



RECORDING ACADEMY® TO CELEBRATE MUSIC LEGENDS AT 2026 SPECIAL MERIT AWARDS CEREMONY DURING GRAMMY® WEEK

THE CEREMONY RETURNS TO THE WILSHIRE EBELL THEATRE ON SATURDAY, JAN. 31, 2026

SANTA MONICA, CALIF. (DEC. 19, 2025) — The Recording Academy®'s Special Merit Awards Ceremony celebrating the 2026 Lifetime Achievement Award, Trustees Award and Technical Grammy® Award recipients will be held on **Jan. 31, 2026**, at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre. [Carlos Santana](#), [Chaka Khan](#), [Cher](#), [Fela Kuti](#), [Paul Simon](#), and [Whitney Houston](#) are the [Recording Academy Lifetime Achievement Award](#) honorees; [Bernie Taupin](#), [Eddie Palmieri](#) and [Sylvia Rhone](#) are the [Trustees Award](#) honorees; and [John Chowning](#) is the [Technical Grammy Award](#) honoree. The Grammy Week event will celebrate the honorees' outstanding contributions to the recording field.

"It's a true honor to recognize this year's Special Merit Award recipients — an extraordinary group whose influence spans generations, genres and the very foundation of modern music," said [Harvey Mason Jr.](#), CEO of the Recording Academy. "Each of these honorees has made a profound and lasting impact, and we look forward to celebrating their remarkable achievements on the eve of Grammy Sunday."

Lifetime Achievement Award Honorees: This Special Merit Award is presented by vote of the Recording Academy's National Trustees to performers* who, during their lifetime, have made creative contributions of outstanding artistic significance to the field of recording. See past recipients [here](#). (*through 1972, recipients included non-performers).

- For over five decades, **Carlos Santana** has been a pioneering force in music, fusing Afro-Latin, blues, rock, and jazz into a sound that transcends genre, culture and generation. A 10-time Grammy and three-time Latin Grammy® winner, he made history with *Supernatural* in 1999, earning eight Grammys® in a single night. He is a Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductee, a Kennedy Center Honoree, and a recipient of Billboard's Century and Latin Music Lifetime Achievement Awards. Rolling Stone ranks him No. 11 on its "100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time" list. Santana recently marked the 50th anniversaries of his groundbreaking album *Abraxas* and his iconic Woodstock performance, as well as 25 years of *Supernatural*. His latest album *Sentient* features collaborations with Cindy Blackman Santana, Michael Jackson, Miles Davis, and more. The feature documentary *CARLOS*, produced by Sony Music Entertainment and Imagine Documentaries, premiered at the 2023 Tribeca Film Festival and is now streaming globally. His Las Vegas residency at House of Blues, now in its 14th year, continues to thrill audiences. His newest release, *Carlos Santana: Love, Devotion, Surrender* (Insight Editions, 2025), is a visual journey through five decades of artistry.
- **Chaka Khan** is one of the most transformative vocal artists of the last five decades, a 10-time Grammy winner, Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductee (2023) and a creative innovator whose influence reaches across pop, R&B, jazz, rock, country, gospel, dance, classical, indie, and beyond. She has collaborated with more artists, across more



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genres, than any other singer in history, with admirers and creative partners ranging from Joni Mitchell, Miles Davis, Prince, Sia, Stevie Wonder, and Whitney Houston. The Chaka Khan Foundation champions wellness, emotional resilience and creative empowerment bringing meditation, music and healing practices to women, youth and system-impacted communities worldwide. What began as a local organization has grown into a global movement for hope, dignity and transformation. She is a trailblazer, storyteller and the voice of power and freedom for many generations. Her live performances are nothing short of electrifying. Chaka Khan remains a living force in music – an artist whose work and life continue to inspire, elevate and redefine what is possible.

