

FEATURES



Madonna attends the 11th annual Billboard Women in Music honors at Pier 36 on Friday, Dec. 9, 2016, in New York. — AP photos



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Nick Jonas attends the 11th annual Billboard Women in Music honors at Pier 36 on Friday, Dec. 9, 2016, in New York.



Shania Twain attends the 11th annual Billboard Women in Music honors at Pier 36 on Friday, Dec. 9, 2016, in New York.



Charli XCX attends the 11th annual Billboard Women in Music honors at Pier 36 on Friday, Dec. 9, 2016, in New York.

MADONNA, KESHA GET EMOTIONAL WHEN ACCEPTING BILLBOARD HONORS

The annual Billboard Women In Music event featured emotional and heartfelt speeches about the uphill battles women face in the music industry, including personal stories from top honoree Madonna and pop singer Kesha.

The Material Girl, named woman of the year Friday, was passionate as she spoke onstage in New York about being raped at knifepoint, battling critics, and being called words like "whore," "witch" and "Satan" throughout her career. "I remember feeling paralyzed. It took me a while to pull myself together and get on with my creative life - to get on with my life. I took comfort in the poetry of Maya Angelou, and the writings of James Baldwin, and in the music of Nina Simone. I remember wishing that I had a female peer that I could look to for support," 58-year-old Madonna said at Pier 36, where the audience included fellow honoree Shania Twain, Nick Jonas, Anderson Cooper and dozens of music industry executives.

'I'm so controversial'

"People say that I'm so controversial, but I think the most controversial thing I have ever done is to stick around," Madonna said at another point. "Michael is gone. Tupac is gone. Prince is gone. Whitney is gone. Amy Winehouse is gone. David Bowie is gone. But I'm still standing."

Cooper introduced Madonna, his friend, with touching words. "For me as a gay teenager growing up, her music wasn't just a soundtrack to my life, her music and her outspokenness, her willingness to stand up, her courage - it showed me as a teenager a way forward, a pathway," he said.

The event also paid tribute to platinum-selling singer Kesha - who is currently in a legal battle with her former mentor and producer Dr. Luke - with its trailblazer award. "It's mind-blowing to be honored like this after the very public year I've had. I feel stuck, and I feel sad. And quite frankly today I feel bloated," she said, as the crowd laughed. "I didn't

really feel like standing up and getting an award - I didn't feel worthy of that. But I knew I had to drag myself out of my bed, put on my boots and walk up here (today) and say thank you to you guys."

The audience applauded loudly. Then Kesha added in a serious tone: "Most importantly, do not let anyone else ever take your happiness. You are worth it, and thank you for reminding me that I'm worth it, too."

Twain was given the icon award, while other honorees included country singer Maren Morris and pop singers Halsey, Alessia Cara and Meghan Trainor, who didn't attend the event because she is on vocal rest. Fifth Harmony sang in honor of the "All About That Bass" performer.

"It's an honor - that's the only thing that comes to mind," said Grammy-nominated R&B singer Andra Day, who earned the powerhouse award. "It's humbling. It's fulfilling. I'm experiencing so much gratitude at the same time because these

women are part of the reason that I'm even able to be here."

The annual Billboard luncheon also honored 100 female music executives, including iTunes and Apple Music's head of global consumer marketing, Bozoma Saint John, who was ranked No.1. Before she spoke, she received warm words from Lady Gaga via video.

Madonna's successful year included her top-grossing Rebel Heart Tour, which sold more than one million tickets. "To the doubters, the naysayers, to everyone who gave me hell and said I could not, that I would not, that I must not, your resistance made me stronger, made me push harder, made me the fighter that I am today, made me the woman that I am today. So thank you," she said. — AP



In this Aug. 28, 2015 file photo, Deborah Cox attends the 2015 BMI R&B/Hip-Hop Awards in Beverly Hills. — AP

Deborah Cox says Whitney Houston role is 'in good hands'

There's one important person to thank for Deborah Cox stepping into Whitney Houston's shoes for the national tour of "The Bodyguard." That person would be Whitney Houston herself. Cox and Houston were label-mates and friends, with the late pop star mentoring the Canadian singer and often telling Cox to put family first. "I take pleasure in the fact that I did know her. I did have a relationship with her," Cox says. "There was a comradery there. She was a mentor. There was a sisterhood that we shared."

Cox treasures the pivotal time she and Houston shared a Miami studio to record the duet "Same Script, Different Cast" in 2000. Houston came in, kicked off her shoes and, after the song was done, the two chatted. "She'd always say to me, 'Girl, where them babies at? Where them babies at? When are you going to have some babies?' And it was really literally at the time where I was between albums, trying to figure out when I should start my family," Cox says. "That really helped to bring me to where I am today, where I have a family, I have a career, I have a wonderful husband, I have a team support system - and it's because of that advice."

