Feb. 20 — It’s going to take a lot to keep this year’s Grammys from looking like the Grimmys. The good news for viewers is the blockbuster lineup for Sunday night’s Madison Square Garden show. The bad news for the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, which presents the Grammys, is that all the star power and glitz in the world can’t mask the pall of desperation that has overtaken the music industry in the last two years.
Along with all the trouble and uncertainty in the world, the recording industry is being rocked by its own mounting litany of woes.

THE LINEUP of this year’s performers includes Bruce Springsteen, Eminem and Norah Jones, the Dixie Chicks, No Doubt, Ashanti, Faith Hill, Sheryl Crow with Lenny Kravitz, James Taylor, Elvis Costello, Avril Lavigne, Nelly with Kelly Rowland, Coldplay, John Mayer, Vanessa Carlton, N'Sync, Yo-Yo Ma and a sizable chunk of the New York Philharmonic. Still, the party may already be over.

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 Granted, the recording industry has cried wolf for decades: Extended radio play was crippling the industry; home taping was crippling the industry; sales of used CDs were crippling the industry. Bootlegs, imports, dubbing decks — the perils were endless. And somehow through decades of complaint, the recording industry was racking up booming sales and profits that other industries could only envy.

Norah Jones performing in Tokyo last year. Her debut album, "Come Away With Me," was nominated for Album of the Year, and her single, "Don’t Know Why" is up for Record of the Year.

The industry is still crying wolf, with the only difference now being that a wolf is vigorously gnawing at its innards. Unlike the boy who cried wolf, people aren’t ignoring the recording industry’s predicament: They’re just rooting for the wolf.

Wired magazine has dubbed 2003 “The Year the Music Dies.” Thanks to file-sharing over the Internet, music sales have been on the decline for two years running now.

Unlike previous proprietary technologies such as CDs or vinyl records, the new advances — the Internet, MP3s, CD burners, Ipods and such — have put consumers in charge of a technology the industry still hasn’t come to grips with. And while the musical mega-corporations have bickered over how to eke the most profit from this brave new world, consumers have been trading music — millions and millions of downloads — for free.

For every Napster the industry shoots down, a Kazaa springs up. The Recording Industry Association of America, which does the industry’s wet work, can’t go after every single college kid with a hard drive. And for every bit of legislation or court ruling the industry wins — including a recent one compromising folk’s Internet privacy — they only alienate more consumers. It’s an endless quagmire. Further legislative remedies may be slow in coming, as Congress is preoccupied with other matters these days, and Hillary Rosen, the industry’s very effective head lobbyist, has just retired.
Meanwhile, Congress has also heard testimony from artists claiming that legislation the industry has pursued has been anti-artist. Everyone from former Grammy winners like Don Henley, Beck, Sheryl Crow and Luther Vandross to the current mega-platinum band Incubus have been mounting challenges to record label contract practices, which they’ve likened to indentured servitude.

Hate on all sides

Plenty of consumers hate the recording industry. Plenty of artists hate it. And we’re entering a time when musicians can do their recording cheaply at home on PCs, and will soon likely be able to effectively sell their music direct to consumers, bypassing record companies entirely.

The “big five” companies that dominate the worldwide recording industry — EMI, Sony, Universal, Warner and BMG — are scared and hurting, so much so that there may soon only be a “big four,” as Time-Warner-AOL is reportedly looking to unload its music division on EMI.

A rare situation exists today where Sony, as a member of the recording industry, is part of a lawsuit targeting manufacturers whose products make illegal downloads easy, one of which is Sony: The corporation is so cumbersome that it is suing itself. Meanwhile, in a belt-tightening move I’m sure we can all empathize with, Universal’s parent company, Vivendi, has begun selling off its corporate jets.

Perhaps the surest sign that the party’s over is the fact that the party’s over. Cost-cutting labels are downsizing their typically lavish post-Grammy parties this year, and the Universal Music Group has cancelled its anticipated $500,000 bash altogether, though it claims money’s not the reason. Company sources say their gala was mixed over concerns that unpleasantness might occur between rapper 50 Cent and feuding Murder Inc. label head Irv Gotti. 50 Cent was stabbed at a March 2000 recording studio melee where Gotti was reportedly present (he hasn’t been charged with the crime). The resilient Mr. Cent was subsequently shot nine times at another soiree, which can leave you wondering if the NARAS shouldn’t just merge with the NRA.

