

Amy, a documentary film about the British singer Amy Winehouse

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Asif Kapadia

British-born director Asif Kapadia's documentary, *Amy*, about the pop singer Amy Winehouse (1983-2011), is a straightforward and compelling account of the performer's life starting at the age of fourteen. Through video footage from a variety of devices and the voiceover comments of friends, family members and music industry figures (Kapadia conducted 100 interviews), the documentary paints a picture of an immensely talented and tortured musical prodigy.

During her eight-year recording career, beginning when she was still a teenager, Winehouse garnered numerous awards, including six Grammys. Her second album, *Back to Black*, released in October 2006, made her an international singing star. By the time of her death, she had sold more than six million albums in the UK and US alone. Kapadia's film features a number of her biggest hits, "Rehab" (2006), "You Know I'm No Good" (2007), "Back to Black" (2007), "Love is a Losing Game" (2007), and her soulful duet with Tony Bennett, "Body and Soul" (2011).

From an early age, as the documentary reveals, Winehouse aspired above all to be a jazz singer. Among her most important influences were Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Frank Sinatra, Bennett and others. But she also channeled many of the pop artists and trends of the 1960s and 1970s, including Motown, R&B, reggae, Carole King, James Taylor and "girl groups" like the Shirelles and the Ronettes. In her music and extraordinary voice one encounters a multitude of influences, each one distinct and yet blended together to create a personal and unique sound. A record industry figure notes that she was a "very old soul in a very young body."

After Winehouse's death, Bennett commented: "It was such a sad thing because ... she was the only singer that really sang what I call the 'right way,' because she was a great jazz-pop singer....A true jazz singer."

The movie opens with footage of a close friend's 14th birthday party in 1998, at which Winehouse offers an alluring, mischievous version of "Happy Birthday" à la Marilyn Monroe, and ends with the aftermath of her tragic death from alcohol poisoning in July 2011 at the age of 27.

A friend observes at one point that she was "a North London Jewish girl with a lot of attitude." Her father Mitchell owned a cab and her mother Janis was a pharmacist. Her paternal grandmother Cynthia was a singer and at one time dated Ronnie Scott, the tenor saxophonist and owner of the best-known jazz club in London.

Kapadia's *Amy* follows Winehouse from her teenage years to the beginnings of her professional music career in 2002 and beyond. We see a host of appearances and performances, both private and public,

some of them intensely intimate and very affecting to the viewer. In some of these scenes, the young singer is disarmingly genuine, childlike and really adorable.

Three of Winehouse's friends, including two from childhood, Juliette Ashby and Lauren Gilbert, and her first manager (when he was 19 and Winehouse was 16), Nick Shymansky, provide the most in-depth and believable portrait. Her father, her ex-husband Blake Fielder and her promoter-manager Raye Cosbert also feature prominently in the film, in a less favorable light.

At a certain point, of course, *Amy* gets down to business, which every viewer knows is coming—the singer's [meteoric] Rise and [tragic] Fall, as it were. Much of the documentary details her successes and the severe complications or contradictions accompanying those successes.

Winehouse insists—and one feels, sincerely—on several occasions that celebrity and what comes with it is not her goal. As she told CNN in a 2007 interview, "I don't write songs because I want my voice to be heard or I want to be famous or any of that stuff. I write songs about things I have problems with and I have to get past them and I have to make something good out of something bad." Early on in the film, in fact, she asserts, "I'd probably go mad [if I were famous]." Later on: "If I really thought I was famous, I'd f--g go top [kill] myself."

Tragically, Winehouse, already a bulimic since her adolescence and a heavy drinker early on in life, falls into heavy drug use. Kapadia's documentary focuses perhaps too much on this aspect, as though this by itself could explain her fate.

The film effectively captures some of the ghastliness of the modern celebrity racket. Countless scenes record paparazzi camped outside her door and snapping photos of her every move, including the most crazed and desperate. Her ex-manager Shymansky told an interviewer, "the paparazzi were allowed to get brutally close...it's this infatuation with getting up people's skirts, or seeing someone vomit, or punching a paparazzi."

As Winehouse goes to pieces in public, the media engages in what Shymansky calls, in the film, "a feeding frenzy." Kapadia himself told the media, "This is a girl who had a mental illness, yet every comedian, every TV host, they all did it [bullied or laughed at her] with such ease, without even thinking. We all got carried away with it."

The production notes for *Amy* suggest: "The combination of her raw honesty and supreme talent resulted in some of the most original and adored songs of the modern era.

Her huge success, however, resulted in relentless and invasive media attention which coupled with Amy's troubled relationships and

precarious lifestyle saw her life tragically begin to unravel.”

