



NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

February 11, 2004

Neil Portnow  
President, The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences  
3402 Pico Blvd.  
Santa Monica, CA 90405

Dear Mr. Portnow:

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 46<sup>th</sup> GRAMMY Awards show.

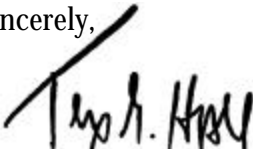
As the pinnacle of performances for that evening’s broadcast, Andre Benjamin of Outkast performed the hit “Hey Ya” to an “Indian” theme. Using a giant smoking teepee as a background, Mr. Benjamin performed his song as several scantily-clad women in “Indian” themed costumes gyrated on stage. I watched 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.

I am unable to comprehend how the Recording Academy, an organization that both promotes education through the diverse expression of music and honors the role-models in the music industry, could approve Outkast’s performance for the GRAMMY Awards. It should have been clear to you 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 our 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 is a commodity 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 approving this display is that we do not deserve respect.

The Recording Academy, through its control of the GRAMMY Awards, showcases the best the music industry has to offer. Approving and subsequently airing Outkast’s performance shows implicit approval of its racist content. I hope the Recording Academy will acknowledge its fault, and apologize to all Native Americans for its offense. We stand ready to assist in providing education and advice in the future to prevent such damaging missteps.

Sincerely,

  
Tex G. Hall, President

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