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FOCUS



FIRE POWER
Carlos Santana lights up the Latin Grammy Awards stage in 2014.

AS THE LATIN GRAMMYS HONOR TOP TALENT ACROSS 50 CATEGORIES, ITS 20TH ANNIVERSARY SHOW IS ALSO CAUSE FOR A CULTURAL CELEBRATION
BY CATA BALZANO



TURN THE BEAT AROUND
Ricky Martin, Celia Cruz and Gloria Estefan honor Tito Puente at the first Latin Grammy Awards in 2000.

FROM IDEA TO LEGACY

Latin Grammys mark two decades of global recognition

THE IDEA OF CREATING a separate organization to honor the diversity of Latin music was a discussion that took place for years before it actually happened, but an event driven by one of pop music's most important crossover artists solidified it.

During the 41st Grammy Awards ceremony, a young Ricky Martin was scheduled to perform "La Copa de La Vida (The Cup of Life)," the theme to the 1998 World Cup. The success of the song put Martin on the map, and with the help of Miami Sound Machine producer-executive Emilio Estefan, the Recording Academy booked him to perform at the 1999 Grammy Awards.

Martin's voice, moves and charisma so captivated the audience that a phenomenon the press called the "Latin Pop Explosion" ensued.

"It was a 'before and after' for my career when I had the opportunity to perform at the Grammys," Martin says. "Things were never the same."

Martin not only won a Grammy and got a sales boost from his performance that night, but his following album, released three months later, also became the one of the biggest-selling of all time.

"Because of the success of that evening, it was a green light to now start celebrating the Latin Grammys," Martin adds.

His breakout year cemented the game-changing music being made by legendary Latin artists ranging from Tito

Puente, Celia Cruz, and Willie Colon to Ruben Blades, Gloria Estefan and so many others. In 2000, the Latin Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences was founded as an independent entity. Mike Greene, Rob Senn and Michael Melvoin were appointed as founding directors and the inaugural Latin Grammy Awards ceremony was held that year at Staples Center in Los Angeles.

"I remember the first time I walked onstage at the Latin Grammys," says Martin, who performed alongside Cruz and Estefan. "Just being able to walk with these two amazing legends — people that I love, that I respect, that brought our language to the rest of the world before the phrase 'crossover' was even invented."

Emilio Estefan, who spent years earning industry recognition for Latin music's diversity and dynamism, saw the birth of the Latin Academy as a way to recognize artists while educating the mainstream about the diversity of its music and culture.

"There was a lot of confusion about Latin music," he says. "Not everything is mariachi, not everything is salsa. We have all different kinds of music. We took a lot of chances in the beginning."

Recalling proposing that Martin perform at the 1999 Grammys, Estefan says: "It was difficult to get people to [include us], and

Tipsheet

WHAT: Latin Grammy Awards

WHEN: Nov. 14

WHERE: MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas

WEB: latin Grammy.com

to tell them ‘Let’s put Ricky Martin onstage and have them approve.’

Twenty years later, as the Latin Grammys are set for Nov. 14, Estefan says he approves of how far the Latin Recording Academy has come. “We are in good hands, and we are lucky and blessed that we can do this and build bridges with music.”

Under the leadership of Gabriel Abaroa Jr., who was appointed president in 2003 and added the role of CEO in 2010, the Academy took significant strides culturally and philanthropically, too. It has 3,500 Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking members in more than 34 countries. The organization comprises recording artists, musicians, songwriters, producers and technical recording professionals who rate and decide which artists receive nominations within the dozens of different categories, and ultimately who wins a Latin Grammy.

“I have zero weight and influence in anything, because that isn’t within my role or my job: It’s the job of the members of the Latin Recording Academy,” says Abaroa, who is also president of the Latin Grammy Cultural Foundation.

Along with producing the Latin Grammy Awards, the Academy has developed an array of educational and outreach programs either directly or through the Cultural Foundation.

“We do other events, like our Latin Grammys in the Schools, where artists talk to students on the importance of reading, studying, being disciplined and pursuing music as a career, or events where an artist is interviewed,” Abaroa says. “With tickets at \$1,000 per person, we collect funds for scholarships that our organization gives out every year.”

The Latin Recording Academy has 200 scholars, and it has donated more than \$5 million while paying for four academic years of tuition and housing for some of the students enrolled in music programs at Berklee College of Music, Boston University, Manhattan School of Music and New York School of Jazz.