Cox says she's honoring Houston's memory with the musical based on "The Bodyguard," the Oscar-nominated 1992 romantic thriller about a diva who falls for a former Secret Service agent. The stage version features songs from the movie such as "I Have Nothing," "Run to You" and "I Will Always Love You" and adds other Houston hits like "I Wanna Dance with Somebody," "Saving All My Love for You" and "How Will I Know." Houston died in 2012.

Singing those songs is both a responsibility and a pressure for Cox, who made her Broadway debut in Elton John and Tim Rice's musical "Aida" and most recently starred opposite Constantine Maroulis in a revival of "Jekyll & Hyde." "I know what the expectations are. I know what people want to hear. But also as an actor, as an artist, as a singer, as a performer, I want to be able to deliver as well," she says. "I want people to know that, for me, this role is in good hands. I really take it very, very serious."

Judson Mills, the actor playing the love-interest role played previously by Kevin Costner, says the addition of Cox was a key reason he signed up for the tour and that she has put her own mark on Houston's songs. "Her energy and her personality is so intoxicating. You can't help but like her, and I really think there's no one else I can think of who can play the role the way she does," says Mills. The tour kicked off at New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse this month. It will make stops in more than 20 US cities, including Chicago, Philadelphia, Nashville, Atlanta, Los Angeles, San Diego and Dallas. — AP

Judge finalizes Khloe Kardashian's divorce from Lamar Odom

Khloé is officially no more. A Los Angeles judge on Friday finalized Khloe Kardashian's divorce from former NBA player Lamar Odom, more than three years after the reality TV star first sought to end their marriage.

Kardashian filed for divorce in December 2013 after the pair had been married for four years, but rescinded the filing after Odom was found unconscious at a Nevada brothel last year. She cited Odom's medical condition as one reason to withdraw the divorce.

She re-filed for divorce citing irreconcilable differences in May. They have no children together. The couple started a company called Khloé, the nickname bestowed on their relationship after they started dating in 2009. The company will dissolve now that the divorce is complete, court documents state.

Neither Kardashian nor Odom will receive spousal support, their judgment states. While the judge signed off on it on Friday, the pair

won't be officially single until Dec 17. Odom last played for the Los Angeles Clippers during the 2012-13 season, averaging a career-low 4.0 points and 5.9 rebounds. He signed a contract with the New York Knicks in 2014, but was cut by the team before appearing in a game.

Kardashian's first divorce filing came days after Odom pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor drunken driving charge. The 6-foot-10-inch power forward had his best years with the Los Angeles Lakers between 2004 and 2011. The team won NBA championships in 2010 and 2011 and Odom won the NBA's sixth man award during that second championship run.

In addition to appearing on several reality series chronicling her family, Kardashian helps operate clothing stores and other businesses with her sisters, Kim and Kourtney Kardashian. — AP



In this April 30, 2012, file photo, Khloe Kardashian Odom and Lamar Odom from the show "Keeping Up With The Kardashians" attend an E! Network upfront event at Gotham Hall in New York. — AP



This June 22, 2014 file photo shows actor Joseph Mascolo at the 41st annual Daytime Emmy Awards in Beverly Hills. — AP

'DAYS OF OUR LIVES' BAD GUY JOSEPH MASCOLO DIES AT 87

Joseph Mascolo, who played bad guy Stefano DiMera on NBC's daytime serial "Days of Our Lives," has died. He was 87. Mascolo, who had Alzheimer's disease for a number of years, died Wednesday, according to a statement released by NBC on behalf of his wife, Patricia Schultz-Mascolo.

Although he was best known for his role as crime boss and mogul DiMera, Mascolo was a classically trained musician and appeared on Broadway in plays including "Dinner at Eight" and "That Championship Season."

His wide-ranging TV credits included the prime-time series "Kojak," "Hill Street Blues" and "It's Garry Shandling's Show." He began on "Days of Our Lives" in 1982 and, despite taking breaks from the show, spent a total of more than two decades with it. Mascolo also appeared in the daytime serials "The Bold and the Beautiful," "General Hospital" and "Santa Barbara." A native of West Hartford, Connecticut, he began studying music as a youngster and attended the University of Miami before deciding to pursue acting. To support himself while he studied with famed acting coach Stella Adler in New York, Mascolo played clarinet with the Metropolitan Opera, according to his family. — AP

Cue the music, cue the drama! Lee Daniels introduces 'Star'

The title of Lee Daniels' latest venture, "Star," might very well identify this celebrated producer-director-writer. His films include "Monster's Ball," "Precious" and "The Butler," while two seasons ago he roared into series TV with Fox's smash music drama "Empire."