Always missing the boat

There may be no greater indication that the NARAS is in sad shape than the fact that its financial condition is a lot more interesting to write about than the music they’re hawking. So it has always been. If anyone thinks the U.N. is irrelevant, they should look at the NARAS’s record of consistently missing the boat on recognizing the significant music of its time.

The Grammys may love Bruce Springsteen now, but they paid him no heed before the world at large discovered him with his breakthrough 1975 “Born to Run” album. They still didn’t notice him that year, either, as they were too busy naming the Captain and Tennille’s “Love Will Keep Us Together” record of the year. It took Springsteen another nine years to come up with something suitably insipid — 1984’s “Dancing in the Dark” — to warrant a Grammy nod.
That was a flash romance compared to Bob Dylan, whom it took the NARAS 17 years to finally recognize, in a minor gospel category. It wasn’t until his 35th year in the record business, 1997, that Dylan won a major award as a solo artist.

In recent years the Grammys have made a desperate effort to become hip, embracing Beck, Eminem and other critical darlings as credibility poster children. It also has helped that with every passing year the Grammys introduce more award categories — from an original 26 in 1958 up to a record 104 this year — so that via blind chance if nothing else they’re bound to recognize some artists of substance, as long as they’re best-selling artists of substance. That 104 awards, by the way, isn’t counting Hall of Fame inductees (an elephant’s graveyard of albums and artists the Grammys ignored in their prime) or the 41 categories in the three-year-old Latin Grammys (whose first televised ceremony last year was a ratings flop, yet one more Grammy woe). Wait a few more years and they’ll probably give each of you a Grammy just for watching the show.

**Dreck aplenty**

Not that you won’t have earned it. There is dreck aplenty to wade through in this year’s list of nominees, along with many laudable choices, and a respectable variety.

Nominations for album of the year span the Dixie Chicks’ sly take on country music, “Home”; Bruce Springsteen’s very Springsteenian “The Rising”; Eminem’s attitude-packed “The Eminem Show”; Nelly’s hip-hop R&B “Nellyville”; and Norah Jones’ sultry jazz

Rickie-Lee-Jones-Does-Vince-Guaraldi-sounding “Come Away With Me.”

The Record of the Year category has historically been an embarrassment. Given even a modicum of hindsight, was Celine Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On” really the best that humanity came up with in 1998? And what era would choose to be remembered by Christopher Cross’ “Sailing” or Olivia Newton John’s “I Honestly Love You”?

This time the Record of the Year choices include Norah Jones’ fine “Don’t Know Why” and catchy, if not especially memorable tunes by Nickelback and Nelly. But the nominees also include “A Thousand Miles” by lightweight waif Vanessa Carlton, and Eminem’s “Without Me.” Eminem has done some OK stuff, but “Without Me” is to music what spackling is to oil painting.

The Best New Artist category — whose past winners often sank without a trace — has a couple of nominees with potential staying power, including Jones again, and the multi-talented pop craftsman John Mayer.

Even nominations that delight curmudgeonly critics like myself, such as Elvis Costello’s three nods, highlight the incomprehensibility of the Grammy’s countless categories. Costello’s “When I Was Cruel” album is nominated as the Best Rock Album, while his “Cruel Smile” — an album made up largely of remixes of the same songs — is up for Alternative Rock Album. Meanwhile, pity folks in the catch-all field of World Music — which encompasses perhaps millions of musicians from scores of musical styles around the globe — who are accorded the same number of nomination slots, five, as those toiling in the relatively unpopulated Polka field.
Costello, by the way, will be on this year’s show in company with Bruce Springsteen, Steve Van Zandt and No Doubt’s Tony Kanal, performing a Clash-song tribute to the late Joe Strummer. It’s a nice gesture, but it would have been nicer had the Grammy’s ever recognized Strummer while he was alive, or found a place for the Clash’s music back when it was a vital part of the music scene.

The Grammy Awards telecast will doubtless be entertaining in places, and it’s guaranteed to be interminable. But what it most probably won’t be is a showcase for music that is more than a product. The perilous times we live in more than ever call for music that is as challenging, emotional and inventive as it can be; music that is an act of love; music that reaches across the gulfs in the world today, that we can all hold up and proclaim, “Hey, look what we’re capable of! Here’s a good reason not to blow everything to smithereens!”

Eminem bragging on himself or Nelly proclaiming, “It’s hot in here, so take off all your clothes!” may not quite rise to that standard.

By Jim Washburn, a California-based writer and longtime rock critic, has been a regular contributor to MSN BC.com

Grimmys or Grammys?

Greats who never won

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