“We also have [initiatives] where producers or recording engineers travel to meet young students and talk about technical things like how to handle frequencies and microphones,” adds Abaroa.

Other programs the organization is involved with include the Latin Recording Academy Producers and Engineers Circle, the Leading Ladies of Entertainment, the Special Awards Presentation and the Person of the Year Ceremony, where a musician is recognized and awarded for their artistic achievement and support of up-and-coming artists as well as their philanthropy.

The road to the 20th anniversary was at times “hard,” says Emilio Estefan. “I hope that all of the things we did at the beginning have opened the door for new talent and the second generation of Latinos, many who are born in the States now.”

A PLATFORM FOR INCLUSIVENESS

LATIN MUSIC COMES IN MANY FLAVORS, BUT IT’S ALL FOR ONE

● AMONG THE PILLARS OF THE

Latin Recording Academy is inclusiveness. Although Gabriel Abaroa recalls when that was a subjective concept. “They thought of the Latin market as a niche that only consumed tacos and burritos, and that we spoke a quick Spanish and drank tequila all day,” he says of perception at the turn of the millennium.

The term “Latin” defines Latin American culture, but it was difficult to explain the diversity that lies within it until the Latin Recording Academy laid it out. As an independent brand focused solely on showcasing Latin talent, the group gave a clearer picture of how diverse the genres that stand under the “Latin music” umbrella are, and every year the Latin Grammys celebrates that.

“The difference between the Recording Academy and the Latin Recording Academy is that the [former] recognizes what’s best in music that has been released within the United States and countries that have linkage to the U.S.,” Abaroa says. “We recognize any product that has been released in Spanish or Portuguese, from anywhere in the world.”

Genres such as pop, urban, Zamba, rock, cumbia, vallenato, salsa, merengue, bachata, classical and tropical are among the 50 categories recognized, and songs written in Spanish and Portuguese by Latin artists can be nominated for record, song and album of the year.

Notes Abaroa: “17 or 18 years ago people would say, ‘I won a Grammy, though it was a Latin Grammy.’ Today people say, ‘I won a Latin Grammy,’ and that is what we have been able to change through our work and our love. There is a pride behind this.”

The pride also lies within the immense platform that the Academy provides to its winners, beaming out the Univision broadcast to more than 100 million

people, with a crowd of 10,000-plus present in the MGM Grand Garden Arena.

Ruben Blades, the Panamanian singer who earned major industry credit for crossover projects including writing Michael Jackson’s Spanish version of “I Just Can’t Stop Loving You” (known in Spanish as “Todo Mi Amor Lo Eres Tu”) has also seen its impact on the acceptance of what were once regarded as niche genres.

“I have noticed that there has been a change in direction in terms of representation and that has guaranteed things that many years ago would have seemed impossible, such as winning awards for a salsa album in today’s age,” says Blades, who won the Latin Grammy for album of the year in 2017. “Today it’s expected that modern and urban music would win, and 20 years ago it would have been pop. So things have made me feel optimistic about the appreciation [of the Academy] for the quality of the music as opposed to popularity or influence.”

Looking to impress the members of the Academy, new generations of artists bring fresh ideas to the table, and the organization has shown receptiveness to that, recognizing singers such as Rosalia and two-time Latin Grammy winner Manuel Medrano, who in 2016 won best new artist and best singer-songwriter for his album “Bajo el Agua.”

The Colombian singer proposed a genre called “pop fundido” — a twist on traditional pop, with slow, deep rhythms fused with a hint of jazz and heavy bass beats. Winning two awards validated his effort. “Pop fundido gives me the openness to be able to mix my music with any genre that I want,” says Medrano, who continues experimenting with genres. “The motivation that it generates personally is huge. It inspires you to keep dreaming — to aspire to even bigger goals. That was the biggest reward.”

BIG WIN
Ruben Blades receiving his Latin Grammy for album of the year at the 2017 ceremony.



THE SECOND LATIN EXPLOSION

The success of 'Despacito' ushered in a new generation of stars

MUSIC IS AN EVER-EVOLVING ART, and for the Latin Recording Academy, that's meant riding multiple waves of attention.

