Can the Grammys’ Best New Artist Curse Be Undone?

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Groups can stay creative and successful over time – if they don’t chase further acclaim.

The Grammy Awards’ Best New Artist curse is legendary for a reason – many winners have failed to live up to the title and recreate their success. However, some notable outliers have gone on to enjoy long, successful careers. Why do some rising stars fall victim to the curse while others thrive?

In a recent research paper, we examined the career trajectories of 52 groups nominated for the Best New Artist Grammy from 1980 to 1990. We created an oral history of each band’s career by analysing interviews with band members, the sonic features of their songs to see if they were experimenting with new sounds as well as album sales and critical reception. This diverse data allowed us to see how creative groups make sense of and respond to recognition, and how this response shapes their subsequent creative process and success.

Our findings demonstrate that artists have three different reactions to being nominated for the Grammy. Most absorb the recognition, outside
expectations and input, while others either insulate themselves against it or have a mixed response. Ironically, groups that approach recognition with a need for more of it often doom themselves never to find it, while groups less focused on recognition are most likely to discover it again.

Our findings reveal that a group’s ability to stay creative depends on how they answer the question: “Is this what we want?” Just under half of the groups seemed to answer “yes” and, as a result, absorbed the (often negative) externalities that accompany early recognition.

The groups that want more

Groups we deem as “absorbing” use the recognition of their debut as a benchmark for what they expect in the future. As a result, they care deeply about external audiences’ opinions and reactions to their work. Big Country bassist Tony Butler summed this up in a 2007 interview: “It still irks me that the band was never as highly regarded in England as it was in Scotland. We were given a wishy-washy label because we had Celtic influences, and I don’t think a lot of people understood how great we were.”

Over time, absorbing groups shift from working together as a group towards a collection of individuals working against one another. The Go-Go’s guitarist Jane Wiedlin described the band’s transition in a 2020 interview:

In the beginning we were a gang of girls out to have a good time. Then we got famous and instead of being The Go-Go’s against the world, it became The Go-Go’s against each other."

Driven by a desire to replicate their early recognition and appeal to new audiences, absorbing groups allow external figures to affect their creative process. “I began hating all the corporate people getting involved,” explained singer-songwriter Nick Van Eede of Cutting Crew in 2009. “I’d be writing songs and trying to perfect my craft and somebody would go, ‘Well, you’ve sold that many units so let’s make this kind of record next.’ There was no music involved anymore.”

These groups feel pressured to accelerate the pace and end up fixating on recreating the aesthetic qualities of their music. They tend to stagnate creatively and go through cycles of exhaustion, breakup and attempted reunion. “It was four years of madness,” remembered Paul Rutherford of
Frankie Goes to Hollywood in 2001. “We crammed a whole career into four years. Living life in that velocity is damaging. That’s why we split up. It was all too much too soon for us.”

While absorbing groups resent aspects of their early recognition, the bitterness eventually gives way to gratitude. Ivan Doroschuk, lead vocalist of Men Without Hats explained: “Before there was a lot of pressure to play the hits. No one wanted to hear the latest songs. Record companies were telling us what to do. There is enough distance now, there’s no pressure from record companies and no agenda. Now I play it with pleasure.”

**The groups that don’t search for fame**

A few bands seemed to answer “no” or “not quite” to the question: “Is this what we want?”. In our study, we found that eight out of the 52 groups insulated against the scrutiny and external expectations that come with recognition, and did not focus on achieving future recognition.

While these “insulating” groups have high standards for what they want to produce, they tend to separate their current work from their prior achievement and focus on the future as a new creative endeavour. “Top 40 success isn’t an Indigo goal,” singer-songwriter Amy Ray of Indigo Girls explained in a 1997 interview. “We’d probably try to sabotage it if it happened. It’s more important to keep experimenting and keep things fresh.”

