

TYLER, THE CREATOR, THE GRAMMYS, AND THE DEATH OF GENRE

The 62nd Annual Grammy Awards ceremony was held in Los Angeles on the 26th of January. For one Tyler Okonma, known to many simply as Tyler, The Creator, it was a night more special than it was for most. After over a decade of making music, the Odd-Future co-founder was rewarded with the ultimate musical accolade. His most recent album, *IGOR*, won the Grammy for best rap album. The explosion of cartoonish excitement and euphoria when his name was announced expressed enough emotion and gratitude that he could easily have forgone an acceptance speech. His shamelessly goofy grin said it all.

After the show, once the adrenaline rush had mostly subsided, Tyler spoke frankly to reporters backstage about his frustrations with The Recording Academy - the organisation responsible for presenting the awards. Although he was deeply grateful for the recognition his album received, the source of his frustration was one simple fact. To him *IGOR* wasn't a rap album.

"It sucks that whenever we — and I mean guys that look like me — do anything that's genre-bending, or that's anything, they always put it in a rap or urban category"

It would be disrespectful to discuss Tyler's frustrations with the Recording Academy without recognizing that his critique very explicitly focused in on the racial biases he felt were present within the voting process for the awards. In his speech, Tyler mentions both the rap and urban categories. Describing the latter as *"just a politically correct way to say the n-word"*. Urban Contemporary music was a term coined by African American radio DJ Frankie Crocker in the 70s to describe the playlists which were extremely popular among African American communities and generally featured music derived from R&B and soul. More recently however, the term has been used in an uncouth and clumsy fashion by organisations like the Grammys to group together black musicians even when their music seems often to have little in common with other artists given the same label.

But Tyler's frustration with the Grammys is also indicative of a wider ideological disconnect. A disconnect between the musical status quo embodied by big record companies, brands like Billboard, and organisations like The Recording Academy - who value highly the ability to classify and organise music - and a new generation of musicians who have grown up in a world where ideological globalisation and the internet has facilitated unending creative and cultural crosspollination. The information age has raised a generation who sees genre as nothing more than an artificial restriction of creative freedom.

IGOR shows Tyler at his most versatile and dynamic. Without committing himself to any one style or genre it's an unfettered outpouring of emotion and sincerity unobscured by the restrictions and expectations which a traditional rap project would bring with it. From old crackly vinyl samples (*I THINK*) to wonky 80s synths (*RUNNING OUT OF TIME*), and maniacal half-rapped, half-yelled verses (*WHATS GOOD?*) to poetic spoken word interludes (*EXACTLY WHAT YOU RUN FROM YOU END UP CHASING*), *IGOR* is a sonic patchwork quilt. Tyler's voice, whether rapping or singing is just another instrument to him, just another weapon in his arsenal for his assault on the restrictions of genre. Tyler seems to relish in his ability to avoid being pinned down or restricted, gorging himself on sounds from all across the vast ocean of sonic possibilities.

Tyler Okonma is not the only one taking this creative approach either. Billie Eilish, who many might see as the posterchild of this new attitude also had a very successful night at this year's Grammys. She became the youngest, and second ever, person to sweep all four of the main categories. Her debut album *When We All Fall Asleep Where Do We Go?*

challenges a lot of pre-conceived notions concerning what pop music can and cannot be. As an example, take *bad guy*, the biggest single off the record. Instead of a hook, it employs a cartoonish synth solo (said synth also being the only other instrument used on the track aside from a bass, minimalistic percussion and Eilish's own voice), and instead of a bridge, the whole song suddenly transitions in pace and tone to a dark, heavy, trap dirge before fading away. All this is done in just over 3 minutes. On *Bad Guy* Eilish forgoes several elements that many would consider essential for a modern smash pop hit, but clearly it works.

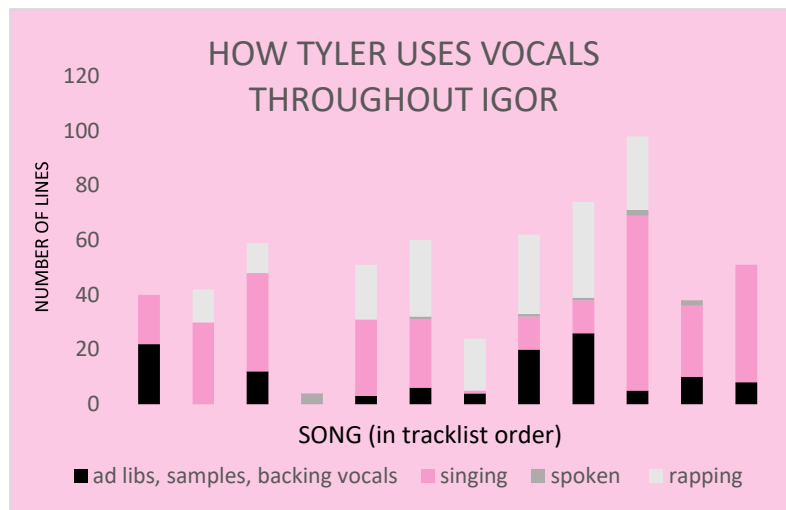
Other artists like *Lil Nas X* (who's record breaking country trap hybrid *Old Town Road* divided opinions and generated conversation around what actually made a song "country"), or the wave of emo-rappers like *Lil Peep* and *Juice Wrld* - who have had a strong presence in the pop charts for the last several years - have used the internet and capitalised, intentionally or not, on the untapped market between genre lines. Even in the musical underground, bands like *Black Midi* and *Death Grips* make and independently release noisy, hard to pin down music which dodges and defies categorisation at every turn.

Perhaps it's optimistic to think that entities as gargantuan as those at the top of the music industry would ever give in and concede that there may be room for improvement in the face of generational change but, as we enter a new decade, I am hopeful. With artists like Tyler, The Creator and Billie Eilish at the helm, the future of popular music looks bright. Only time will tell whether the big companies in the music industry will stubbornly stand their ground or adjust to a new generations of musicians who play by different rules. One thing does seem certain though, whether it's in spite of or in collaboration with the giants of the industry, the new decade seems poised to produce an avalanche of incredibly exciting music and forward thinking musicians.

SHOULD *IGOR* BE CONSIDERED A RAP ALBUM?



Above: The proportion of lines on IGOR delivered via singing, rapping, as spoken world or as ad-libs/samples/backing vocals.



Above: Breakdown showing how much of each song is made up of rapping, singing, spoken world passages or ad-libs/samples/backing vocals.

(Data: Genius [<https://genius.com/albums/Tyler-the-creator/Igor>] and me counting out the lines while listening to the album)