

Grammys: The Good

■ Commentary: Academy voters again shy away from the maverick creative forces in music, favoring mainstream veterans and previous award-winners.

By ROBERT HILBURN
TIMES POP MUSIC CRITIC

NEW YORK—Want a sure thing in next year's Grammy competition? Team Natalie Cole and Bonnie Raitt on an album and have

those four names weren't just picked at random. Brown, Dylan, Hendrix and Lennon were honored with lifetime-achievement awards in the last two years by

■ GRAMMY'S TV RATINGS
The four-hour show scored poorly across the nation. F14

Pop Critic's Out of Touch, Not the Grammy Voters

By STEPHAN MICHAELS

Pop music critic Robert Hilburn has got to be joking. Otherwise how could he contradict himself so many times in one article?

In his commentary, "Academy Voters Again Shy Away From Maverick Creative Forces" (Calendar, Feb. 27), Hilburn lambastes the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences for bestowing Grammy Awards to mainstream performers while ignoring more culturally significant and creative artists. In actual fact, that may be true. The Grammys have traditionally recognized the more commercially successful acts, especially in mainstream pop music.

However, after asserting that "the academy membership is far too comfortable with the status quo," Hilburn unfairly dismissed Natalie Cole's top-winning "Unforgettable" because it "didn't even make the list of 40 best albums"—according to the Village Voice poll of the nation's top pop critics.

The fact of the matter is that Cole and her producer were able to contemporize an old tune and, through the music and an amazing state-of-the-art video, bring both the song and the spirit of Nat King Cole back to life. If that isn't culturally significant and artistically worthy of praise, what is?

Why is it that so long as an artist is on the outside and striving for acceptance, Hilburn embraces them as "vital" and "creative"? Yet once they achieve a glimmer of recognition, he not only abandons them but also turns them into targets for denigration.

Such is the case with Bonnie Raitt, a rare, independent voice who has consistently put out a quality product, much to the love and appreciation of her fans.

Now that she's basking in a wider spectrum of public acceptance, and winning Grammys, Hilburn implies that she has sold out and lacks "the kind of artistic heat that defines the moment."

Hilburn also bemoans that top-selling groups Guns N' Roses and Public Enemy didn't win their respective categories, but deserved to by virtue of their tremendous popularity. That argument is ridiculous! If the awards only represent critical popularity and commercial success, then we can dispense with the voting entirely. The academy can just pick the winners out of the Village Voice poll and the Billboard charts and be done with it.

Presumably, however, the point of the ceremony is for the creative people in the industry to acknowledge their peers based on a more sensitive appreciation for the aesthetics of performance than the average critic possesses. Perhaps the only category critics should be allowed to complain about is "best liner notes."

In all fairness, Hilburn rightfully pointed out the absurd irony in awarding lifetime achievement citations to those artists who were "ignored by the Grammys during their most productive years."

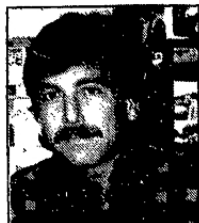
Then, astonishingly, he endorsed the mean-spirited acceptance speech made by Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich, who berated the venerable British rock band Jethro Tull for winning a Grammy three years ago. That's neither fair nor accurate.

In 1989, the recording academy combined hard rock and heavy metal into one category. Rock's Jethro Tull won, and heavy-metal fans were outraged. Tull became the first group in Grammy history to be booed for winning. Robert Hilburn contributes to that vitriol by stating Grammy voters made a mistake, when the academy itself erred in grouping the two categories in the first place.

Metallica's Ulrich sarcastically thanked "Jethro Tull for not putting out an album this year . . . and the academy for giving Jethro Tull the award in 1989." That lack of gratitude demonstrates the prevailing arrogance in metal music today, but Hilburn stated Ulrich simply "couldn't resist having fun."

"Hopefully," he wrote, "Public Enemy or Nirvana or Guns N' Roses or R.E.M. will get a chance to make the same joke." First, R.E.M. won three Grammys this year, and didn't insult previous winners. Second, Ulrich was hardly joking, Robert, but you gotta be.

Michaels is an independent TV and radio producer who contributes regularly to National Public Radio. He won a Los Angeles Press Club award in 1990 for best entertainment reporting on Los Angeles radio.



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