

the retrospect

AWARD-WINNING MINORITIES?! That's Old News.

The last few Academy Award Ceremonies have spawned a zany new trend in the entertainment industry. You may have missed it – even with the incredible [over] abundance of coverage it's received in every possible entertainment publication currently known to humankind – if not, you may want to sit down and take a deep breath, because it's a biggie: minorities are winning awards!

To think, that *only* (note: the italics imply the use of not-so-subtle sarcasm) forty years since the end of legal segregation, "colored" people are being allowed to take home gold trophies signifying their talent. When the likes of Morgan, Denzel, Benicio, Halle and Jamie took home their shiny new statues, journalists around the world made a big deal out of something that was apparently not obvious to most Americans – minorities can be talented too!

It's quite funny how this sort of news is even an issue anymore. With the number of minorities of all races, colors and creeds populating music, radio, news, sports, film and television in front of and behind the camera, one would think that the idea of an exceptionally talented minority wouldn't be such a hot-button, stop-the-presses news item. Have we already forgotten how black artists shattered the entertainment race barrier as far back as the very first Grammy Awards? Apparently (and sadly), it seems that we have.

Let us rewind to May 4th, 1959 when the first annual Grammy Awards were held, honoring the recordings of 1958. Remember Jim Crow? Most of you were probably decades from being born, but back in the late '50s laws given the name of Jim Crow were still shuckin' and jivin' all across America telling your elders that they couldn't partake in the same things white people did. If you've ever opened up a history book, you know that blacks were not allowed to eat at the same restaurants, use the same bathrooms or water fountains, or even participate in the same activities as their white-skinned counterparts. Though it wasn't televised, the first Grammys proved that though they were barely even allowed to breath the same oxygen as whites, black artists were equally skilled and sought-after entertainers.

Ella Fitzgerald, "The First Lady of Jazz/Song," was one of the first two African-Americans to bring home the gold that year. Considered the finest jazz singer of all time (though others give that title to either Billie Holiday or Sarah Vaughn), she took home awards for "Best Jazz Performance, Individual" for *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Duke Ellington Song Book* and "Best Pop Vocal Performance, Female" for *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Irving Berlin Song Book*.

William "Count" Basie, legendary pianist and band leader, also took won two awards for his recording, *Basie*, which took home "Best Jazz Performance, Group" and "Pop, Best Performance by a Dance Band."

The following year, even more legendary black artists would take home awards. Ms. Fitzgerald won some more and Dinah Washington, Duke Ellington and Nat "King" Cole all helped push the talent of the black community into public consciousness at a time when the current Civil Rights movement was only just beginning to heat up.

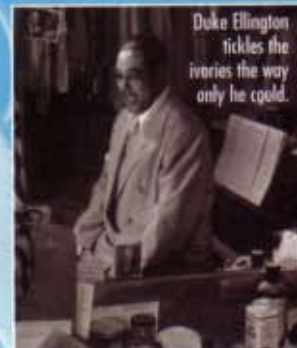
When the 13th Annual Grammy Awards were finally given its very own television special in 1971, the likes of Aretha Franklin, Miles Davis, Dionne Warwick, The Delfonics, Edwin Hawkins, T-Bone Walker, B.B. King, comedian Flip Wilson and even the late Martin Luther King Jr. stepped to the plate and showed those watching at home that indeed, all humans were created equal.

So the next time you pick up some lame magazine or turn on some crummy entertainment news show that tells you that minority entertainers are the "next big thing," just remember that we've been holding it down for decades now, they just never bothered to pay attention, 'til now. – A. Q. Casasnovas

76 Black Beat



Ella Fitzgerald sings to the crowd while Dizzy Gillespie looks on in 1947.



Duke Ellington tickles the ivories the way only he could.



Jim Crow personified. No joke.



Very few could light up a piano the way Count Basie did.



Nat "King" Cole puts his pipes to work in the studio.



The always beloved, yet still controversial Dinah Washington.