

67th Annual Grammys reward mediocrity and backwardness

Erik Schreiber
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The 67th Annual Grammy Awards ceremony was a largely insular, self-congratulatory affair that functioned more as a commercial for the giant record companies than a celebration of artistic achievement.

The ceremony Sunday night was a spectacle of costumery, acrobatics and tap dancing far removed from everyday life as most of the world experiences it. Musicians and performers oriented to the reality of broad layers of the population—and there are such people—were absent at the event for the most part.

Acknowledgments of painful and complex actualities, such as the danger of fascism, war, pandemics and poverty, were nowhere to be found. Instead, presenters and awardees such as rapper DoeChii diverted attention from these issues with racialist and feminist pandering.

The event that inspired near jubilation (and immense relief!) in the media this year was the Recording Academy's bestowal of its Album of the Year award to Beyoncé's *Cowboy Carter* (2024). This event made the Grammys feel "entirely logical and deeply triumphant," according to the *Washington Post*'s Chris Richards.

Prior to the 2025 ceremony, Beyoncé had already won 32 Grammys, more than any other artist has won. Yet she had never taken home the highly coveted Album of the Year award, despite having been nominated for it on four previous occasions. The mainstream media considered this a snub, in fact, an injustice. It was proof of the Academy's denigration of black and women artists, a failure for which the Academy had to redeem itself. The *New York Times*, in particular, has engaged in inappropriate and sycophantic worship of Beyoncé for years.

At the same time, various columnists defensively argued that *Cowboy Carter* should be named Album of the Year not because of Beyoncé's gender or race but

because of the album's artistic merit. From the time of its release, *Cowboy Carter* has been the subject of hyperbole. Typical are the encomia of Michael Patrick F. Smith, who wrote in the *Times* that the album is "a paradigm shifting musical statement," "a wild and masterful musical tapestry" and "a timely celebration of our cultural past [that] offers a vivid vision of our possible future."

Such comments reveal more about the media than they do about the album. In fact, *Cowboy Carter* is not an artistic masterpiece but a machine-tooled corporate product designed by committee and marketed mercilessly. The album does not contain any deeply felt or socially meaningful content. When Beyoncé is not singing about (and praising) herself or her family, she is either indulging in racial or gender politics or simply celebrating hedonism and wealth.

Another putative sign of progress (in the eyes of the affluent editorialists) was the awarding of two major Grammys, Song of the Year and Record of the Year, to rapper Kendrick Lamar for "Not Like Us." Erstwhile critics of the Grammys insist these awards are a step toward overcoming the Academy's alleged tendency to disdain rap. But more important than the Academy's attitude toward rap is the caliber of the song itself.

"Not Like Us" is a sorry specimen. It is one of the musical jabs that Lamar traded with Canadian rapper Drake in their highly publicized, pointless and juvenile feud. Amid the ongoing genocide, the persecution of pro-Palestinian protesters and the US presidential election campaign, the two musicians channeled their energies into mutual name-calling and one-upmanship. "Not Like Us" features a monotonous string hook over which Lamar unleashes a stream of vulgarities and slanders. Lamar repeatedly calls Drake a pedophile, labels him effeminate, implies he is gay and, for good

measure, dubs the Canadian a “colonizer.” By giving Lamar not one but two Grammys for this song, the Academy has rewarded the rapper for squandering his intelligence and polluting the cultural atmosphere.

In contrast with “Not Like Us,” neither “Hind’s Hall” nor “Hind’s Hall 2” received any recognition at the Grammys. In both songs, rapper Macklemore openly opposes the genocide, denounces President Joe Biden for his complicity in it, blasts the music industry for its silence and calls for protest and resistance. In the most memorable line from a rap song in 2024, Macklemore declares, “I want a ceasefire, f— a response from Drake!”

Another low point during the broadcast was Lady Gaga’s unveiling of a new song, “Abracadabra,” as an extended Mastercard commercial. This is not the first time that the flamboyant singer has placed her music at the service of commerce. The film clip for her song “Telephone” (2010) won a Guinness World Record for Most Product Placement in a Video.

On a more creditable note, the Grammys ceremony acknowledged the fires that have ravaged Los Angeles and also helped raise money for their victims. Naturally, given the damage done to the city that is a major center of the music industry, this was more or less unavoidable.

The most positive and significant moment at the Grammys by far was singer-songwriter Chappell Roan’s acceptance speech for the Best New Artist award. Roan used her time slot to demand the music industry offer a livable wage and healthcare to its artists, especially developing ones. With her comments, the singer voiced the needs of millions and punctured the bubble of glamor that the Grammys and the music industry so studiously cultivate.

Roan described having been signed to a record company while still a minor. When the company decided in August 2020 that Roan was not profitable enough, it unceremoniously dropped her. “I had zero job experience under my belt and, like most people, I had a difficult time finding a job in the pandemic and could not afford health insurance,” she said. “It was so devastating to feel so committed to my art and feel so betrayed by the system and so dehumanized to not have healthcare.” Her speech met with loud applause from the audience, and workers in any industry can relate to these sentiments.

“Labels, we got you, but do you got us?” Roan asked. Of course, the record companies are not the least concerned with the well-being of the artists that generate their profits. No appeals to their conscience or attempts to publicly shame them will divert their focus from their bottom lines.



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