Music Made for TV: Reassessing the History of Pop Music in/on Television

Taking Award Shows Seriously

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On January 26, 2014, rapper-entrepreneur Queen Latifah married thirty-three couples during Macklemore & Ryan Lewis' Grammy performance of "Same Love." Indicative of the program's frequent cross-genre musical collaborations, the segment also included a cameo from Madonna, who sang the chorus to her 1986 hit "Open Your Heart." The ceremony, which was broadcast live from Los Angeles' Staples Center on CBS, attracted 28.5 million viewers and received a one-percent increase in viewership from the previous year. The televised moment also received upwards of 60,000 tweets per minute (*Billboard*).

While not the peak for the award show's ratings or social media presence, this segment was subject to intense scrutiny surrounding the white rap group's triumphant night—they won four awards, including three from the four rap categories, thrice edging out African American rapper Kendrick Lamar in the process—as well as the opportunism of turning marriage equality into a "classic Grammy moment." Such commentary was also frequently put in dialogue with August 2013's MTV Video Music Awards where pop star Miley Cyrus pushed the limits of post-racial discourse by staging her "adult" reinvention at the expense of black female back-up dancers' grotesque subjugation.

By contrast, scholarly discourse on music in television tends to privilege recordings' integration in narrative television instead of how the medium frames live performance and the music's industry's recognition of itself. During the 1980s and 90s, music video captured considerable interest in media and cultural studies, particularly around the ways in which the forum facilitated feminist analysis of stars like Madonna as well as industry studies research around the launch and maintenance of MTV during the advent of cable and narrowcasting. Interest continues to circulate around music videos' currency in the YouTube era, particularly as either mash-up fodder or as viral phenomena. In addition, a considerable amount of research focuses on popular music's placement in narrative television and its ancillary properties, with increasing attention toward the contributions of industry professionals like music supervisors. Yet, save for a handful of key interventions, like Phillip Auslander's *Liveness* (1999), Murray Forman's *One Night on TV is Worth Weeks at the Paramount* (2012), and Keith Negus' "Musicians on Television" (2006), scholarship on live music and television remains understudied, tends to focus on early broadcast history, and pays little attention to televised awards ceremonies.

One possible reason for this dearth of research is that for many cultural studies scholars who study popular music, the Grammys and its ilk are bad objects. As the Grammys' organizing institution, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences is frequently characterized as passé and risk-averse because it is slow to recognize innovation. For example, the Grammys did not honor contributions in hip-hop until 1989,

and originally did not televise those portions of the show until after a number of recording artists organized a boycott. NARAS is also quick to merge or discontinue categories that are not perceived as ratings draws, and often rewards mediocre fare from artists who peaked, crossed over, or didn't upset the apple cart.

Following colleague Myles McNutt's sterling Antenna coverage of the primetime Emmy Awards (2014), I want to explore rather than wave away televised music awards as sites of scholarly inquiry. In addition to award ceremonies' articulation of genre and heritage through the construction of categories and the bestowing of accolades, critical consideration of live musical performance potentially opens up a number of questions about television reception practices. For example, what influence does live music have over second-screen activities like live-Tweeting? Furthermore, how might we turn to streaming platforms like YouTube as unofficial archives of institutional memory? This is how I watched the 1995 Source Awards, which originally aired on BET, and documents the bicoastal conflict between record labels Death Row and Bad Boy, as well as a promise from a young Antwan "Big Boi" Patton of the emerging rap duo Outkast that "the South got something to say" too.

McNutt persuasively argues that the Emmys' nomination process serves as evidence of the television industry's struggles over power and recognition. We could reach similar conclusions about the music industry by considering what award shows tell us about industry and production processes. We can use them to consider how television functions as a changing medium that facilitates the music industry's representation of itself, thus raising questions about power and legibility for media workers. Borrowing from John Caldwell (2008), how do award shows serve as deep texts and contact zones for media scholars who study music's relationship to television? How might greater critical attention toward music award shows allow us to consider the labor politics of ceremonies' booking, promotion, and performance practices? In sum, what might media scholars learn if we took award shows' representation of the music industry seriously?