, hiring an outside adviser to review workplace culture, and changing the election system for board members:

On December 12, 2019, we issued a 47-page report, setting out 18 systemic changes we determined were needed to improve diversity and inclusion at the Academy, and drive constructive change across the music industry. These new charges reinforce just how important and urgent it is that the Academy implement all of the changes in the report that we delivered — without any delay.

The Academy's Board of Trustees and leadership must immediately commit themselves to real reform, take concrete steps to implement all of the Task Force reforms, and transparently and regularly report on their progress — including transparently reporting on the pending investigations they have announced are underway. The Task Force will be reconvening in 90 days and expects to hear progress from the Academy by that time.

Celebrities including Gabrielle Union and recording artists like Sheryl Crow and Public Enemy's Chuck D have also supported Dugan. Chuck D wrote on Instagram, "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. Same old bullshit."

In terms of the Grammys telecast, none of the artists previously announced as performing have canceled. However, Taylor Swift was reportedly going to appear as a surprise performer, but has pulled out in solidarity with Dugan, according to Variety. Per the New York Post, Swift was expected to perform her song "The Man," a tune about gender inequality and the double standards women are held to in society. The song's lyrics include:

If I was out flashin' my dollars/ I'd be a bitch, not a baller/ They'd paint me out to be bad/ So it's okay that I'm mad

Neither Swift nor her representatives have commented on her reported cancellation of a performance.

It's not difficult to imagine how a performance from Swift might have drawn Dugan's claims right into the spotlight at the Grammys, especially given her Swift's public comments on equality, sexism, and, of late, politics.

But even if no one directly mentions Dugan's allegations during the Grammys ceremony, despite Dugan saying her complaints aren't intended to taint the awards themselves, it's impossible not to think about what's going on behind the scenes.