The most recent arrived with the stratospheric success of "Despacito," which kicked off a second Latin Explosion with full force in 2017. The Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee hit, later featuring verses by Justin Bieber, made Latin music a hot commodity once again, with the popularity of social media and streaming platforms only amplifying its presence.

"It was all a snowball effect that was never really in sight," says Fonsi, a five-time Latin Grammy winner — four of those awards for "Despacito." "It was just crazy — crossing over without me having to sing in English, and Justin Bieber's addition to the equation four months later for the remix."

What Emilio Estefan calls the "reverse crossover" was in full effect. The success of the song inspired collaborations with Anglo artists looking to sing in Spanish. All of a sudden, Drake, Beyoncé, Sean Paul and Katy Perry began joining the likes of J Balvin, Nicky Jam, Bad Bunny and Daddy Yankee, further affirming that Latin Music was stronger than ever.

"EVERYBODY IS BRINGING THEIR A GAME TO BREAK THAT LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BARRIER." — LUIS FONSI



TWO TO TANGO

(Above) Luis Fonsi and Erika Ender, co-writers of "Despacito," accept a Latin Grammy song of the year at the 18th annual ceremony. Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez (left) perform an emotional version of "Olvidame y Pega La Vuelta" at the 2016 show.

As Fonsi points out: "I've been doing this for 20 years, and before, my tours [traveled to] Mexico, South America, Spain and Latin cities in the U.S. Since 'Despacito,' I have been able to perform in Russia, China and the Middle East. I've been to Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Everybody is bringing their A game to break that language and cultural barrier."

Growing up, Karol G only recalls Juanes and Shakira as international artists from her country, Colombia. They had broken the language barrier in the early 2000s. She, too, aspired to work in music and win a Latin Grammy. She achieved that dream in 2018, winning for new artist, but she couldn't imagine that Latin music would go global.

Today, as one of urban Latin music's most-streamed female artists, Karol G gets emotional when she sees fans abroad singing along to her songs.

"It's really amazing and special," she says. "All countries and languages now accept our music. There are people who don't even speak Spanish, singing and dancing to the songs."

Karol credits her Latin Grammy win for boosting her career and her confidence. "When I talk to people and do interviews in different parts of the world, the first thing people say is, 'You won a Grammy.' It's easily the most important award that any artist can win."

Mexican pop singer Natalia Lafourcade also saw doors open after being recognized by the Latin Recording Academy.

"It has helped me to find other markets and other audiences that perhaps would have taken me a bit more time to [get to] without the nominations and the recognition."

At the same time, Lafourcade is also looking to "show the world what Mexican culture is all about," as she did at the 2018 Academy Awards when she collaborated with singer Miguel for "Remember Me" from Disney's animated feature "Coco."

Says Lafourcade: "The Academy is doing a very interesting thing [in] expanding and putting emphasis on musical trends that are happening and where they are headed with new generations." ■

PRODUCING THE SHOW

“WHEN NOMINATIONS COME OUT, we sit down and say, ‘That’s cool, we haven’t done that before,’ and then we have a team of creative people work on it,” says the Latin Grammys’ executive producer Jose Tillan. The main goal is to bring out the “wow” factor to every show.

“Conversations have to do with who is going to perform and what song, and the nominations. When you’re producing a show of this magnitude, it’s almost like a domino effect. You can’t do certain things until you have certain things done beforehand.”

Discussions about key elements of infrastructure and stage design occur about six months in advance. Ideas and decisions on the design of the set made up a four-month process and construction began in September.

Two weeks leading up to the show, some 14,000 man hours of local labor are clocked to build the set, which includes three performance stages that will logistically serve 17 to 20 performances throughout the evening.

“The lighting, the screens, the audio and staging has a timing and it has to be in the right flow and the right rhythm,” Tillan says. “If you ever go back-stage to one of these things it’s like being in war.” No wonder: the staging team only has about four minutes between performances to set up the next act and transform the stage’s look.

After all that, it takes less than 24 hours to break everything down on Nov. 15. But the echo of the Latin Grammys show rings for far longer. **■**



COMO LA FLOR

Bold colors and a floral stage design were created for Chilean Singer Mon Laferte’s performance at the 18th annual Latin Grammys in 2017.

PITBULL, MON LAFERTE: KEVIN WINTER ©2



DANCE AGAIN

Pitbull delivers an explosive performance of “Don’t Stop the Party” at the 2012 Latin Grammys.

