

The 2019 Grammy Awards: The music industry's love affair with itself

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The 61st annual Grammy Awards were held last Sunday in Los Angeles. The event claims to be “the biggest night in music” where the “recording industry’s most prestigious award” is handed out to “honor excellence in the recording arts and sciences.” The ceremony was attended by a good number of talented musicians, singers, writers and technicians.

A few artists were recognized for genuinely moving or interesting work. The country singer-songwriter Kacey Musgraves won Album of the Year and three Country-specific awards (Album, Song and Performance) from her somewhat humane and musically-vibrant album *Golden Hour*.

Some other nominees among the 84 categories were also noteworthy, such as the jazz guitarist virtuoso Julian Lage (*Modern Lore*), the vibrant US-Cuban jazz collaboration *Orquesta Akokán*, the interesting Mississippi blues and roots recordings by archivist William Ferris, several powerful orchestras, Willie Nelson, John Prine and a few others. The presence of figures like Smokey Robinson, Dolly Parton, and Mavis Staples, as well as musical tributes to the exciting and powerful work of Motown Records and Aretha Franklin also added a little bit of life to the mostly dull affair.

The Grammys were mostly remarkable, however, for the fact that *so little* about the world—or even the situation facing the artists themselves—was reflected in any of the awards, speeches and musical performances of the ceremony.

Instead the event was dripping with conformity, self-congratulations and banality. One could sense that a lot of money was on the line if an artist “stepped out of line,” said or performed a sentiment that conflicted with the program’s tightly controlled “storylines,” or protested the complacency of it all.

The now ubiquitous and mandatory theme of every awards show—identity politics—was on heavy display Sunday. The unofficial “theme” of the Grammys, repeated endlessly in popular media coverage, was that it was “an event to celebrate women in music.” Several of the most celebrated categories were won by female artists, such as Best Album (Kacey Musgraves), Best New Artist (Dua Lipa), Best Pop Solo Performance (Lady Gaga) and others.

Host and singer-pianist Alicia Keys, who is talented but was at times painfully complacent, set the tone at the opening monologue. “Tonight we celebrate each other through music. I’m taking it in.”

She then quickly brought out four women, singer Lady Gaga, actresses Jada Pinkett Smith and Jennifer Lopez, and former First Lady Michelle Obama, to chants of “Who runs the world?”—a reference to a feminist-themed song by Beyoncé. Each presenter then spoke about their own successful lives and careers, and its transformative connection to music...and quite literally nothing else.

A more appropriate theme would have been that it was an event to “celebrate women in the top ten percent of society.” Much of the pettiness, career-maneuvering and self-involvement of the women and men of that layer found expression throughout the night.

Nowhere was this more self-evident than in the silence regarding the major development preceding the event where one of the nominees, Atlanta rapper 21 Savage, was detained in a “targeted operation” by the semi-fascistic Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency.

The British-born rapper, who has been living in the US since he was 7 years old, had recently performed a new song “A Lot” on national TV, which in part denounced the attack on immigrants and the poisoning

of Flint (“Went through some things, but couldn’t imagine my kids stuck at the border/Flint still need water ...”), and was detained by ICE shortly after the performance.

The rapper was nominated with the artist Post Malone for their rap song “Rockstar,” and was scheduled to attend the Grammys before being caught up in the widespread right-wing attack on immigrants and refugees across the United States. With one brief exception—producer Ludwig Göransson, who briefly noted his absence in an acceptance speech for Best Song (Childish Gambino’s “This Is America”)—no one spoke a word of the attack on one of their fellow artists, let alone tens of thousands of other immigrants being terrorized, including children.

Particularly notable was the silence of Post Malone, who performed the collaborative song “Rockstar” on stage at the event without uttering a word or sign of protest. Again, one can sense in these artists the feeling that there is a lot of money to lose if one sticks one’s neck out.

What was celebrated instead was largely crass money-worship, success and supposed progress for women in music. There were over 15 live performances broadcast. Almost without exception—perhaps only Brandi Carlile’s sincere performance of “The Joke”—each were terribly unmoving or worse. Some were dull and heavily self-conscious performances, dressed up as “edgy” takes on sexuality, such as St. Vincent and Dua Lipa’s “Masseducation” or Janelle Monae’s “Make Me Feel.”

Other elements spoke to the low level of the evening driven on by identity politics. Singer-actress Jennifer Lopez faced media criticism prior to the event regarding her selection to lead the performance tribute to Motown Records, because she is a Puerto Rican woman honoring artists who are largely of African-American descent. To his credit Smokey Robinson denounced these attacks before and after the show.

The rapper Drake, who won an award for best Rap Song with “God’s Plan,” gave a largely vain speech—typical of the night—imploring other performers that they’ve “already won” in the “business” if people “are spending their hard-earned money to buy tickets to come to your show.” As banal as this was, it was largely considered the most controversial moment of the night by media outlets, because he was allegedly

speaking “truth” to the Academy.

One of the more mind-numbingly crass performances of the night—which embodied something of the character of the event as a whole—was that of rapper Cardi B, who performed the terrible song “Money.” To take just a small sampling of the least foul lyrics:

I was born to flex (Yes)
Diamonds on my neck
I like boardin’ jets, I like mornin’ sex (Woo!)
But nothing in this world that I like more than
checks (Money)
All I really wanna see is the (Money)

She went on to win Best Rap Album of the year later in the evening. The music press largely referred to this as a “historic” victory because she was the first solo female rapper to win the award.

The resurgence of class struggle in the US, Mexico and around the world will undoubtedly produce much richer, sharper and urgent music in the coming period. One trusts that much of the events and musical output involved in the 61st Grammys will be quickly forgotten.



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