

## **The Grammys Aim for a Big Tent, but Not Everyone Feels at Home**

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Sunday night at the 66th annual Grammy Awards, Jay-Z accepted the Dr. Dre global impact award, a sort of éminence grise prize. He's previously won 24 Grammys, but he did not treat the moment like a homecoming.

Instead, he used his speech to alternately nudge and excoriate the Recording Academy, the body that awards the Grammys, for its mistreatment and short-shrifting of Black artists: "We want y'all to get it right. At least get it close to right." He mentioned his wife, Beyoncé, winner of the most Grammys ever, yet never a winner for album of the year. "Think about that," he said, as he scrunched up his face with distaste.

By this point, the room seemed to understand what was happening — Jay-Z was rinsing the Grammys on its own stage. Beyoncé, in the audience, appeared to be somewhere near tears. "When I get nervous," Jay-Z said, "I tell the truth." He reached out and grabbed the hand of his daughter Blue Ivy for support before urging those who have been overlooked and slighted to persevere "until they give you all those accolades you feel you deserve."

Jay-Z's speech took a moment of acclaim and turned it into a moment for reflection, and maybe a lecture. Over the past few years, several Black artists have effectively been boycotting the Grammys by declining to submit their music for consideration, frustrated with how hip-hop and R&B are treated, particularly in the biggest all-genre categories.

This year was no different — album, record and song of the year were won by white artists, though broadly speaking, the most awarded artists were diverse: three each for SZA, Killer Mike and Victoria Monét; four for Phoebe Bridgers (three of which came as part of *boygenius*) and two each for Taylor Swift, Billie Eilish and Miley Cyrus.

How those artists received those honors, however, differed mightily. In their speeches, Monét and SZA emphasized how long and roundabout their paths to this moment had been. During her acceptance for best new artist, Monét called the prize the endpoint of "a 15-year pursuit." She's primarily been known for her songwriting, particularly her work with Ariana Grande. And while she'd released music independently through the 2010s, her 2023 album, "Jaguar II," was her first major-label LP. "My roots have been growing underneath ground, unseen for so long," she said. "And I feel like today, I'm sprouting."

SZA had previously received 15 Grammy nominations, but only won once, for a collaboration with Doja Cat. When she accepted best R&B song, for “Snooze,” she embraced Lizzo, who presented her with the prize, recalling a tiny-venue tour they were on together in 2013. Her speech was winningly filled with non sequiturs. “You don’t really understand,” she said, choking up. “I came really, really far.”

Both of these speeches were affecting statements of pride over a spotlight that was not promised. Compare these moments, though, to those of some of the white artists who won big on Sunday, and seemed implausibly comfortable while doing so. Swift, when winning her first award of the night, best pop vocal album for “Midnights,” turned the Grammys telecast into a news conference, surprise announcing that she has a new album, “The Tortured Poets Department,” coming out in April. She took the event, which bills itself somewhat grandiosely as “Music’s Biggest Night,” and hijacked it for promotional purpose — the kind of mischief only a superstar on the surest of footing could get away with.

When at the end of show, Swift’s “Midnights” was named album of the year — her fourth time winning the top prize, a record — she brought Lana Del Rey onstage and, in essence, urged the Grammys to recalibrate its relationship to Del Rey’s work: “I think she’s a legacy artist, a legend and in her prime right now.” (Del Rey also works frequently with Jack Antonoff, Swift’s primary producer.)

But perhaps no Grammy winner or performer moved more blithely through the night than Miley Cyrus, pop’s most chameleonic star. When she performed “Flowers,” she razed the seemingly sleepy audience: “Why are you acting like you don’t know this song?” When “Flowers” won best pop solo performance, Cyrus requested Mariah Carey, who presented the award and is not prone to sharing spotlights, remain beside her for her speech. When “Flowers” won record of the year, Cyrus averred, “This award is amazing, but I really hope that it doesn’t change anything, because my life was beautiful yesterday.” Before she left the stage, she joked about going without underwear.

These are the gestures of performers certain of their place, fully at home, and certain that nothing untoward could displace them. Eilish, by now a Grammy perennial, at least sheepishly drew attention to the awkwardness of her persistent winning, exulting, “Damn, that’s stupid, guys.” Her brother, Finneas, underscored the point with modesty: “We just continue to be just deeply, deeply privileged, lucky people.”

If the chasm between those whom the Grammys embraces and those on less steady footing weren’t clear enough, not long before the beginning of the main telecast, video began circulating on X of the politically outspoken rapper Killer Mike being led away from the ceremony in handcuffs. He was arrested and charged with misdemeanor battery following an apparent altercation after he won his three awards during the preshow. (He has since been released from police custody, his lawyer told Variety.)

In time, Killer Mike's arrest will likely be remembered as yet another ungainly pressure point on the Grammys' often toxic relationship with hip-hop — last year's multi-artist 50th anniversary extravaganza notwithstanding — along with the protests Jay-Z mentioned in his speech, and the outspoken rap stars who have effectively declared that the Grammys aren't worth their time. Drake, one of those stars, posted on Instagram Sunday night, "Congrats to anybody winning anything for hip-hop but this show doesn't dictate [expletive] in our world."

As for Jay-Z, when he returned to his table, he took his all-black statue and reoriented it sideways, giving it a fitting and lightly disrespectful spin as a cup. He poured a couple of fingers of D'ussé cognac into it, and took a few leisurely sips. Last year, he sold his controlling stake in that company to Bacardi for a reported \$750 million. Hip-hop made him a superstar, and also a billionaire, and also a high-level agitator, laurels be damned. The ultimate sign of feeling at home in any room is being unafraid to say how it needs to be rearranged.

Source: NYT **By Jon Caramanica** Feb. 5, 2024

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