THE LATIN GRAMMYS LOWDOWN

WHO’S UP FOR THE TOP AWARDS AT THE NOV. 14 SHOW

- The Latin Recording Academy features 50 categories that cover every genre, from classical, flamenco, tango and folk, to regional, cumbia, merengue, rachero, bachata, salsa and vallenato. Rock and pop/rock have their own separate categories, while tropical, pop and urban all have three categories each: for album, fusion album and song within each genre.

AND THE NOMINEES ARE...

ALBUM OF THE YEAR	RECORD OF THE YEAR	SONG OF THE YEAR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Visceral” by Paula Arenas • “Paraíso Road Gang” by Rubén Blades • “Cargar La Suerte” by Andres Calamaro • “Agustín” by Fonseca • “Vida” by Luis Fonsi • “El Mal Querer” by Rosalia • “#ElDisco” by Alejandro Sanz • “¿Dónde Bailarán Las Niñas?” by Ximena Sariñana • “Mas De Mi” by Tony Succar • “Fantasía” by Sebastián Yatra 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Parecen Viernes” by Marc Anthony • “Verdades Afiladas” by Andrés Calamaro • “Ahí Ahi” by Vicente García • “Kitipun” by Juan Luis Guerra 4.40 • “Querer Mejor” by Juanes feat. Alessia Cara • “La Plata” by Juanes feat. Lalo Ebratt • “Aute Cuture” by Rosalía • “Mi Persona Favorita” by Alejandro Sanz & Camila Cabello • “No Tengo Nada” by Alejandro Sanz • “Cobarde” by Ximena Sariñana 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Calma” by Pedro Capó • “Desconstrução” by Tiago Iorc • “El Pais” by Rubén Blades • “Kitipun” by Juan Luis Guerra 4.40 • “Mi Persona Favorita” by Alejandro Sanz & Camila Cabello • “No Tengo Nada” by Alejandro Sanz • “Quédate” by Kany Garcia and Tommy Torres • “Querer Mejor” by Juanes feat. Alessia Cara • “Un Año” by Sebastián Yatra feat. Reik • “Ven” by Fonseca

JUANES' BIG DAY

Latin Grammys opened doors for singer-songwriter

JUAN ESTEBAN ARISTIZABAL VASQUEZ — better known as superstar Colombian singer-songwriter Juanes — remembers the first time he was nominated for a Latin Grammy Award as if it were yesterday, perhaps because he received the nod six times in one sitting. When he heard his name called, he recalls nearly jumping out of his chair. After the sixth nomination, he sprang up and ran out of the room.

It was 2001, and the pop-rock singer was at the dawn of his career as a solo artist — a time he describes as “very challenging, with limited opportunities.” But he knew the prominence that a Latin Grammy nomination would grant him within the music industry.

“I was so excited that I had to go to the bathroom and cry: My life was about to take a big turn,” says Juanes, who ended up winning three Latin Grammys that year. He’s gone on to become the second-most awarded artist ever, with 23, and was named the Latin Recording Academy’s 2019 Person of the Year for his artistry, support for developing artists and philanthropic and charity work. He has also won two regular Grammys out of six nominations over the years, both for Latin pop album.

“The Latin Grammys have been like a key that has opened many doors,” he continues. “The visibility that the Academy has given me has been very important, because when you’re nominated as a new artist, everyone’s eyes are on you, which generates a domino effect that is very positive.”

Perhaps most impressively, on his big day

in 2001, the Latin Recording Academy was just in its second year. The 2019 edition at Las Vegas’ MGM Grand Arena marks its 20th anniversary, and despite some criticism — such as many urban artists feeling that their genre is being overlooked — the influence of which Juanes speaks has only grown. To wit: In 2019, The Latin Recording Academy received 15,500 submissions from artists who released music during the eligibility period,

TRIPLE CROWN
Juanes holding his Latin Grammy bounty at the 2001 ceremony.

which began June 1, 2018 and ended May 31.

“In the Academy, we call them 15,500 dreams,” says Gabriel Abaroa Jr., the Latin Recording Academy’s president and CEO since 2010. “Of the 15,000, only 250 artists get a nomination — and only 48 will take home a Latin Grammy on Nov. 14. ... The Latin Grammy is special because it’s a measure of recognition from professional colleagues.” **■**

