

2017 Grammy Awards: Adele Upsets Beyoncé, Chance Arrives, Politics Pop (Slightly)

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The 59th annual Grammy Awards brought a pair of sweeps: a likely one for a dearly departed star, a surprise for the reigning queen of pop — and more performances than anyone will likely remember tomorrow.



[The Two-Way](#)

[Grammy Awards 2017: The Full List Of Winners](#)

As she did in 2012, Adele swept her "general category" nominations (the night's headline trophies) — but five years ago she wasn't up against what many considered to be one of the year's most definitive and universally lauded pieces of work: Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. Beyoncé has never won either Record or Album of the Year — Adele is the first to twice sweep the Album, Record and Song of the Year awards.

As she accepted the penultimate award of the night, for Record of the Year, Adele looked at Beyoncé and said, "You move my soul every single day."

Beyoncé didn't make it out of the front row of the audience for the three final awards of the night, and Adele would be back to the stage moments later to accept Album of the Year for *25* as well, upsetting *Lemonade*. Adele herself admitted *Lemonade* was a "monumental" work and mentioned being unable to

accept the Album of the Year award (before accepting it).

By the numbers, the night's other big winner was David Bowie, who posthumously took every award he (and package designer Jonathan Barnbrook) was nominated for, including Best Rock Song and Best Rock Performance for his deeply affecting and pre-eulogistic "Blackstar" from the album of the same name, which won Best Alternative Music Album, Best Recording Package and Best Engineered Album.

The arrival of the night went to Chance the Rapper, the Chicago-born rapper who has shepherded his career independent of the major-label system. Chance won for Best New Artist — and thankfully ignored the show's get-off-the-stage music while accepting the night's first trophy. Later, winning the award for Best Rap Album for *Coloring Book*, he somewhat notably gave a shout-out to German-based streaming company SoundCloud, not Apple Music, which paid him a fair chunk of change for a window of exclusivity for *Coloring Book*. Independent is as independent does.

More than most years, a black cloud whorled over this year's Grammys, the show's 59th iteration and one that followed a year of remarkable loss for popular music after the deaths of Prince, Leonard Cohen, George Michael, Merle Haggard and many others ... but also a year that began amidst a deeply polarized political climate, one that many artists, we can reliably assume (Madonna, [for sure](#)), are lamenting.

Ahead of the telecast many wondered whether the Grammys would get political. (One only needed to look to [Kendrick Lamar's performance](#) last year for the answer, regardless of longtime producer Ken Ehrlich's [pre-show diplomacy](#).)

Jennifer Lopez was the first of the night to make a statement, however oblique, saying: "At this point in history, our voices are needed more than ever," before quoting from [Toni Morrison's essay](#), "No Place for Self-Pity, No Room For Fear."

Katy Perry, who stumped for Hillary Clinton, ended a performance of new single "Chained to the Rhythm" bathed in a projection of the preamble to the Constitution — a gesture that seemed less overtly political than one that simply acknowledged politics exist.

*Orange Is The New Black's* Laverne Cox, introducing Metallica and Lady Gaga's fiery performance of "Moth Into Flame," referenced the upcoming [Supreme Court hearing](#) of a case centering around students' right to use bathrooms that correspond with their gender identity.

Even Recording Academy president Neil Portnow, who generally steers clear of even a whiff of politics, jumped into the fray, if meekly. Portnow referenced "the things" — music principally, we can assume — that bring us together and help to

cohere our "more perfect union." Then, more customarily, Portnow called for reforms to the consent decrees which dictate songwriter remuneration and copyright laws that regulate usage of music. (Even Johnny Walker, in a late-show ad, got Chicano Batman to sing "This Land Is Your Land," touching on Trump's executive order around immigration.)

Solange (who made NPR Music's [favorite record](#) last year) introduced A Tribe Called Quest, who alongside Anderson.Paak and Busta Rhymes, performed a medley that kicked off with "Can I Kick It?" before Busta Rhymes popped up to "President Agent Orange and his unsuccessful attempt at a Muslim ban," then moving into "We The People" from Tribe's newest record, *We Got It From Here... Thank You 4 Your Service*. Q-Tip ended the utterly monumental performance with repeated calls to "resist" — it was the most fervently and successfully political presentation of the night.

Not to be outdone, Beyoncé meteored a crater of personal and political empowerment. Her mother, Tina Knowles, introduced a reliably gargantuan and beautifully produced performance, which began with the rhetorical question: "Do you remember being born?"

The production design referenced the Virgin Mary, Cleopatra and Queen Elizabeth I, with little singing for an extended period of time before Beyoncé settled into a pillowy rendition of "Love Drought" and "Sandcastles."

There, too, were the flowers that accompanied that [now-famous Instagram post](#). As my colleague Rodney Carmichael wrote: "This is full-on #blackwomanmagic." "There is a curse," Beyoncé whispered in a pre-taped voice over, "that will be broken... now that reconciliation is possible... if we're gonna heal, let it be glorious."

Later, accepting the award for Best Urban Contemporary Album for *Lemonade*, she said her work seeks "to confront issues that make us uncomfortable — it's important to me to show images to my children that reflect their beauty."

Sturgill Simpson, backed by Daptone Records' house band The Dap-Kings (and, it seemed, a few friends), delivered arguably the most purely perfect musical performance of the night, singing "All Around You" with striking commitment. Equally striking was Bruno Mars' late-show tribute to Prince, which began with the indelible prayer of "Dearly beloved..." and ended with Mars ripping a (nearly) Prince-worthy guitar solo.

There were flubs: Adele stopped her tribute performance of George Michael's "Fastlove" as it was getting going, swearing and apologizing before jumping back into the 1996 hit. "I don't want to do this like last year," she said, referencing [the](#)

[broken piano](#) of 2016. The song choice was semi-appropriately elegiac, though didn't engage with the unbridled joy of Michael's best work.

As for the rest: A mildly disappointing performance of "Hello" from Adele, who opened the show just prior to a very brief bit of slapstick and rapping that served as host James Corden's introduction.

There was a surprisingly sharp turn from previously stilted performer The Weeknd (with assistance from Daft Punk), an '80s synth jams straight out of *Top Gun* (Carrie Underwood and Keith Urban performing "The Fighter") and a bizarrely empty new reggaeton-by-way-of-Bon Iver song from Ed Sheeran.

Neil Diamond, Keith Urban, Faith Hill, Jennifer Lopez, Tim McGraw and Jason Derulo sang "Sweet Caroline" with Corden in a makeshift iteration of the "Carpool Karaoke" segments on his late night show. Diamond looked, perhaps was, a little lost.

Katy Perry's performance perhaps unintentionally referenced the mirrored picket fence sculpture by Alyson Shotz at upstate New York sculpture park Storm King. Gary Clark and William Bell (who won for Best Americana Album) performed the blues standard "Born Under a Bad Sign," written by Bell and Booker T. Jones and first recorded by Albert King in 1967 for Stax Records.

The show remained as reliably corrugated as ever — as it will until entropy catches up with it. Looking to the Grammys for substantive, not glancing, engagement with challenging times, as Ann Powers [addressed recently](#), is a waste of time. The show is comfort food; delivering the same faces, the same voices, the same melodies and shimmering gowns.

Perhaps next year, when the awards return to New York for the first time since 2003, the show will let itself change as much as the world around it has. But probably not.

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