

Blowfish, Gangstas and Seals

Backstage at the 38th Annual Grammy Awards

by Rebecca Kraus

What goes on backstage at the Grammys is an amazing thing. Not because it's terribly glamorous or organized—dozens of people are running around not exactly sure what to do or say. You'd think after all these years, stars, security, publicists, talent representatives and journalists would know it all, but often it's just plain chaotic.

The awards were especially sweet this year. Okay, Hootie as Best New Artist isn't exactly a coup and critics' darlings PJ Harvey and Joan Osborne were sorely overlooked. But Joni Mitchell did oust Mariah Carey and Irish laddies the Chieftans and Van Morrison beat out Michael and Janet Jackson. The rawness of Alanis Morissette succeeded in winning over voters. But all this is old news, isn't it? What exactly is it like *behind* the curtains, before, during and after show time?

For starters, as I discover moments into my long day at the Shrine, attitude *is* everything. As I hurry toward the press area, someone asks me where the VH1 lunch is. The speed at which I walked was obviously mistaken for knowledge of where I was going. How would I know? I wasn't invited. In fact, I also soon discover that my print badge puts me at the bottom of the press access totem pole, with the TV and radio media getting

much better spots backstage in special curtained areas. Still, I am asked where the restrooms are, how the headphones work, and where to get telecast programs. Since everyone seems to think I know what I'm doing, I figure I might as well use that of purpose and roam.

In the moments before the pre-telecast, backstage is buzzing. Doing last minute tune-ups with her band, Joan Osborne is talking with her bass player who seems to be wearing a lot more lipstick than usual. I am in a sea of black clothes on a bright day. Cool shades and leather everywhere. Many of these musicians aren't used to daylight, apparently. Buffet tables of sodas, bagels and vegetables are ready. Next curtain over are a dozen computers broadcasting events live over the Internet. Everyone's eyes are madly dashing about, looking for someone they know or want to know. Hired escorts await the chance to lead winners and presenters through the backstage Habitrail.

Although it's not broadcast on TV, the pre-telecast is visible on all backstage monitors. The presenters seem a bit sloppy, fumbling many of the nominees' names. Who cares, no one's watching. Seal gets Best Male Pop Vocal Performance. He steps up to the podium and says, "I didn't know the awards were even going on. I was just backstage. Thanks. Great." Glen Ballard is already

feeling how his collaboration with Alanis Morissette will make him the big winner this night, but the Canadian rocker is nowhere to be found. When asked about Alanis' angry woman persona, an image concocted more by the media and her hit 'You Oughta Know' than by herself, Ballard says, "I always think of Alanis as an artist first and a woman second... but she's not afraid to stand up as a woman and as a person and I think that's refreshing and somewhat intimidating."

Los Lobos wins for Best Pop Instrumental Performance for their contribution to the film *Desperado*. Winner Vince Gill is in high spirits when he meets the press. His goal now: to lose weight for his next album cover. Someone's walkie talkie blurts out with an air of presidential gravity "Alanis Morissette has arrived. Alanis Morissette." When Ramblin' Jack Elliot comes to meet the press for his Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album, not one head or pen lifts to get his comments. Yet he greets us enthusiastically

cally exclaiming, "This is the first time I even watched [the Grammys]. I don't have a TV out where I live, but it feels wonderful!" Likewise, rather than wait for congratulations, the winner for Best Musical Album for Children seizes this opportunity to speak. He condemns the old lullaby threatening that from the tree top "down will come baby, cradle and all," and says kids need better messages. Yeah, yeah, where's Coolio and 2Pac?

When *Civilization Phase III* wins for its packaging design, the presenter informs us of the winner's fate. "Frank Zappa has passed away." Thanks. Won't be

expecting him backstage then. Did Jon Secada just thank José Eber, the hairstylist? If not, it's still good for a laugh. Cesar Rosas from Los Lobos is stopped by security on his way back to the auditorium. "Can I see your pass please?" asks a guard. "I'm just trying to get back to my seat," says Mr. Rosas. "Let him in," I say. "He just won a Grammy." The guard obliges. Someone who's speaking to the press has left her Grammy sitting on a table. Granted permission by an escort who really had no authority to do so, I pick it up to try it on for size. Pretty heavy and much less phallic than an Oscar. Maybe if I pretend to be the winner for Best Song via Sign Language, I'll get a photo opp. "Try it!" enthuses the escort. Naah.

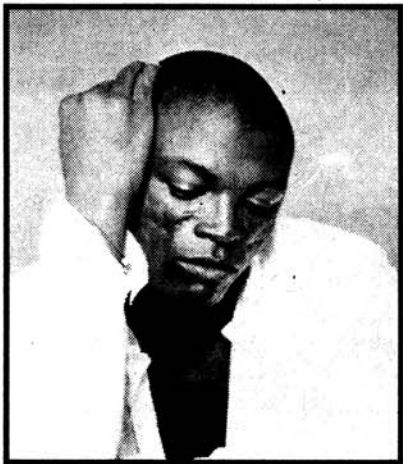
The Internet folks are interviewing Emmylou Harris. As I pass by I catch myself on the monitor inadvertently getting on the Web. Does that count, like being on TV? Every time someone steps into the photographers' den, a burst of flashing lights peppers the air and screams reminiscent of a horse race are heard over the din. Chris Isaak, a presenter and nominee, wants nothing to do with the serious line of questioning from a



Class act Stevie Wonder

radio reporter. Asked about the airplay he's receiving on different stations, he quips, "I hardly ever listen to the radio and when I do, I listen to a Mexican station on AM." And about his role at the Grammys? "I really just wanted to meet Pat Boone here," adding, "If I want to fix up that buffet for you people I've got to get out of here."

