

The 65th annual Grammy Awards: A spectacle of self-absorption and self-delusion

Nick Barrickman
7 February 2023

The 65th Annual Grammy Awards February 5, ostensibly held to recognize “outstanding” works in the field of music, was a spectacle of the self-absorbed entertainment and media elite. In far too many ways, this was another exhibition of cultural backwardness, wealth and social complacency inflicted on the US and global public.

From the introductory comments delivered by comic and former host of *The Daily Show* Trevor Noah onward, very little could be found that in any way reflected the reality of contemporary society and life for the vast majority of the population.

Rather than a celebration of what Noah called the “harmony of human beings of different races, genders, religions, identities, sexual orientations ... rejecting division to find moments of joy and unity and harmony,” a thinly disguised form of upper-middle class tribal warfare prevailed throughout the evening.

The primary focus Sunday was on *which* supposed representative of *which* racial or ethnic group, gender or sexual orientation would be receiving his or her “just due” from the Recording Academy.

Presenters often felt obliged to announce winners, not based on the musical merits and social insight displayed by the given artists, but along the same “identity” lines.

This seething competition reached its peak with the announcement of the winner for the highly coveted Album of the Year award. Would 28-time Grammy Award winner and multimillionaire music celebrity Beyoncé Knowles take home the prize for her generally banal 2022 album *Renaissance* or would the academy “snub” her; awarding the prize to some other performer?

As it turns out, the academy awarded the prize for Album of the Year to the British-born pop artist Harry

Styles for *Harry’s House*. The backlash was instantaneous, with commentators picking apart the “white male” Styles for his “tone deaf” acceptance speech that failed to offer the right amount of contrition for daring to beat out Beyoncé. The *New York Times* and other sycophants would happily take part in her coronation.

(As it turns out, Knowles won four more Grammys on Sunday night, shattering the record for most wins previously held, remarkably, by the Hungarian-British conductor Georg Solti, best known as music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from 1969 to 1991.)

As the WSWWS pointed out at the time of the release of Beyoncé’s most recent album, the promotion of *Renaissance* “in the American media has taken on an almost desperate character,” with “a series of accolades, various forms of flattery and puffery” taking the place of a serious critique of the vacuous and empty album.

We noted that the appearance of a new Beyoncé album was “not primarily a musical or artistic development.” It was, first and foremost, “a dual economic and political one. A portion of the US recording and entertainment industry depends on the massive commercial triumph of the album, and that other leading American ‘industry,’ identity politics,” led by the *Times*, “ties its racist and nationalist program in part to her success.”

The fervor Sunday night over who would take home the most sought after awards, to be what the *Washington Post* called the face “the music business wants to see when it looks in the mirror,” largely crowded out the more genuine moments of the evening.

There were nominations, wins and performances where genuine ability and artistic talent entered the

picture. Bad Bunny, the stage name of Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, gave a lively on-stage performance that managed to bring the entire arena to its feet. Likewise, a tribute to Motown Records delivered by Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson and country singer Chris Stapleton infused the event with a celebration of music that otherwise was lacking during the evening.

Important new music was also on display. Bonnie Raitt, the veteran blues singer, won song of the year for “Just Like That...,” a touching and well-written melody from her 2022 album of the same title. Also appealing was Samara Joy, who took home a prize for Best Jazz Vocal Album and another for Best New Artist. The “In Memoriam” section included Kacey Musgraves movingly performing Loretta Lynn’s “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” a reminder in its own way of a time when popular music spoke eloquently to wider layers of the population.

Last year, the WSWS was obliged to comment on Ukrainian President Zelensky’s videotaped appearance, during which the American imperialist puppet called upon the assembled guests to “tell the truth about this war,” that is, to assist in the propaganda barrage to which the US government and media were—and are—subjecting the population.

That obscenity was matched this year by the Recording Academy’s preposterous decision to allow First Lady of the United States Jill Biden, the wife of a war criminal and lifelong representative of Wall Street and big business, to present the award for a new category, “Best Song for Social Change.”

The award was given to Iranian singer Shervin Hajipour for his song “Baraye,” which Biden described as the anthem of the mass protests that swept that country following the police killing of Mahsa Amini for supposedly violating the clerical government’s religious law.

This is almost purely distilled hypocrisy. There is mass opposition in Iran to the reactionary regime, but the US is mixing in the affair for its own nefarious purposes. Washington’s dedication to “democracy” in Iran was demonstrated by its unflinching support for the police-state torture regime of the Shah from 1941 to 1979.

One could have just as easily pointed to any number of mass protests that have swept countries aligned with the United States, such as the multiethnic protests

against the far-right Netanyahu government in Israel, or the mass protests against the French government of Emmanuel Macron, “the president of the rich.” Of course, acknowledging these mass movements, opposed to the social inequality and warmongering policies of Washington’s allies, was inadmissible.

For the last three years, the Grammys have been held in alternative venues due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Not so this year. Whether the event will prove to be a super-spreader, like the Golden Globes earlier this year, remains to be seen.

According to the Associated Press, “An estimated 12.4 million people tuned in to watch stars Harry Styles, Lizzo and Bad Bunny perform at the Grammy Awards, along with a tribute to 50 years of rap history.” This was up from 8.8 million viewers in 2021 and 8.9 in 2022.

The Recording Academy strove to incorporate more “populist” features into its show this year in an effort to make the gathering appear more fan-driven. The broadcast included segments of discussions among “superfans” of different nominees, seeking to justify their musical favorites as the deserving winners. This was only partially effective, as the presence of members of the general public did not obscure the fact that the Recording Academy’s judges had already picked the winners ahead of time.

The unreality of such gestures came into focus when host Trevor Noah made the tasteless but accurate comment to the handful of fans onstage that “this is the first time you’re able to come on stage without being chased by security.”

Closing out the night’s ceremony, and exposing the official-institutional character of the various performers, was an absurd 10-minute opus to greed in the form of DJ Khaled’s “God Did,” a number featuring music billionaire Jay-Z and other artists. The song ended with the assembled performers gathered around a magnificent banquet table, with Jay-Z ending his verse as he has so many others, boasting about his personal fortune.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)