



Native American music is getting attention.(The Orange County Register)

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The recent announcement of Grammy nominations for "best Native American music album" represents a breakthrough for the genre. But some feel more breakthroughs can be made.

For years, Native American artists, record companies and music fans have seen their favorite albums and musicians get passed up during award time, or get square-pegged into weird categories like new age, folk or world.

Meanwhile, a Native American music revival has been taking shape, with releases, sales and airplay increasing substantially since 1994.

Record companies and the New York-based Native American Music Association have lobbied the recording academy for a Native American category since the mid-1990s.

With the announcement of five "best album" nominees this month, the industry _ and the academy _ are finally paying attention.

"We're very pleased," said Joanna Spindler, marketing manager for Silverwave Records, which released Joanne Shenandoah's Grammy-nominated album "Peacemaker's Journey" in March 2000.

"It lends a lot more credibility to the genre," Spindler said. "This is not ancient history. It's very much in the here and now. It's on par with any other genre of music out there today."

In addition to Shenandoah's album, the other nominees are: "Tribute to the Elders" by the Black Lodge Singers; "Chey enne Nation" by Joseph Fire Crow; "Veterans Songs" by Lakota Thunder; and "Gathering of Nations Pow Wow" by various artists.

Though most in the Native American music industry are pleased with the nominations, not everyone is ecstatic.

Some point out that there are problems inherent within the category. "Best Native American music album" falls within the folk field and is governed by strict traditional principles.

For instance, albums that incorporate contemporary rock sounds can't be considered, and those with European or African instruments and influences have been disregarded as well.

Thus, the Recording Academy's choices are not exactly the most progressive and exclude recent Native American rock, blues, country, hip hop, electronic and new age

releases, of which there were many last year.

In fact, of the five nominees, three are traditional pow wow albums.

Critically acclaimed releases such as John Trudell's "Blue Indians" and Clan/destine's "Deeply Rooted" didn't get considered because they combine American Indian chants with non-Indian singing and instruments, like electric guitars, bass and African or rock drums.

"Those got kicked over because they weren't traditionally oriented," said Robert Doyle, president of Phoenix-based Canyon Records. "Some people aren't happy about that. A lot of these albums that wouldn't qualify are definitely Native American in spirit."

Arizona-based rock-reggae band Clan/destine won the most recent Native American Music Award for best pop/rock recording but wasn't even considered for a Grammy this year by the recording academy.

"It's kind of like a catch-22 in a way," said David Montour, bassist and flutist for Clan/destine. "On the one side you're thankful for the opportunity (for Indians) to participate. On the other, you want to have more categories. You also want to be included."

There's an additional quandary: technically, all Grammy categories _ even those for Latin musicians _ are not ethnic specific. So an all-white group could record an album of traditional American Indian chants and could qualify for a "best Native American music album" nomination.

Some don't have a problem with that, but others, like Aaron White, vocalist and flutist for Flagstaff-based Burning Sky, do.

"I think it's OK if you're a producer, like Ry Cooder working with the Buena Vista Social Club, but musically, I don't think so," said White, who's Navajo and Northern Ute.

At the moment, Native American albums that incorporate contemporary sounds have to compete in other categories, such as rock, folk, new age and world.

Not everyone sees that as a bad thing _ American Indian artists have been nominated in different categories in the past. Robbie Robertson got a Grammy nomination in the world music category for his 1998 "Contact from the Underworld of Redboy."

And R. Carlos Nakai just picked up his fourth Grammy nomination in the new age category for his collaboration "In a Distant Place."

"We would like to win, because we're good at what we do, with no stipulations," Montour said. "We don't want to be limited just because of ethnicity."

Many Native American musicians and record company folks agree that a "contemporary Native American music album" category should be added eventually. The current category can be modified to "traditional Native American music album."

The recording academy itself is open to the possibility, said Diane Pheriot, vice president of awards.

"It would certainly be given consideration," Pheriot said. "Whether they'd establish one

sooner or later, I don't know."

The Native American Music Association is reportedly working on a proposal, to be submitted by April. But, judging by how long it took to get the initial recognition, it might take a while before a contemporary category is established.

Those involved in Native American music would probably have to step up their efforts as well.

"We in the industry may have to prove there's enough coming through every year to warrant another category," Doyle said.

Juancano Sanchez, vocalist and percussionist for Clan/destine, said he remains optimistic.

"If the numbers are right, if there's enough awareness, if people take notice, it will happen," he said.

"There are plenty of talented musicians and artists. A lot are continuing to sell. I think if enough bands continue to play, the Grammys will take notice. They'll pick the appropriate music at the appropriate time," Sanchez added.

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