

At the Grammys, a New Guard in the Spotlight and a Nasty Fight Backstage

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As the Recording Academy and its suspended CEO trade accusations, the Grammys get ready for a star-studded night

The 62nd annual Grammy Awards on Sunday is bringing together star-studded performances by Billie Eilish, Lizzo and Aerosmith, wacky collaborations involving Lil Nas X and BTS and special tributes to artists like the late rapper Nipsey Hussle.

Women will be front and center at this year's ceremony. For the four biggest awards—album of the year, song and record of the year and best new artist—more than two-thirds of the nominees are female artists or acts fronted by women. The latest Grammy nominations have won praise for acknowledging a new wave of female, often genre-blurring, stars like Billie Eilish, along with more artists of color.

News that former Los Angeles Lakers basketball star Kobe Bryant and his 13-year-old daughter died Sunday in a helicopter crash was also felt at the ceremony at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. Fans gathered at the Center, where the Lakers play, and a number of Grammy winners honored before the evening telecast began cited the tragedy in speaking about the awards.

Instead of focusing on pop's new guard, the Grammys are unearthing old problems. The Recording Academy, which hosts the Grammys, is facing a threat to its legitimacy fueled by a very messy public dispute with its first-ever female chief executive, Deborah Dugan, that started 10 days before the ceremony and has continued to ignite a back-and-forth through the weekend.

It began when the Recording Academy said it put Ms. Dugan on leave, based on a subordinate's claim that her management style was bullying. Ms. Dugan fired back with a discrimination complaint alleging sexual misconduct and improper Grammy voting practices. On Sunday ahead of the awards ceremony, the Recording Academy's interim CEO, Harvey Mason Jr., issued a statement promising a "deeper exploration...into voting processes for the Grammys."

"The Grammys are facing a credibility crisis," says Bill Werde, a former editorial director at Billboard magazine and director of Syracuse University's Bandier music-industry program. "The question is: Do they want to try and weather this, or do they want to fix the perceived

problems? If they don't, then, over the long haul, I do think they are facing an existential crisis."

For years, the Recording Academy has been a lightning rod—for its perceived lack of recognition of women and black artists, especially in hip-hop & R&B; for its limited transparency when it comes to voting processes; and its record of favoring commercial blockbusters over critical favorites or zeitgeist-capturing upstarts.

Some of this, the Academy's critics say, stems from its leadership and voting body—64% of the Recording Academy board is male, according to the organization. Its voting members and nomination-review committees, which narrow the top 15 to 20 nominees picked by voters down to five or eight nominees, have historically been populated by older, white and male voices.

As of October, only 22% of Grammy voters were women. Despite an improvement in the number of female nomination-review committee members last year, the share of women on such committees for this year's awards dropped from 51% to 44%.

Questions about the Academy's gender diversity spilled out into the open in January 2018 when Ms. Dugan's predecessor Neil Portnow made comments that women needed to "step up" to climb the music industry's ranks. As a result, the Academy launched a Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in March 2018, led by Tina Tchen of the newly formed Time's Up. The task force published a 47-page report with 18 recommendations for systemic changes in December. These included increasing diversity on all Academy committees, with equal representation of men and women, and changing the Board's election system so that the leadership is more diverse.

In other major changes, the Grammy Awards in June 2018 expanded the number of nominees for its top prizes to eight, from five—an effort to broaden the array of acts it recognizes. In theory, this opens the door to more women artists, hip-hop & R&B acts and critical favorites, though it can also mean more vote-splitting that favors bigger acts.

In November 2018, the Academy widened its membership rules. It intensified efforts to diversify its voting body with more female, nonwhite and younger members, including on its nomination-review committees.

The efforts appeared to bear some fruit. Yet the latest controversy threatens to set the Recording Academy back considerably, critics say.

On Thursday, the Recording Academy task force on diversity expressed its "shock and dismay" at the latest allegations surrounding the Academy and urged its leadership and board to "commit themselves to real reform."

“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 [in December]—without any delay,” the statement says.

Ms. Dugan’s complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission alleges the Academy’s general counsel sexually harassed her and that its board of directors improperly influences nominations for the Grammy awards.

In her complaint, Ms. Dugan called the Grammy voting process “ripe with corruption.” The complaint claims the Academy’s board uses nomination-review committees to “push forward artists with whom they have relationships.” (These nomination-review committees are officially permitted to pick nominees that are not among the 20 or so front-runners picked by voting members.) Ms. Dugan also contends the board manipulates the process to ensure songs or albums are nominated when the show’s producer wants a song performed on the show.

In a statement Thursday, Bill Freimuth, the Academy’s chief awards officer, said such claims “are categorically false, misleading and wrong.”

A key reason the Grammys started creating so-called “secret” nomination-review committees in 1989 in the first place—there’s now one for hip-hop, for example—was to counterbalance the biases of a stodgy voting bloc, which sometimes voted based primarily on popularity or brand-name recognition. Members of nomination-review committees are confidential to prevent “lobbying from outside parties,” Mr. Freimuth says in his statement.

In the separate statement that Mr. Mason issued on Sunday, he pledged to recommit to the task force’s recommendations. Ms. Dugan’s lawyers, in a statement on Sunday, questioned the sincerity of Mr. Mason’s pledge and said the Recording Academy should reinstate Ms. Dugan as CEO.

To many Grammy-watchers, Ms. Dugan’s complaint seemed to confirm existing perceptions of the Grammys—the very same entrenched problems that have made it hard for female and black artists in particular to gain recognition. This, the logic goes, is why Adele won album of the year over Beyoncé in 2017.

The opaqueness of the Grammy voting process fuels a lack of trust. “The whole thing just has to be a lot more public,” Mr. Werde says.