

NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS



February 11, 2004

Michael K. Powell
Chairman, Federal Communications Commission
455 12 St. SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Powell:

As the President of the National Congress of American Indians—the oldest and largest representative body of American Indians and Alaska Native governments in the nation—I write to express profound dismay at Outkast's performance of their song "Hey Ya" during the 46th GRAMMY Awards show.

As the pinnacle of performances for that evening's broadcast, Andre Benjamin of Outkast performed the hit "Hey Ya" to an "Indian" theme. Using a giant smoking teepee as a background, Mr. Benjamin performed his song as several scantily-clad women in "Indian" themed costumes gyrated on stage. I watched in shock as this Nation's native cultures and religions were painfully caricatured by this performance. Perhaps most disturbing was the use of faux Indian headdresses by band performers. Our peoples' headdresses are very sacred, and it is a rare privilege to wear one. Such blatant mockery of these sacred traditions is sacrilegious and deeply offensive.

All parties to the performance, including the National Association of Recording Arts and Sciences, Arista Records, CBS Television, and Outkast are responsible for the events that transpired during the GRAMMY Awards show. It should have been clear to all involved that—notwithstanding its intent—this act was degrading, insulting, and racist. There are over four million American Indians and Alaska Natives in this country—four million people shamed by such barefaced abuse of their cultures and the cultures of our ancestors.

A multitude of products, labels, and mascots demonstrate daily that the private religious traditions and cultural heritage of our people are commodities that can be bought and sold against our will. The message you send to the American public—and worse, to American Indian and Alaska Native youth—by broadcasting this display is that we do not deserve respect.

We are appalled at the racism that was displayed during the GRAMMY broadcast. We feel that both Outkast and Arista Records exhibited very poor judgment in creating the "Indian" themed act, that the Recording Academy deserves reprimand for allowing such a racist performance in its show—particularly given their special measures to prevent any "indecency"—and that CBS has abused its privilege of free use of the country's airwaves by airing such divisive material. The FCC has been attentive to the needs of Indian Country in the past, and I hope that you will give prompt attention to this matter as well. Please contact NCAI if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,

Tex G. Hall, President

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