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TV Sunday

It hardly matters who wins at next week's Grammys show. What counts is who gets to perform live on TV. The right song can turn an unknown into an overnight sensation. Look what happened to Ricky Martin. When it comes to the Grammy show, it's...

Live or death

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Winning a Grammy is great. But for labels who want to sell albums or boost a young artist, performing on the Grammys is even better.

Ricky Martin's rocket to stardom last year after singing "The Cup of Life" is just the most recent example.

The show airs next Wednesday on CBS. But right now is when the real winners and losers are decided: not the winners and losers of awards, the winners and losers of who gets to strut their stuff on stage.

"We have close to a thousand nominees and only 16 performance slots," says Michael Greene, president of the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences and gatekeeper to the Grammys. He laughs. "I am not a very popular person right now."

Naturally, the politicking

is intense.

"The chief pressure for the labels is to get their artist a slot on the show," says Thomas O'Neil, author of "The Grammys: The Ultimate Unofficial Guide to Music's Highest Honor." "You can't guarantee the outcome of the vote, but you can guarantee a sales boost if they

perform."

No one knows how crucial those slots are better than Greene.

"I got approached by labels and managers and artists," says Greene. "We understand that this is an opportunity that any manager, any record label worth their salt should be calling about."

How important is performing on the Grammys? "The people who perform usually get a sales spike of 26 percent to 31 percent," says O'Neil.

Winning an award, on the other hand, isn't nearly as valuable.

"In 1995, Naughty By Nature won the Grammy

for Best Rap Album," says O'Neil. "But they didn't perform and they actually sold fewer copies the following week."

Joan Osborne was nominated for four awards a few years ago. She lost all four awards, but her sales jumped 47 percent because she performed. So that shows you how

important it is."

And that's why Greene is besieged on all sides.

"I've had people do about every trick in the book," says Greene. "I've had people come outside the office with their guitar and sing. That didn't work by the way. They've even met me at airports when they found out I was going somewhere."

Greene insists none of that makes a difference in his decision.

"It was shocking to a record company executive last week. He said,

'Do you know our label doesn't have any artists on the show? And I said, 'I don't have a clue.' I truly don't even think about it.'"

In truth, many of the decisions are a given.

"The nominations alone give us about 60 percent of the performers," Greene says. "It's that last 40 play that we get to play with."

And they have the pick of the crop. Like most specialists, the Grammys won't feature a performer who's just appeared on a competing awards show.

That's why this year's American Music Awards — an increasingly popular show produced by

Dick Clark — was conspicuously missing some top names.

"It was a sad state at the AMAs," says O'Neil. "Santana didn't perform, the Backstreet

Boys didn't perform." Greene won't apologize for playing hardball with the unspoken rule that performing on one show bans you out for the other.

"With a thousand nominees, why would we replicate a performance the public saw a month before?" he asks. "There is no way we would do something that's already been done."

Other issues come into play, too. George Jones refused to perform on the Country Music Awards when they insisted the legendary artist play an abbreviated version of his hit song.

The Grammys faces the same stubbornness when they ask people to pair up with other artists rather than having the spotlight to themselves.

"Politicking doesn't work," says Greene. "What works is their willingness to collaborate to be flexible."

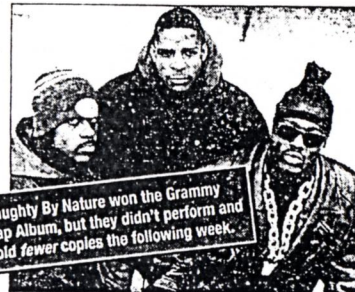
This year, Greene has announced nine of the lucky performers who made the cut. They're the big names: Backstreet Boys, Britney Spears, TLC, Santana, Ricky Martin and so on.

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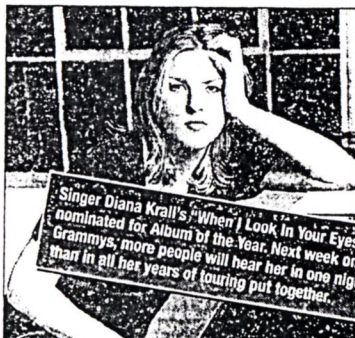
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After years of toiling in singer/songwriter obscurity, Bonnie Raitt became an overnight star when she performed and won Album of the Year.



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Singer Diana Krall's "When I Look In Your Eyes" is nominated for Album of the Year. Next week on the Grammys, more people will hear her in one night than in all her years of touring put together.

But don't always expect them to run through their biggest hit or newest single. "It would be very easy to let the Backstreet Boys just go up there and do their thing," says Greene. "But they're going to spend half their performance paying tribute to a capella singers and showcase what great vocalists they are."

"With Britney, everybody

audience to a new artist or established star in a less visible genre like classical music or folk.

"The Grammys has a long history of turning artists into superstars," says O'Neil. "Ricky Martin, of course. And Bonnie Raitt became an overnight star when she performed and won Album of the Year."

Nothing gives Greene more pleasure than stories like those.

If [classical pianist] Evgeny Kissin comes on our show, his record sales go nuts. It's a testament to the fact that people do have eclectic tastes."

So who's going to break out this year? No one should expect another commercial explosion like Ricky Martin — that was a once-in-a-lifetime event. But of all the new artists likely to get the nod, perhaps the one best poised to scale new heights is Diana Krall on Verve.

She's a strikingly beautiful singer and pianist and already a star in the jazz world.

Her newest recording, "When I Look In Your Eyes," is the first jazz CD to be nominated for Album of the Year since 1988. Her record label — which naturally doesn't want to jinx her chances — won't even comment on the possibility she might be a performer.

"I'm sure they'll have her perform," insists O'Neil. "The academy is proud of that nomination, so they're going to tout it."

Greene will only say: "Stay tuned. I've got something very, very cool in mind for that young lady. I just haven't quite finished putting it together yet."

If she does make it on, Krall will reach more people in one night than in all her years of touring put together. And if she knocks them dead, a star will be born. That's what makes the Grammys so exciting.

"It's one of the best television shows of the year," says O'Neil. "We watch the Oscars for the awards and go to the bathroom when the musical numbers come on. But at the Grammys, it's something to look forward to."

Greene's one regret is that the show can only be so long.

The most difficult part of putting on the Grammys is knowing that we have the ability to make a real difference in someone's career and not having the real estate to do it," admits Greene.