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# In major awards, rap gets no love

The snub caps a weak year for a genre that had become a force.

By Geoff Boucher and Chris Lee, Times Staff Writers

In the three decades since rap music grabbed the microphone and swaggered toward pop culture's center stage, it's been hotly debated whether it's the essential sound of youth and urban culture or just ugly noise masquerading as music. But nobody could argue that it was yesterday's news.

That changes today.

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Nominations were announced Thursday for the 49th annual Grammy Awards and, for the first time in six years, no rap stars made it into any of the marquee categories such as album of the year or best new artist. Instead, the glory went to soulful singer Mary J. Blige (who led with eight nominations), the scarred rock survivors of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, British newcomer James Blunt and the Dixie Chicks, the latter nominated for album, record and song of the year.

The Grammy snub caps a fairly miserable year for the rap scene.

A look at the best-selling CDs of 2006 shows that only one rap album, T.I.'s "King," cracked the Top 20, a jolting development considering the genre has been a commercial powerhouse since the early 1990s.

The doldrums go beyond the ledger.

This year there was no critics' darling to follow up the platinum-selling achievements of OutKast, Kanye West, Eminem and 50 Cent, all of whom racked-up major Grammy nominations in recent years.

The drought of 2006 has been felt at XXL, the leading national magazine for hip-hop journalism, where music editor Anselm Samuel has scrapped for material.

"Our problem now is finding enough albums that are worthy of being reviewed, honestly," Samuel said this week. "It's been a down year, no doubt."

## Death of rap?

There's been hand-wringing about whether all of that adds up to a music scene running low on fresh ideas or limping through a few sluggish seasons.

Recording studio guru Rick Rubin, one of the most acclaimed names in contemporary music and a nominee Thursday for producer of the year, has helped shape rap since its early days.

He said cycles of decline and rejuvenation are nothing new. A case in point: the arrival in the '80s of the incendiary L.A. rap group N.W.A.

"Hip-hop was dead for me for a while and then N.W.A came along and knocked down the doors and completely changed what it could be and how far it could go," he said. Rubin said the salvation of rap is someone whose name isn't even known yet. "They're coming."

Some rap insiders are tired of waiting. "Hip Hop Is Dead" is the title of one of the year's most anticipated rap releases, the new CD from Nas, one of hip-hop's respected elder statesmen. He said Thursday's lack of rap respect confirmed his dour view.

"Look at the Grammy nominations, and then look at the title of my album," Nas said. "Pretty appropriate, don't you think? A Grammy is a great honor, but we're just not making those records right now."

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That vacuum has also been cited by superstar rapper and executive Jay-Z.

He came out of his self-proclaimed retirement two weeks ago with the release of "Kingdom Come," his first CD since 2003. One reason he returned, he told the Sunday Mail of London, was to raise rap's game: "The problem with hip-hop is it gets to a certain point, and it has to go down."

Some complain that hard-core rap's favored themes — the thug life, cash and alpha-male posturing — are passe, and album sales may reflect that.

Debating the health of any music scene is a familiar pastime in pop-culture punditry (the last rites have been administered to rock music, for instance, every other year since 1975) and plenty of music industry stalwarts scoff at the notion that rap is in decline. They say if 2006 is a downbeat year, it's only because Eminem, 50 Cent and other bankable acts were on the sidelines while others, such as Jay-Z, Snoop Dogg and the Game came late to the party with end-of-the-year releases.

In three of the last five years, a rapper finished No. 1 in the Nielsen SoundScan tally of the year's bestsellers. This year they didn't even come close. Three country stars, a Disney television soundtrack and a greatest-hits compilation called "Now That's What I Call Music Vol. 21" finished in front of the strongest-selling rapper. In rap circles, there's been little to get excited about since Three 6 Mafia's shocking Oscar win in February.

### Saved by the ringtone

Some say the malaise of 2006 is due to shifting economic realities.