These groups shield themselves from external influences and work as a collective – through one another, rather than against each other. As Annie Lennox of Eurythmics explained in 1999:

> Dave [Stewart] is the facilitator. Very often, he captures the idea as it comes from me and takes it several steps further. Then I take the idea a few steps further still, and we swap back and forth until the song is done.”

Rather than creating new albums because of external pressure, insulating groups take time off when they felt creatively depleted. They allow in-the-moment feelings to guide the unfolding of their creativity and tend to explore different sounds and influences. As singer Sade Adu put it in a 1985
interview: “If you try to get a certain feeling, all you get is contrivance... We have our own feeling and our own sound that comes from many things... We don’t consciously try to make any songs or records that sound like anything or anybody.”

As a result, insulating groups exhibit gratitude for their ongoing ability to create. “There isn’t a day when I don’t tell myself how fortunate I am,” noted Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits in 1996. “I can wake up in the morning, read for an hour, and then play my guitar. I couldn’t want more than that.”

Ultimately, insulating groups remain productive for a longer period of time, produce more albums and receive more recognition than absorbing groups over the course of their careers.

**The groups that change course**

Some bands (17 out of 52) seemed to change their response to the question, “Is this what we want?” – they initially absorb the recognition and then attempt to reorient and insulate themselves against it. Many of these bands are overly attuned to audiences’ opinions and continue to seek renewed mainstream recognition.

These “mixed” groups attempt to transition away from internalising expectations and allowing new voices to influence their work, with mixed success. As Corinne Drewery of Swing Out Sister explained in 2009: “We started out working with great producers and arrangers, and lots of great musicians. As the years have gone by, we’ve really got [musically] inside our own heads.”

Mixed groups describe being stuck between the push to be more experimental and the pull to recreate prior sounds. They also have to find new ways of working together. Paul Waaktaar-Savoy described how A-Ha grappled with this:

> I think we sort of run ourselves into the ringer when we get together, that we always need to step back, and I think it’s when we step back that... it seems to do our career a lot of good. We have to go away to get better, that’s sort of how it is.”
In general, mixed groups work together for longer periods than absorbing groups but cannot achieve the level of critical success that insulating groups do. The big differentiator for mixed groups is the ability to mend wounds, allowing them to have a longer career together.

Further analysis of the acoustic attributes of bands’ albums revealed that insulating groups tend to produce music with greater variance after the recognition of an early album. This corresponds with our qualitative finding that insulating groups experiment more with their sound overall (whereas absorbing groups become locked into a sound) and that mixed groups are initially more like absorbing groups but, over the course of their career, start to become more varied in their sound.

We also found that insulating groups and mixed groups spent more time being productive (i.e., years active) and created more original albums than absorbing groups did. When we compared the average number of additional Grammy nominations (not including the original year in which they were nominated), insulating groups received 5.13, absorbing groups received 1.85 and mixed orientation groups received 1.71. In addition, three insulating bands were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame: Dire Straits, The Pretenders and Eurythmics. The Go-Go’s are the only group from either of the other orientations that have been nominated or inducted.

**Catalysing future creativity**

Our research reveals a paradox: By shunning outsize expectations and outside input and voices, groups might be more likely to be more creative and meet those expectations in a more organic way. This appears to run counter to prior research that suggests the only way groups can sustain creativity over time is to swap out the people they’re collaborating with.

However, our analyses do not suggest that the most creative groups isolate themselves completely. Instead, insulating groups protect and pace their time together, taking breaks when necessary, rather than forcing the issue if the timing or creative energy does not feel right. This allows them to learn how to create through each other rather than pitting their ideas against each other.

Early recognition, if not handled appropriately, may foster an emotional longing for the past. In order to catalyse future collaboration and creativity, groups need to be grateful for how they work together and what they
produce, not just what they have achieved. Rather than chasing widespread future acclaim, groups need to think carefully about what recognition means to them and choose whose recognition they might desire as they move forward.

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