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ODE online edition

'O Brother,' Alicia Keys, U2 top Grammy Awards

By Brian McCollum
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

We were supposed to remember it as a bad year for the music business.

But the Grammy Awards just couldn't help themselves Wednesday night, honoring quality artists from front to back and leaving a glowing mark in the history books next to the entry for 2001.

The biggest heart-warmer came courtesy of "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" — the bluegrass soundtrack that finally, officially, shook off its underdog status, grabbing the vaunted Album of the Year trophy. That startling victory was one of five wins for the blessedly traditional country album, which was last year's biggest surprise commercial hit.

But the bulk of attention wound up where expected: on U2 and Alicia Keys, who matched the classy showing of "O Brother."

For U2 — eight-time nominee, four-time winner — that meant opening the show with a rousing rendition of "Walk On" and closing with a rousing victory speech when that tune captured Record of the Year. It was a second consecutive win in that category for the Irish band, which last year won for "Beautiful Day."

No artist could top the occasionally wide-eyed Alicia Keys, the neo-soul newcomer who started the night with six nominations and left with five awards, including three of the biggies: Best New Artist, Best R&B Album and Song of the Year.

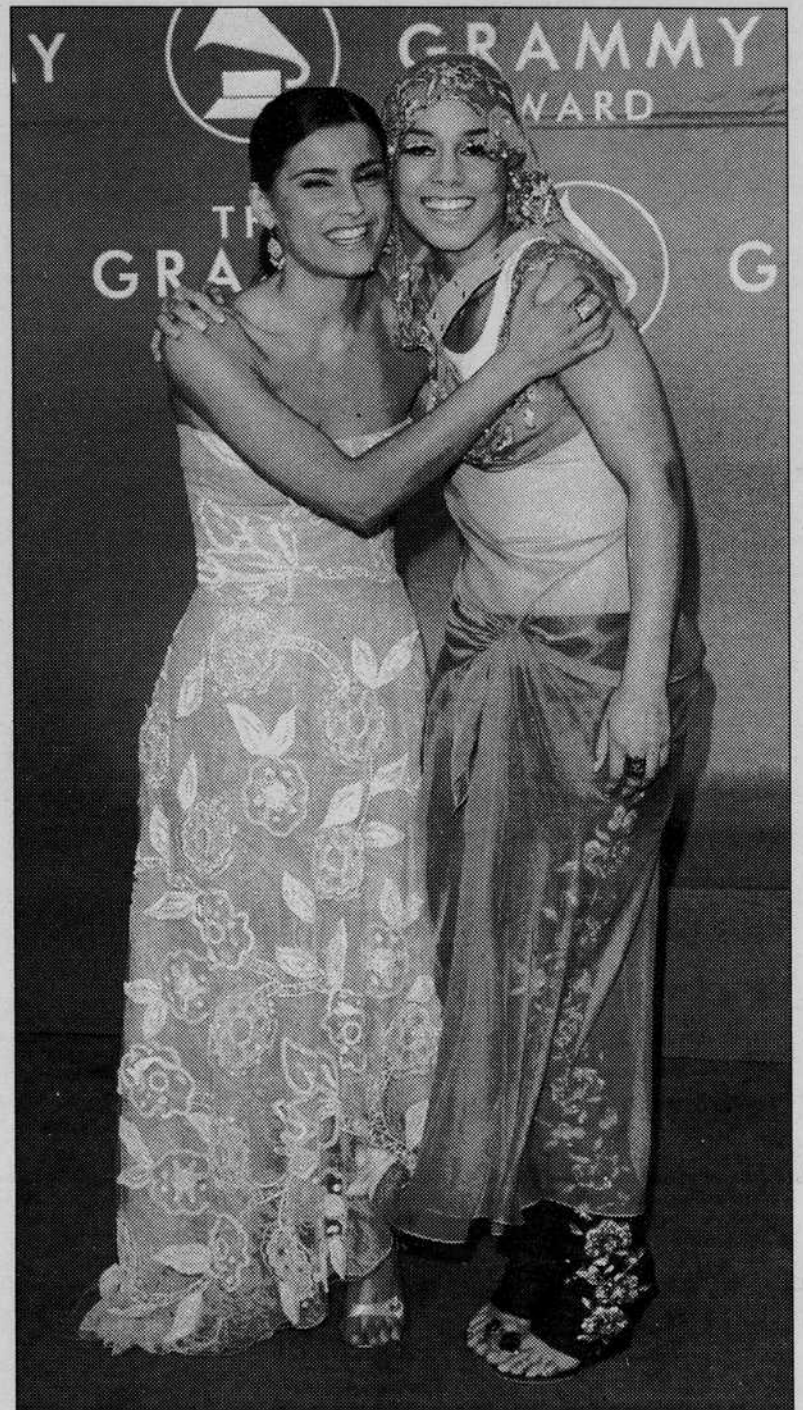
With her handful of golden gramophones, Keys tied Lauryn Hill's single-night mark for most Grammy wins by a female artist. Hill, who set the stage for Keys' blend of organic soul and cosmopolitan decorum, won five awards in 1999.

It got to the point where Keys seemed to run out of acceptance speeches. "You don't know how much this humbles me," she said.

This year's Grammys arrived with plenty of baggage: Music sales are down, labels are hurting and few new stars emerged in 2001. Grammy chief Michael Greene stepped to the stage Wednesday night to make a seemingly desperate plea against illicit music downloads online.

But for all the negative vibes lurking around the music industry, Wednesday night was a triumph for those who champion the good stuff popular music has to offer.

Gone for good, it seems, are the



Lionel Hahn Knight-Ridder Direct

Nelly Furtado (left) and Alicia Keys, who won the gramophone for Best New Artist, arrive the 44th Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, Calif., on Wednesday night.

days when the Grammys gave us more reason to jeer than cheer. Wednesday highlighted what was roundly considered some of last year's best work — music that came with the bonus of wide sales appeal.

The biggest beef could be directed at the shutout of India.Arie, a Keys peer whose eclectic take on neo-soul is considered superior by many critics. Arie was nominated seven times; she left empty-handed.

It was the longest Grammy show in history, with an extra 30 minutes tacked onto the standard

three hours to accommodate record executives' demands for artist airtime. But host Jon Stewart — consistently spry and funny — helped keep a brisk pace, and despite live performances that seemed to spill into each other, the show rarely lagged.

"O Brother" produced the night's finest live performance, a medley of songs eloquently delivered by a coterie of artists that included 75-year-old Ralph Stanley, who earlier took his first-ever Grammy win.

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