"American Music Awards" come 'round again

Hammer is host, Brown gets his due

By Steven Alan McGaw

When Dick Clark and the production company bearing his name announced the creation of "The American Music Awards" in 1973, it may have been easy to question the motives behind the show. After all, the Grammy Awards existed, didn't they? So did the annual presentation of trophies from the Country Music Association, the Rolling Stone Reader's Poll, the Playboy Music Poll, and year-end salutes from industry magazines like Billboard and Cashbox. Surely, that was enough, without adding another prime-time TV special. Was it love or music that fueled this new kid on the block, or merely cynical grubbing for advertising dollars?

Audiences responded, however, making the show a success and questions of merit and motive irrelevant. The awards have become a tradition, a significant dot on the music industry calendar and a reliable ratings success. The 19th presentation of "The American Music Awards" will air live on ABC on Monday, Jan. 27.

The AMAs and their presentation still have their critics and naysayers, of course. What's more interesting is the level of acceptance and significance the AMA trophies have achieved in a relatively short time. One barometer is the calibre of artists who consistently agree to appear on the above, as performers or presenters. Based on ballots distributed to record buyers, the awards appear to have, in public perceptions and among the industry as well, at least as much legitimacy as the Grammys.

The issue of legitimacy is an important one. There's a strong argument that no one set of awards can accurately reflect and acknowledge the width and complexity of contemporary music. Perhaps it requires several such endeavors, each filling a slightly different agenda. If so, the AMAs have done their part, leading the Grammys in recognizing the fields of rap and heavy metal.

This year's show promises once again to offer a well-executed, fast-paced thumbnail sketch of the face of popular music. The show is relatively slick, perhaps, but often wildly spontaneous by normal network standards. Serving as hot for this year's show is Hammer (hold the M.C., please), the smiling rapper who's gained unlikely enter into America's living rooms. The list of performers continues to fluctuate, but audience can trust that the fields of rap, heavy metal, country, dance and adult contemporary will all be amply represented

C&C Music Factory and Color Me Badd lead the pack in nominations, with six each. Veterans like Rod Stewart and Luther Vandross join newcomers such as Boyz II Men and Mariah Carey in competition for AMA trophies. "Unforgettable," Natalie Cole's tribute album to her father, is nominated for several awards, while Extreme's moving "More Than Words" seems a favorite for Favorite Pop/Rock Single.

The highlight of this year's show, however, will surely be the moment when James Brown steps up to receive the 1992 Award of Merit. The last few years have not been easy for the Godfather of Soul, and this type of recognition is long overdue.

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Jon Polito (left) and David Beecroft star in *Hearts Are Wild*, a new series airing Friday on CBS. The show is set amid the glamour of a Las Vegas casino.

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