But "Star," a sort of "Empire" encore, refers instead to the lure of stardom on an ambitious singing trio, and, more specifically, to the fiery young woman calling the shots. Her name happens to be Star.

Star is played by Jude Demorest, who joins real-life fellow newcomers Brittany O'Grady (as Star's sister Simone) and Ryan Destiny (as Alexandra) in portraying this defiant three-some out to beat the odds in the show-biz sweepstakes and make a fresh start in their lives. "Star," which premieres Wednesday at 9 p.m. EST on Fox, also features Queen Latifah as the girls' surrogate mother and Benjamin Bratt as a down-on-his-luck talent agent. It was co-created by Daniels, who directed the first two episodes and has been heavily involved in all the subsequent writing and editing. "We want to get it off the ground in the right way," he says, copping to a bit of

weariness from his heavy involvement. "It's a delicate time. You really have to get people hooked into the characters."

Differences with 'Empire'

While "Empire" depicts the glitzy but cut-throat world of music at its pinnacle, "Star" is planted at the gritty entry level. But how did the series come about?

Daniels explains that, after feasting on movie success, he resolved a while back to give TV a try. "I did a pilot. I thought, 'OK, I can check THAT off my bucket list.' I assumed it wouldn't get picked up. Then it got picked up." It was "Empire." "Then Fox said, 'You want to do another one?' I said, 'OK.'"

He stewed over what that new series should be, and gathered what he calls "a hodgepodge of things that inspired me: 'Dreamgirls,' 'Valley of the Dolls,' 'Sex and the City,' a girls' show with music and a little bit of edge."

Plus original vocal-and-dance numbers. "It's hard enough telling a story," he declares with a roll of his eyes. "I must be a masochist to want to add music! It has to be seamless - you can't just bust out into a musical number.

But I enjoyed it so much with 'Empire' we did it again. "And I wanted to talk about race, about where we are racially in America. So the lead girl (Star) is white, her sister's half-black, and, just to turn things upside down, the third girl, who is black, is the rich girl."

That was the show as envisioned.

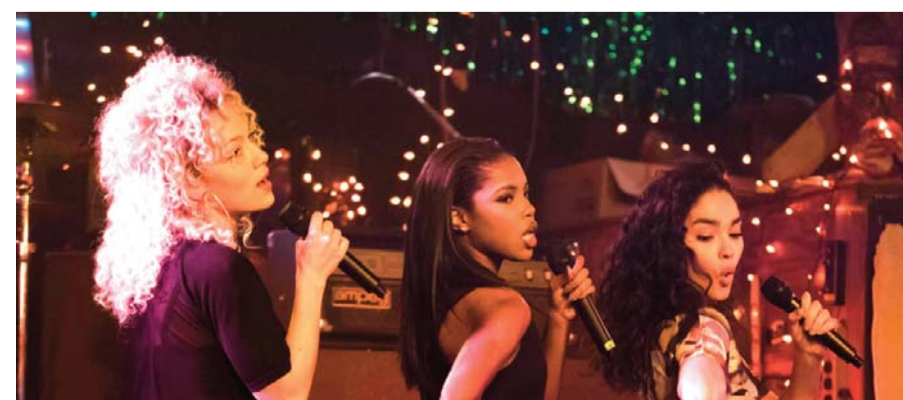
"Then HE became president," says Daniels, perhaps getting a little ahead of himself. But his point is clear: With half of its 13 episodes completed, Daniels worries that the ground has shifted under his series as it has with so much else. "This show is a little bit about what's going on today, but now it's more of an escape. Because I think people just can't bear what's going on now. The show is for those of us who can't bear it."

But for Daniels - a gay black man who, growing up, felt like an outsider in his "West Philly" neighborhood - escape isn't really what he aims to give his audience. Actually, he wants to share a bit of what he's learned living what he calls, sardonically, his "zany life."

"When I was 7, I watched somebody killed," he says. "And also when I was 10.

"I'm 57 (on Christmas Eve) and I'm alive, without HIV, and that's a miracle: I watched so many friends die in my arms, many of whom I had slept with. So when you've got a foundation of bullets whizzing by you or somebody dying in front of you, and parents who didn't embrace you, you have a wealth of stuff at your command. I only just now started going to therapy. But before that, all my therapy was my work. I just spilled it out.

"My work is all about from whence I cometh," says the man who found his way to Los Angeles and landed his first job as a receptionist at a nursing agency. "I'm living a dream today. I'm blessed. And I'm here to give you what you're craving, which is a story that you can identify with; voices that you don't hear and faces you don't see. At least, not onscreen every day." — AP



This image released by Fox shows Ryan Destiny, from left, Jude Demorest and Brittany O'Grady from "Star," the latest series by Lee Daniels, premiering Wednesday at 9p.m. EST on Fox. — AP