- For nearly 50 years, **Cher** has remained one of the world's most enduring entertainers, with a career spanning music, film and television. The only artist with No. 1 hits in six consecutive decades, she is an Academy Award, Grammy, Emmy, and Golden Globe winner whose influence has shaped pop culture and fashion worldwide. Rising to fame with the groundbreaking hit "I Got You Babe," she went on to achieve solo chart-toppers like "Gypsies, Tramps & Thieves," "Half-Breed" and "If I Could Turn Back Time," before redefining dance-pop with the Grammy-winning "Believe," one of the best-selling singles in history. On television, she became a trailblazer with *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour* and *The Cher Show*, cementing her status as a dynamic and innovative performer. As an actress, Cher earned acclaim in films such as *Silkwood*, *Mask* and *Moonstruck*, the latter earning her an Oscar for Best Actress. Her record-setting world tours and landmark Las Vegas residency have drawn millions of fans, while her documentaries, television work and humanitarian efforts continue to expand her legacy. Still evolving creatively, she remains one of the most influential performers of all time.
- **Fela Kuti**^A was a Nigerian musician, producer, arranger, political radical, outlaw, and the father of Afrobeat. In the 1960s, he created the genre by combining funk, jazz, salsa, calypso, and a blend of traditional Nigerian rhythms. A titanic sociopolitical voice, Afrobeat's revolutionary politics brought Fela into violent conflict with successive Nigerian military regimes, which made many attempts to suppress him and once sent in the army to burn down his communal home, Kalakuta Republic. Fela's mother later died as a result of the raid. Fela's influence and catalog of music have been widely celebrated and explored, including the podcast series *Fela Kuti: Fear No Man* (the New Yorker's No. 1 Podcast of 2025), and the Tony Award-winning Broadway run of *Fela! The Musical* from 2008-2010. Fela's influence spans generations, inspiring artists such as Beyoncé, Paul McCartney and Thom Yorke, and shaping modern Nigerian Afrobeats. His legacy lives on through his family: His sons, Femi Kuti and Seun Kuti, lead The Positive Force and Egypt 80, respectively, while his daughter, Yeni Kuti, and son, Kunle Kuti, are the keepers of the Kalakuta Museum and the New Afrika Shrine. An annual celebration in his honor, Felabration, takes place in Lagos and around the world each October.
- Songwriter, recording artist, performer, and philanthropist **Paul Simon** has shaped the sound of modern music across seven decades with classics like "Bridge Over Troubled Water," "The Sound of Silence" and his album *Graceland*. Widely regarded as one of the greatest songwriters of all time, he has earned 16 Grammy Awards, three for Album Of The Year, and holds a rare place in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as a two-time inductee. His accolades also include the Kennedy Center Honors, the inaugural Gershwin Prize for Popular Song, the Polar Music Prize, and the Smithsonian's Great Americans Medal. In 2023, Simon released his seven-movement masterwork *Seven Psalms*, earning his 36th Grammy nomination and inspiring the documentary *In Restless*



Dreams: The Music of Paul Simon. Despite significant hearing loss during its creation, he returned to the stage with his 2025 *Quiet Celebration Tour*, met with widespread acclaim. A devoted humanitarian, Simon co-founded the Children's Health Fund, supports global conservation efforts and has raised millions for education, arts and public health, extending his influence far beyond music.

- **Whitney Houston[^]**, renowned worldwide as "The Voice," was a record-breaking vocalist whose unparalleled talent and more than 220 million records sold made her one of the most celebrated artists in music history. Born into a dynasty of legendary singers, she rose from performing in New York clubs to signing with Clive Davis in 1983 and releasing her groundbreaking self-titled debut album in 1985, which became the best-selling debut album by a solo artist. Houston made history with seven consecutive No. 1 Billboard Hot 100 hits and eight consecutive multi-platinum albums, achievements that cemented her status as a generational icon. Her acting debut in *The Bodyguard* (1992) led to one of the best-selling soundtracks of all time and to her defining recording "I Will Always Love You," the biggest-selling single ever by a female artist. The six-time Grammy winner was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2020 and became the first Black artist with three RIAA Diamond-certified albums. Today, the Whitney E. Houston Legacy Foundation advances her lifelong commitment to uplifting youth, ensuring that her voice, spirit and influence resonate for generations to follow.

Trustees Award Honorees: This Special Merit Award is presented by vote of the Recording Academy's National Trustees to individuals who, during their careers in music, have made significant contributions, other than performance*, to the field of recording. See past recipients [here](#) (*through 1983, recipients included performers).