The inquest into Winehouse’s death, according to the *Daily Mail*, found that she “drank herself to death ... Three empty vodka bottles were found near her body in her bedroom. A pathologist who examined her said she had 416mg [milligrams] of alcohol per decilitre [3.38 fluid ounces] of blood—five times the legal drink-drive limit of 80mg. The inquest heard that 350mg was usually considered a fatal amount.”

Kapadia’s documentary is both valuable and intriguing. Because the director lets Winehouse speak (and sing) for herself, the viewer receives a relatively clear-eyed and balanced picture of both her artistry and her qualities as a human being. *Amy* rightfully points a finger at a predatory industry. Kapadia told *NME* (*New Musical Express*, the British music journalism magazine and website), “I was angry, and I wanted the audience to be angry. ... This started off as a film about Amy, but it became a film about how our generation lives.” *NME* continues, “Kapadia hopes his film will force the music industry to re-examine its handling of young, troubled talents.”

In the interview, unfortunately, the director places too much of the blame on the public itself, as though people were in control of the information they received and were responsible for the operations of the entertainment industry. *Amy*, at more than two hours, is perhaps overly long because the filmmaker seems intent on driving home to the viewer his or her supposed “complicity.”

In opposition to this, the 2011 WSWS obituary of Winehouse argued that the ultimate responsibility for her death lay with “the intense ... pressures generated by the publicity-mad, profit-hungry music business, which chews up its human material almost as consistently as it spits out new ‘product.’”

Comic Russell Brand, in a comment on the death of Winehouse, a close friend, characterized the celebrity culture as “a vampiric, cannibalizing system that wants its heroes and heroines dead so it can devour their corpses in public for entertainment.”

Stepping back, Amy Winehouse was definitely a cultural phenomenon. As opposed to many acts and performers, who ride on the crest of massive marketing campaigns, like bars of soap or automobiles, she came by her fame honestly, almost in spite of her efforts. She truly struck a chord with audiences and listeners.

This was not an accident. Her songs, in part because they brought to bear (and *made new*) so much popular musical history, registered with audiences as more substantial, truthful and urgent than the majority of current fare. Winehouse’s popularity reflected a dissatisfaction with the lazy, self-absorbed pablum that dominates the charts.

In terms of the combination of factors that led to Winehouse’s death, of course there were the individual circumstances of her background and life. The entertainment industry juggernaut inflicts itself on everyone, but only the most vulnerable collapse under what is to them an unbearable burden.

As always in such cases, the media self-servingly treated the singer’s death as a purely personal episode. The *Daily Mirror*, for example, fatuously suggested that Winehouse was “a talent dogged by self destruction.”

Surely, something more than this, or what *Amy* offers as an explanation (drugs, difficult family history, a bad marriage, a cold-blooded industry), for that matter, is called for. Why would someone at the height of her global fame and popularity bring about the end of her life so abruptly and “needlessly”? What made her so wretched and conflicted?

To begin to get at an answer, one must look at the more general

circumstances of her life, including the character of the period in which she lived...and died.

She came of age and later gained public attention between the years 2001 and 2011, in other words, a decade dominated by “the war on terror” and the politicians’ “big lie” and hostility to democratic rights (the Blair government in particular prided itself on flouting the public will), as well as by global economic turbulence and sharp social polarization. The generation she belonged to increasingly looked to the future with skepticism and even alarm. A serious darkness descended into more than one soul.

One study of American college-age students in the first decade of the 21st century, and this could certainly be applied to British young people as well, sums them up as a “generation on a tightrope,” facing an “abyss that threatens to dissolve and swallow them,” “seeking security but [living] in an age of profound and unceasing change.”

Amy Winehouse, as far as this reviewer is aware (or the film would indicate), never addressed a single broader social issue, including the Blair government’s involvement in the Iraq War, which provoked one of the largest protest demonstrations in British history in February 2003. Nonetheless, the drama, anxiety and sensitivity of her music speaks to something about both the turbulent character of the decade and the dilemma of a generation whose dreams and idealism came up against the brutal realities of the existing social set-up.

The manner in which Winehouse approached the latter “dilemma” was refracted through the objectively shaped confusion and difficulties of that same generation, which finds itself hostile toward dominant institutions and yet not entirely clear why. In that light, Winehouse’s famous refrain in “Rehab,” “They tried to make me go to rehab, but I said, ‘No, no, no,’” which from one point of view might simply seem self-indulgent, comes across as a firm (if misguided in this case) rejection of intrusive orders from above.

In part due to an unfavorable and unsympathetic social atmosphere, a conscious or unconscious alienation from official public life, Winehouse turned inward and reduced these significant feelings into purely personal passions and self-directed anger, and ultimately, with her lowered psychic immune system, found herself a victim of that rage and disorientation.

Kapadia’s *Amy* does not go anywhere near some of these critical issues, but it is a worthwhile introduction to the work of a remarkably gifted artist.

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