Once the live telecast begins, action continues with wondrous synchronicity. The trick is catching what's happening on the show *and* backstage. When Hootie plays, we are getting both the live feed and generic music through our headphones. The result is this bland, muddled sound. Isn't it ironic? They give an uninspired acceptance speech, about as edgy and eloquent as their music. Still they're affable guys who have just happened to sell over ten million albums and inundate American pop culture. "Winning a Grammy



Gracious winner Seal

is one thing, but just to be awarded one by KISS in full makeup is probably the biggest thrill of all of our lives," says one of the Blowfish. "We might jam with them later." KISS continues to make a ruckus backstage with a rock 'n' roll photo session; the bevy of photographers is yelling at the band "Hey, over here Gene!" "Let's see some tongue!" It's getting a bit crass for me, so I turn around only to find myself swept up by Coolio's entourage. Hey, I'm cool like that. So I follow, keeping my eye on the rapper's spiked 'do till my badge can't do no more and my tour with Coolio is cut short. I kinda liked being in a gangsta's posse for those few minutes.

I can't help but groove to the Stevie Wonder tribute while most other journalists are typing away. When he comes backstage, I become an awestricken fan - pen and paper in hand, I follow him around not so much to take notes but because I truly love the man. I ask his people, "Does Stevie give out autographs?" No one seems to know. I wonder if Stevie knows that his coat

says "African Warrior" on the back. They appear to be headed for the ladies' room. I'm sure Stevie doesn't know that either. Waxing poetic, Stevie says, "I'm so very happy that God created music; it reflects the essence of society, of the soul, of the spirit." Winner for "For Your Love" and the Lifetime Achievement Grammy, he's the only artist who actually thanks the press for constructive criticism while most seem to begrudge the whole process. Joan Osborne is now performing; boy, she looks nervous.

I never do get Stevie's signature, but I do muster up the courage for one from Annie Lennox, winner for Pop Female Performance. Talk about a star: skinny, shaded and clever, Lennox is a cool cucumber indeed. I turn around and there is her antithesis: Sparky, David Letterman's 10-year-old correspondent. Looking for an angle, Sparky himself looks ripe for an interview. I ask him how he got started in his illustrious broadcasting career and if he plans to continue. Never lifting his eyes from a monitor, he answers, "Why not, I mean, you got a good start in it already, why can't you just stop right now." I get the idea. His Mom, decked out in a very expensive outfit and jewelry, has also gotten the idea.

Timothy Hutton and I are watching the same monitor, and I'm not sure if he's talking to me or himself when he exclaims, "Tony B [Bennett]!" I don't know how to react, so I nod and play it cool. Later, I'm surprised to find that Tony B is pee wee, about a foot shorter than you'd expect. Michael Greene, president of NARAS, is getting ready to go on stage and deliver his speech about funding for the arts. But where's his fellow speaker? "We've lost Richard Dreyfuss," asserts an urgent voice from a walkie talkie. I ask Greene, who's been outspoken about the Academy's new voting methods, how the show is going. "As good as live television can go," he says. I'd hoped for something more controversial.

"Someone for Tim Allen?" a woman asks the escorts, leading the star to the press area. Three women jump up, trying to look coy. "I'll take him." "I got it." "Yes, please." I spot TLC whose dancers, dressed in tight blue hooded jumpsuits, resemble Martian gymnasts. When Alanis' performance of "You Oughta Know" spells out the F word nice and slow, many of us look around in confirmation and giggle. Later, I hear that it was bleeped on TV.

Joni Mitchell is thrilled and giddy. Seal, the softspoken Englishman, cradles his Grammys backstage while graciously thanking the American public. "I'm still slightly shell-shocked," he muses. I glance at the monitor to see Whitney Houston do her perfunctory belt-out song. As I try to nudge closer to the actual stage area, an outstretched arm prevents me from going any further. There is this window, like a bridge between the press area and the actual stage, which is pretty damn sacred, apparently. People's eyes are intent and tuxedos mingle with sunglasses. It's hard to tell who's actually important. The big finale is coming up.

It's no big surprise that many never cross that boundary into the press maze. Why bother? It's probably hard enough to explain how it feels to win a Grammy let alone having to deal with, "So, how's it feel to lose?" Photos tell some of the stories. Words help. But in the end, it's the music itself that speaks the loudest. And backstage at the Grammys is just another bunch of sights to go with the sounds that move our worlds. **5**