

Winning a Grammy helps musicians keep their creative edge, study finds

October 19 2022, by Patrick J. Kiger



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In 1988, U2 won its first two Grammy Awards for its album The Joshua

Tree. While the Irish rock group was already selling millions of records, filling stadiums, and getting heavy exposure on MTV, winning the coveted golden statuettes further solidified its members' status as rock superstars.

That's why it was so startling several years later when U2 released *Achtung Baby*, a radical stylistic departure from the music produced at that time that daringly incorporated elements of the 1970s German genre known as Krautrock. Bono described it as "the sound of four men chopping down The Joshua Tree."

"When artists win these awards, it gives them some leverage," explains Glenn Carroll, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford Graduate School of Business, who recently worked with Giacomo Negro of Emory University and Balázs Kovács, Ph.D. '09, of Yale University on a study that looks at how winning Grammys influences musical artists' [creativity](#). "So now, all of a sudden, they have lots of other opportunities, but also the record company realizes, 'They have as much notoriety and power as we do. Maybe if we make them unhappy, that's not good for us.'" *Achtung Baby* was "an interesting but very different kind of album for a rock band of that stature," says Negro. "It's a good example of a real shift in creative direction."

While U2's metamorphosis caught listeners by surprise, it followed a typical pattern for Grammy winners, according to Carroll and his colleagues. By systematically analyzing the style and sonic content of five decades of albums, the researchers found that getting a Grammy enables performers to become more daring and unique. Winners' subsequent albums tend to stand out stylistically from other artists in their genre.

But for other Grammy nominees, the recognition of almost getting an award seems to have the opposite effect. Instead of becoming more

distinctive, they end up sounding more mainstream and more like other artists.

A mountain of music

The inspiration for the Grammys study came from a 2014 paper by Kovács and Stanford alumna Amanda J. Sharkey on the effect of literary prizes on readers' book ratings. Paradoxically, they found that award-winning books' ratings on sites like Amazon and Goodreads got worse—because they'd attracted new readers who were less likely to react favorably to a book from a different genre than their usual favorites. Carroll, Negro, and Kovács were intrigued by the findings and started thinking about how awards might affect musical performers.

"There were few studies focused on the behavior of the artists, the people who produced the product," Carroll says. "We got interested in following them and seeing if their behavior changed in subsequent products and career trajectories."

"Music is one of those industries that is characterized by a high diversity of products," Negro adds. "We also were interested in connecting this question about awards to another question about the diversity of the products."

The shift to online music and streaming platforms presented an opportunity to analyze and compare artists and genres in new ways. "There's a lot of data available now that wasn't available before," Carroll says. All in all, they gathered data on 125,340 albums by thousands of different artists.

To compare Grammy winners, losers, and artists who weren't nominated, the researchers assembled a mountain of data. They pulled lists of Grammy nominations and wins from 1959, the year the first awards

ceremony was held, to 2018, focusing on four cross-genre categories: Album of the Year, Record of the Year, Song of the Year, and Best New Artist. They also used information from AllMusic, an online site for music obsessives that categorizes records by genre. Weekly charts from Billboard were used to gauge records' commercial success, and data from Spotify provided measures of albums' sonic features, such as loudness, tempo, and danceability.

The researchers found that Grammy winners' subsequent albums feature music that is more distant and distinct from the combined work of other artists in their genre. That distancing effect was primarily expressed through stylistic rather than sonic content.

Grammy nominees, in contrast, went on to make records that were stylistically closer to other musicians. One example is jazz guitarist Charlie Byrd, whose collaborations with saxophonist Stan Getz were unsuccessful nominees in 1963. (Getz got a Grammy for best solo jazz performance for a version of "Desafinado" in which Byrd's guitar solo had been cut.) After the Grammy rebuff, Byrd kept making records in the Brazilian bossanova style for the next 12 years, "with few exceptions to his usual playing style," the researchers note.

What winners (and losers) hear

While the study didn't establish specifically why these effects occur, the researchers cite several possibilities. Winning an award—and reaping the commercial success that typically comes with it—may shift the balance of power between musical artists and recording companies. Grammy winners suddenly have more leverage, which compels record companies to give them a longer leash and to provide more resources for future recording efforts. "You have stories of artists like Neil Young and Prince and George Michael, who fight for what in their minds is artistic independence, though I'm sure the record companies think they're

preventing them from career suicide by following their creative instincts," Carroll says.

In contrast, almost winning a Grammy may have a chilling effect that's especially powerful because it's coming from other people in the [music business](#). Grammy awards are voted on by musicians, songwriters, producers, and other industry insiders—who may be influenced by record companies.

"One possible interpretation is that the nominees interpret the feedback on their artistic choices as essentially negative feedback or a negative signal that what they tried to do did not win them the award," Negro explains. "And so it may be natural to adjust and try to do something that is not perhaps very adventurous." And, he adds, "At the end of the day, they are also embedded in a very commercial and market-oriented world."

Since the music industry might have more opportunities for success if more artists felt comfortable taking risks, the researchers raise the question of whether the Recording Academy should keep the names of Grammy nominees secret and only announce the winners, as is done with Nobel Prizes.

It's important to note, though, that winners don't always go on to achieve additional success or prestige in the long run. Carroll cites the example of the Fugees, the influential 1990s alternative hip-hop group that split up to work on solo projects after winning two statuettes in 1997. Even after later reuniting, they were never able to match their previous heights, though singer Lauryn Hill did win five Grammys for her 1998 solo effort, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.

"The other thing that happens is you win the award, and you try to become so unique that it tears the band apart," says Carroll. On the other

hand, some artists do make the most of winning the award. After Achtung Baby picked up a Grammy, the band went on to win another 17.

More information: Giacomo Negro et al, What's Next? Artists' Music after Grammy Awards, *American Sociological Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00031224221103257](https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224221103257)

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Winning a Grammy helps musicians keep their creative edge, study finds (2022, October 19) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-10-grammy-musicians-creative-edge.html>

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