

# Billie Eilish's Grammys and Tyler, the Creator's critiques suggest Deborah Dugan was right

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By Maura Johnston

The success of Billie Eilish at Sunday night's Grammy Awards gave a happy ending to a particularly rocky Grammy season. Just 10 days before the ceremony, Deborah Dugan was placed on leave from her post as CEO of the Recording Academy, which puts on the show and hands out its awards; she replied with a complaint to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on Tuesday, full of allegations detailing sexual harassment and idiosyncrasies in voting, both of which stemmed from what she described as a "boys' club" atmosphere.

Dugan had established herself as someone who wanted to make the Grammys more representative of the music industry early on in her tenure, which began in August. "I actually wanted to make change from within," she said on an ABC "Good Morning America" segment Thursday after her EEOC suit had been filed. Variety reported that, before her ouster, she had reached out to artists who had felt "alienated or underrepresented by the Grammys in recent years" — she wouldn't say which, but Variety noted that hip-hop, R&B and pop heavyweights such as Jay-Z, Beyonce, Ed Sheeran, Drake and Kendrick Lamar were likely in the mix — and in December, she also told the trade publication that she was examining the academy's process up-close while figuring out how to modernize it.

Sunday's show, which she told "Good Morning America" last week she'd "worked very hard" on before her ouster, was fun in spots, yet lagging in others. It was also the last one to be produced by longtime producer Ken Ehrlich, and it had some of the curious booking decisions and anachronistic staging that marked ceremonies of old, such as the hand jives during the performance of the Jonas Brothers' just-released single "What A Man Gotta Do" and the overwrought orchestras that accompanied belter-rapper-flautist Lizzo and pop force Ariana Grande.

Other performances, though, were solid; Gary Clark, Jr., accompanied by the Philadelphia hip-hop collective The Roots, put on a blistering performance of his anti-racism broadside "This Land"; Bonnie Raitt's brief tribute to folk legend John Prine was a lovely moment of steely calm; Lizzo and Grande showed why they've been filling arenas with their elaborate stagings and solid vocals.

The only real misstep was the Prince tribute, which featured R&B smoothie Usher, powerhouse drummer Sheila E. and critically acclaimed synth-soul-popper FKA twigs. Usher proved to be a capable Prince stand-in, and Sheila E.'s drumming was as tightly wound as it was on her many collaborations with the funk-soul legend, who died in 2016. But twigs, whose 2019 album "Magdalene" was one of the year's most critically acclaimed, was somehow relegated to being Usher's backup dancer, a decision that seems to lie with the people behind the show. "of course i wanted to sing at the grammys," she tweeted. "i wasn't asked this time but hopefully in the future."

Meanwhile, L.A.-based provocateur-turned-auteur Tyler, the Creator, who won Best Rap Album for "Igor" and tore through two tracks from it during the ceremony, revived the controversy over the Grammys' inability to properly acknowledge the work of black artists. "On one side, I'm very grateful that what I made could be acknowledged in a world like this," he said in the press room after being asked about the controversies, "But also, it sucks that whenever we — and I mean guys that look like me — do anything that's genre-bending or that's anything, they always put it in a 'rap' or 'urban' category, which is ... I don't like that 'urban' word. That's just a politically correct way to say the n-word to me."

"Urban" has its lineage in radio formatting, which has long been divided along lines of race, gender and age — although it has, as Tyler noted, become synonymous with "black" in the parlance of corporations, particularly in the music industry. In the '70s, influential DJ Frankie Crocker christened the format of the New York radio station WBLS, where he was program director, as "urban contemporary," which was an evolution of what had been known as "black-oriented radio." As Eric Weisbard writes in his radio history "Top 40 Democracy," "urban contemporary" also played white artists, courted white listeners and "relished crossover."

And the crossing over of artists, as Tyler pointed out, continues to be something of a one-way street: white artists can cross over into "urban" formats, but it's far more difficult for black artists to break into non-urban formats, including ones as seemingly broad as pop. "When I hear that, I think 'why can't we just be in pop?' Half of me feels like the rap nomination was a backhanded compliment," he said Sunday.

For much of the 2010s — with 2019 being a welcome exception — pop radio playlists reflected that idea of "crossover" to a fault, as EDM-pop by the likes of the Chainsmokers and Zedd ruled the airwaves, shoving R&B and hip-hop aside to the point where even Beyoncé had to hop on an Ed Sheeran track in order to score her only No. 1 single of the decade. But the popularity of hip-hop on streaming services such as Apple Music and Spotify — and their increasing importance to the overall chart landscape — have changed the makeup of the charts pretty radically in recent months.

Five years ago, the Compton MC Roddy Ricch's skeletal "The Box" wouldn't have been a likely candidate to unseat Justin Bieber or Selena Gomez from the top spot on Billboard's Hot 100 singles chart, but it's held onto that slot for two weeks, thanks to its popularity on streaming services.

The Grammys caught up with streaming's rise relatively quickly, allowing albums and singles that had only been made available digitally to be eligible for Grammys beginning in 2017. Without that shift, the most genre-bending performance of the night probably wouldn't have happened: Lil Nas X, whose deliciously catchy "Old Town Road" broke the record for most weeks at No. 1 on the Hot 100 last year, performed that track at the Grammys with boot-scooter Billy Ray Cyrus, Kpop sensations BTS, culture-vulture producer Diplo and viral sensation turned tweenpopper Mason Ramsey, then debuted a new version of his song "Rodeo" alongside New York hip-hop legend Nas. The original version of "Old Town Road" wouldn't have become as big as it did without the digital ecosystem; the genre-agnostic remixes that made up the bulk of Sunday's performance wouldn't have, either.

But streaming also — and somewhat paradoxically — accentuates the biggest problem the Grammys have right now when it comes to credibly giving awards, particularly in specific categories. There's a definite sense of brand recognition going on and while, in some instances, it's righting long-perpetuated wrongs — take Tanya Tucker wins for Best Country Album and Best Country Song last night, the Nashville outlaw's first even though she was nominated in 1972 for her single "Delta Dawn" — in others it feels like there's a sense of loyalty in play, with legacy names often winning over newer artists. (The Best Metal Performance category, which was won by the reunited Tool this year, is a prime example of this, although there are many others.)

The Academy has tried to head these conservative tendencies off by capping the number of non-"big four" categories in which its members can cast ballots, but they still creep in.

Before Dugan's exit, she presented a diversity report by a task force that recommended sweeping changes to the Recording Academy's structure. The task force, led by Time's Up CEO Tina Tchen, suggested a slew of changes, including suggesting that the academy publicly report its demographics; proposing that it implement ranked-choice voting in the "Big Four" categories; and recommending that the academy have its workplace policies reviewed by an outside law firm.

In the hours before Sunday's ceremony, the academy proposed new diversity initiatives that included hiring a diversity and inclusion officer, examining how it is doing with meeting diversity initiatives over the next 120 days, donating to women in music organizations and reconvening the task force. Dugan's attorneys said in a statement that this move amounted to a "smoke and mirrors" job by the academy.

But whether this is a face-saving operation or a way for the Grammys to truly rethink how to give their awards — and not just to top-of-the-line pop stars, but to the Latin jazz, American roots, and classical artists and music that make up a large part of the academy's voting membership — likely won't be apparent until next year's nomination slate comes out.

"We've got a lot to change," Keys said as she closed Sunday's show. "We've got a lot to do. Keep speaking the truth. Peace and love."