"Hip-hop and urban music is just as strong as it has been, it's just that now its success is coming in new places and in new ways," said Jay Frank, the chief of programming for Yahoo Music. "There's a lot of digital downloads and ringtones being sold, and in some cases this is music that is being very successful in ways other than selling CDs."

Sixteen-year-old rapper Jibbs is an example. His debut album has sold a humble 126,000 copies since its release in October. But one sing-song track on the CD, "Chain Hang Low," an ode to diamond necklaces, has sold 1.4 million ringtones. Those sound clips, used to personalize cellphones, usually cost about \$2 each.

Jibbs was born the same year MC Hammer and "U Can't Touch This" took rap to an unprecedented mainstream success. Album sales were desperately important to rappers then, but Jibbs said things change.

"I don't know how it's doing now," Jibbs said of his CD sales total. "The game changed and it's something that everybody in the industry gotta deal with. Period. So why not be a part of the best thing happening now: ringtones."

Erica Grayson, an executive at Geffen Records, said the label saw ringtones as an integral way for Jibbs to get in the ear of teen fans. "It's just not the way we've done it in the past," she said. Privately, though, other executives worry that ringtones are a novelty and new phone technologies will make them even easier to steal.

Rap is especially vulnerable to market fluctuations, too, because the genre doesn't perform strongly in the sales of catalog titles, the industry term for albums that were released more than two years ago. In other genres, older titles still sell (AC/DC, Garth Brooks and Bob Marley, for example) but rap fans covet the hits of the moment above all else.

"In hip-hop, my people have no sense of history, no loyalty to things that have been here before," said Eric B., who with partner Rakim was an influential early rap act. "Kids now don't know LL Cool J was a rapper before he was an actor in movies."

Samuel, the editor at XXL magazine, said one reason may be that today's emphasis on quick-hit singles results in artistic standards that hang low. It's been the year of "silly stuff and disposable music," he said. That may be the case with rap, which is the rhyming vocal component of the broader music scene called hip-hop. Its beat-driven sonic style, however, has become pop's essential building block.

There were no pure rap albums nominated Thursday in the four prestige Grammy categories, but there was plenty of hip-hop represented. Gnarls Barkley, Mary J. Blige and Justin Timberlake make music that keeps rap's beats alive even as they replace rappers on the charts.

Next year, Dr. Dre, Eminem and 50 Cent may end the debate about rap's dry spell. But Nas, for one, said the drought is valuable for the genre that he calls "the most honest contemporary sound."

"Everybody in hip-hop," he said, "needs to be challenged, needs to be threatened and needs to stay on edge for it to be good."

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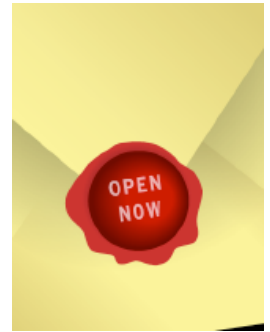
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(INFOBOX BELOW)

*Back story*

*Rap began in New York as the sound of the city's block parties, dance clubs and sidewalks. Now, moving through its third decade, it has become the signature sound of youth culture in America and points beyond.*

*At its rag-tag beginnings, it was a music scene for people who didn't have instruments and didn't have to know how to sing. Hip-hop, the music itself, is based on beats while rap is, at its essence, rhyming without singing. The music now*



laces film, television, advertising and videogames, making it a **generational touchstone for both Hollywood and Madison Avenue.**

It's now clearly mainstream: **Eminem** won an Oscar for his 2002 song "Lose Yourself," and when **OutKast** won the Grammy for the best album of 2004, it marked the first time a pure hip-hop act claimed that coveted trophy. In recent years, rappers such as **Kanye West**, **Eminem** and **50 Cent** have piled up prestige nominations.

Some in the scene, however, say rap has lately lost its edge and art. "It used to be fresh and original," said **Nas**, who has sold **12 million albums** since his **1994 debut album "Illmatic"** was hailed as a watershed recording for the genre. "But that day is gone."

Reported by Times staff writers Geoff Boucher and Chris Lee

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