The 54th Grammy Awards will be remembered as a story of two women with towering, timeless voices — Adele and Whitney Houston — one representing youthful triumph and boundless possibility, the other a reminder of fresh tragedy and a life unraveled.

Adele, the 23-year-old British singer-songwriter, took home six awards including album, record and song of the year, a trophy bounty that puts a gold-plating on a commercial and critical success story that has dramatically defied the grim gravities of today's economically-challenged recording industry.

Adele's other victory came when she stepped to the microphone and sang a robust version of her hit "Rolling in the Deep," which suggests that she is past the career scare of throat surgery that came just after Halloween and kept her mute through New Year's Day. It was her first public performance since the operation.

Adele's honors for her sophomore album, "21," were juxtaposed against the dazed grief and still-raw reactions to the death of Houston on Saturday. The 48-year-old singer was found in a bathtub in her room at the Beverly Hilton Hotel and, while the determination of cause of death could take weeks, Houston's history of drug addiction is a likely starting point for the investigation.

The Grammy broadcast on CBS began with Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band performing its new hard-times anthem, "We Take Care of Our Own," and then host LL Cool J addressing the loss of Houston, a six-time Grammy winner who tumbled from the pinnacle of the pop charts into the pit of a tabloid life.

"We ask ourself," the rapper and actor said with the crisp tones of a Sunday sermon, "How do we speak to this time, to this day? There is no way around this. We've had a death in our family. At least to me, the only thing that seems right is to start with a prayer for our fallen sister, Whitney Houston." He then read a prayer while the audience went silent, many with bowed heads.

It was one of the many moments of emotion during the night. The big winners included the Foo Fighters with five awards and Kanye West with four, but it was the performances — not the envelopes — that opened up the true drama of the night.

Country singer Glen Campbell, who is battling Alzheimer's disease, was given a warm ovation after his engaging, high-energy performance of "Rhinestone Cowboy."

Meanwhile the applause for Chris Brown's daring dance work (he performed on a hulking prop of giant cubes) may have echoed with a sense of redemption. Brown's future seemed uncertain at the Grammys in 2009 when he missed the show and was arrested on suspicion of felony assault on his girlfriend, Rihanna, but on Sunday he won best R&B album for "F.A.M.E."

"First and foremost, I gotta thank God, and thank the Grammys for letting me get on this stage and do my thing," Brown said. "All my fans, I love you. We got one. Thank you."

The best new artist award went to Bon Iver, the folk-pop project of mastermind Justin Vernon, who used his time on the Grammy stage to thank "all the non-nominees who never will be here." Although the likes of Kanye West have endorsed Bon Iver, the Midwestern act was competing against bigger names such as rapper Nicki Minaj and dance music sensation Skrillex.

"It's really hard to accept this award," Vernon said. "There's so much talent out there and on this stage. There's so much talent that's not here.... When I started making songs I started for the inherent reward of making songs."

The 3 1/2-hour show also featured cross-generational pairings, most notably a Beach Boys reunion that came bundled with the newer falsettos and harmonies of Maroon 5 and Foster the People.

Brian Wilson wasn't the only 1960s legend on stage — Paul McCartney performed twice on the show.

The 69-year-old McCartney performed a new song, "My Valentine," with an orchestra, Eagles guitarist Joe Walsh and jazz pianist Diana Krall. The song was written for Nancy Shevell, his new wife, and he also crooned it on their wedding day.