- **Bernie Taupin** is a celebrated lyricist, author and visual artist whose words have shaped some of the most enduring songs in modern music. Best known for his legendary partnership with Elton John, Taupin helped create more than 35 gold and 25 platinum albums, over 30 consecutive U.S. Top 40 hits and one of the best-selling singles of all time, "Candle in the Wind 1997." His achievements have earned him the Gershwin Prize for Popular Song, a dozen Ivor Novello Awards, an Academy Award, two Golden Globes, induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and a Commander of the British Empire honor. A best-selling memoirist and a prolific collaborator, Taupin continues to write across genres, most recently contributing to the Grammy-nominated album *Who Believes in Angels?* and earning an additional Academy Award nomination for "Never Too Late." Beyond music, he is an acclaimed visual artist whose abstract and mixed-media works have been exhibited in prominent galleries and major art fairs worldwide.
- **Eddie Palmieri[^]** was a visionary pianist, composer, arranger and bandleader whose own personal signature took Afro-Caribbean music to new horizons for over seven decades. Born in 1936 in Spanish Harlem to Puerto Rican parents, he began playing piano in childhood and launched his professional career in the 1950s. In 1961, he founded La Perfecta, replacing trumpets with trombones to forge a bold new sound that helped define modern salsa. His landmark 1965 recording *Azúcar Pa' Ti*, exemplified his groundbreaking works and was inducted into the Library of Congress in 2009. In 1975, Palmieri became the first Latino ever to win the Grammy for his historic recording *Sun of Latin Music*, eventually earning eight Grammy Awards and two Latin Grammys[®]. He was honored with the Latin Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, the NEA Jazz Master distinction and induction into Lincoln Center's Ertegun Jazz Hall of Fame. Palmieri also enriched film and multimedia. He received an honorary Doctorate from Berklee College



of Music and remained a devoted educator at Rutgers University. His legacy endures as a cornerstone of Latin music's evolution.

- **Sylvia Rhone** is a pioneering music executive whose five-decade career reshaped the recording industry and forged historic pathways for women and people of color. Rising from Harlem, she became the first woman to serve as CEO of a major record label owned by a Fortune 500 company and went on to hold top executive roles across all three major music groups at four companies, including Atlantic Records, Elektra, Motown, and Epic Records, where she was named Chairwoman and CEO in 2019. Rhone expanded the labels' global reach, overseeing career-defining releases across genres — from Travis Scott, Future, En Vogue, Metallica, Björk, and Tracy Chapman to Zara Larsson and Tyla — while playing a vital role in shaping the rise of hip-hop and championing female trailblazers from MC Lyte and Missy Elliott to Nicki Minaj. Her leadership has earned her more than three dozen honors, including the Recording Academy's Global Impact Award, Billboard's Executive of the Year and the City of Hope Spirit of Life Award. Widely regarded as the most influential female executive in music history, Rhone's legacy endures through the artists she empowered, the institutions she reimagined, and the doors she opened for generations to come.

Technical Grammy Award Honorees: This Special Merit Award is presented by vote of the Producers & Engineers Wing® Advisory Council and Chapter Committees and ratification by the Recording Academy's National Trustees to individuals and/or companies/organizations/institutions who have made contributions of outstanding technical significance to the recording field. See past recipients [here](#).

- **John Chowning** is a transformative composer and computer-music innovator whose discovery of frequency modulation (FM) synthesis in 1967 revolutionized electronic sound. After studying with Nadia Boulanger and earning his doctorate at Stanford, he launched the university's early computer-music program and developed the first digital algorithm for surround-sound localization. Stanford's licensing of his FM patent to Yamaha led to the most successful synthesis engine in the history of electronic instruments. A co-founder of Stanford's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (CCRMA) in 1974, Chowning helped establish one of the world's leading hubs for computer-music research. Even after retiring in 1996, he continued a teenage interest in exploring reverberant caves. He initiated and assembled experts from relevant disciplines to explore ancient acoustic environments, projects to reconstruct the sound worlds of Peru's Chavín de Huántar, China's Longyou Grotto, and France's prehistoric Chauvet Cave. His honors include election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the French Ordre des Arts et Lettres, multiple honorary doctorates, and the Giga-Hertz Award.

^Denotes posthumous honoree.

ABOUT THE RECORDING ACADEMY

[The Recording Academy](#) represents the voices of performers, songwriters, producers, engineers, and all music professionals. Dedicated to ensuring the recording arts remain a thriving part of our shared cultural heritage, the Academy honors music's history while investing in its future through the [Grammy Museum®](#), [advocates](#) on behalf of music creators, supports music people in times of need through [MusiCares®](#), and celebrates



artistic excellence through the [Grammy Awards®](#) — music's only peer-recognized accolade and highest achievement. As the world's leading society of music professionals, we work year-round to foster a more inspiring world for creators.

For more information about the Grammy Awards and the Recording Academy, please visit [Grammy.com](#) and [RecordingAcademy.com](#). For breaking news and exclusive content, join the Recording Academy's social communities on [Instagram](#), [YouTube](#), [TikTok](#), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Threads](#), and [X](#). For media assets, please visit the [Recording Academy's Press Room](#).

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