



## Grammy Tunes Out Children's Spoken Word

By Shannon Maughan - December 15, 2011

Everybody loves to win an award—especially a prestigious one that is known to boost sales. But this year, children's audiobook publishers feel they have been denied the chance to win one of their industry's highest honors, the Grammy.

When the nominations for the 54th annual Grammy Awards were announced on November 30, children's audiobook publishers were perplexed to find not a single children's spoken word title among finalists. This scenario is a result of the Recording Academy's restructuring, earlier this year, of the Grammy categories, which combined the previous categories of Best Children's Music Album and Best Children's Spoken Word Album into a new joint category, Best Children's Album.

Competing for the Grammy has long proved a tough go for audiobook publishers, in part because they typically make up a much smaller pool of the Recording Academy's voting membership for the awards than do those in the music field. Best Spoken Word Album remains a general Grammy category to which publishers submit adult titles, but the existence of a separate children's spoken word category had given that segment of the industry the opportunity to put its recordings in the running. Eliminating the category is a blow. Anthony Goff, publisher and director of Hachette Audio, and a member of the Audio Publishers Association board, said, "There's very little chance for book product to compete when that's the case." He calculates that roughly 15% of the total children's field of approximately 122 titles submitted this year was audiobooks. Without the category, he adds, "I worry about the ramifications for children's literacy when we have one more area that's silenced. We're up against a bigger, thicker wall than ever."

Tim Ditlow, v-p, young adult and children's acquisition editor for Brilliance Audio and a voting member of the Recording Academy, was particularly dismayed by the list of finalists, which contains five titles by largely little-known, independent music artists—*GulfAlive* by The Banana Plant; *All About Bullies... Big and Small* from Cool Beans Music; *Fitness Rock & Roll* by Miss Amy; *Are We There Yet?* by the Papa Hugs Band and *I Love: Tom T. Hall's Songs of Fox Hollow* by various artists. "This was one of the most rich and robust years ever for audiobooks," Ditlow says. "The strength and depth of quality narrators submitted this year by our industry was amazing." He noted recordings featuring such talent as former Grammy winner Jim Dale, as well as authors/musicians with strong followings, like Dar Williams and Colin Meloy, as well as accomplished actors John Lithgow and Elijah Wood.

In addition to fielding a strong roster of entries, "The audiobook industry has the ability to generate national publicity and sales placement at an incredible number of retail and consumer outlets," Ditlow adds. Publishers agree that such exposure is a win-win, bringing positive attention to quality recordings as well as to the Grammy Awards.

However confounding the changes may seem to audiobook publishers, the reworking of the Grammy categories was not undertaken lightly, contends Bill Freimuth, v-p of awards for the Recording Academy. The Academy continually reviews and tries to improve its awards process, and "it took two years to go through the whole thing," Freimuth says of the restructuring. The number of categories had grown from 28 back in 1958 to 109 in 2011, according to Freimuth. The number is now down to 78, and the minimum number of entries per category is now 40, up from 25.

"When we were looking field to field, genre to genre, it looked like there was an imbalance," Freimuth notes, pointing out that some categories might have more than 450 entries, and others only 25 or 30. "We wanted to create more parity," Freimuth says. "At the rate we were going, we could have 200 categories in five or 10 years and then the Grammy becomes devalued. We wanted to ensure that because it's the only peer-judged award in the recording industry that it's a real competition."

Speaking specifically of the children's category, Freimuth explains that the change is actually a reversion to the way things had been prior to 1993, when music and spoken word were broken out. "It's not a precedent-setting move in the new structure," he says.

Freimuth points to a couple of factors that have likely influenced this year's children's nomination results. "Keep in mind that voting members who are in the children's music community far outweigh those in the publishing community," he says. And, because members are asked to vote in their areas of expertise, this helps tip the scales. He also believes that many of this year's children's music artists made good use of social media in soliciting votes from members, and says, "It's a brave new world for us."

Going forward, Freimuth emphasizes, "I have a tremendous amount of respect for artists making spoken word recordings for children. This was one year. It's very possible that next year could yield a very different field of nominees. We knew whatever we did would be imperfect, but the system is and always has been dynamic."

For children's audiobook publishers, there are a "couple of possible reactions," according to Freimuth. "They can give it another year or two to see if it's a trend, or they can decide 'We just hate this and we know it will never work.'" In either case, Freimuth says that he is willing to listen to publishers' concerns, and that voting members always have the option to pursue official Academy channels and propose that a category be added or reinstated.

According to Goff, the Audio Publishers Association is currently discussing what steps to take as a voice for its member publishers in the cause. This year's Grammy winners will be announced on February 12, 2012.

[http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/49868-grammy-tunes-out-children-s-spoken-word.html?utm\\_source=Publishers+Weekly%27s+PW+Daily&utm\\_campaign=ade7e14cfb-UA-15906914-1&utm\\_medium=email](http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/49868-grammy-tunes-out-children-s-spoken-word.html?utm_source=Publishers+Weekly%27s+PW+Daily&utm_campaign=ade7e14cfb-UA-15906914-1&utm_medium=email)