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Amy Winehouse: A Tainted Legacy

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FY 103: Gender Inequity in the Entertainment Industry

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Abstract

Many idols have graced the earth in the past thirty years, each with their own stories to tell. The legacy of Amy Winehouse, however, reigns as the most impactful and tragic. From a “rebellious” child to a worldwide phenomenon, the British Queen of Soul provided the public with some of the most infamous songs in history, as well as a blueprint for up and coming women in the music industry. These accomplishments, however, have been overshadowed by a focus on her personal-life struggles. As a result, a universal mania for Amy’s death has erupted. With a concentration on her upbringing, accomplishments, and causes leading to her struggle with addiction, Amy’s legacy is given a chance of rebirth in the eyes of an educated public.

Keywords: Amy Winehouse, celebrities, alcohol addiction, the music industry, influential women

Amy Winehouse: A Tainted Legacy

When the word “icon” comes to mind, a vast variety of divas invade my head, each one differing in individual talents, looks, abilities, and personas. While they all share their renowned differences, a universal similarity surrounds them: struggle. The world has blessed us with several diva’s, all of whom have experienced a form of struggle. Sadly, these conflicts are what are most remembered of their legacy. This sad reality is most prevalent in the legacy of the iconic British artist Amy Winehouse. Throughout her entire life, Amy struggled with a rejection of acceptance on behalf of those around her. Although she was never one to care about how she was perceived, a vigorous societal pressure led her down a dark path into her demise. As a result, Amy’s career is tainted by her untimely death, no longer because of her pure talent and impact on the music industry. This is the reason why I have chosen Amy as the topic for my paper. Amy has been an inspiration to me for many years, and I refuse to continue to let her legacy be overlooked due to what led up to her tragic death.

A Star is Born

On a beautiful Wednesday morning in the outskirts of Southgate, London, a star came into existence. Amy Jade Winehouse was born on September 14, 1983, to pharmacist Janis Winehouse and cabman Mitchell Winehouse. As a child, Amy was rather outspoken than the rest of her classmates. She was a ball of energy, as her teachers described her as “difficult to handle.” She would constantly speak and sing during her classes, which stemmed from her love and appreciation for music. This respect adapted from the musical backgrounds of both her parent’s families (Hombach, 2012). While Amy’s father would sing with his family as a child, her mother was related to many big performers in the Jazz industry. This attachment to music is what helped

Amy overcome one of the biggest hindrances in her life. When the divorce of her parents occurred, nine-year-old Amy chose to cope with her discomfort by indulging herself in the realm of R&B and Soul music. This transition led to her fascination (and soon-to-be inspiration for her music) with many artists such as TLC, Destiny's Child, Salt-N-Pepa, and others alike.

(Biography.com Editors, 2020)

Once it was deemed that music was Amy's passion, her grandmother Cynthia made it her mission to ensure Amy's dreams would come true. She urged Amy to apply to one of the best theater schools in London, in which she was later accepted and continued her education here for the next few years. While here, Amy created a band titled Sweet-N-Sour with her best friend Juliette Ashby. Juliette was one of the few people that understood and respected Amy's unique personality. As a result, the pair became inseparable. During her time in Sweet-N-Sour, Amy was introduced to the fundamentals of the music industry, as she was occasionally brought to the studio by Juliette's father. Although the band did not gain success, it served as the blueprint for Amy's future career. (Far Out Staff, 2020)

As Amy aged, her passion intensified, leading her to finish her educational career at the highly reputable Sylvia Young Theater School. Here, Amy received help in stage performance and her overall musical ability. However, after two years of attendance, Amy encountered a few issues with the educators of the school. Many of these teachers had claimed that Amy was not taking her time at the school seriously, essentially labeling her as a rebel (which Amy did not let affect her, as she added to the stereotype by piercing her nose). She was later expelled from the school and landed a part-time job as a journalist at an entertainment network. While working, Amy never strayed away from music, as she continued pursuing her passion in public Jazz bands and orchestras. During these years is when Amy's career had been ignited. She had been signed

to a record label after an old classmate sent a demo of her singing to a fellow friend of his in the industry (Hombach, 2012). This was the naive beginning to a career that brought Amy much joy and an abundance of hardships.

The Golden Spotlight

Once Island Records signed and secured Amy, her career catapulted into enormous success. Almost immediately, Amy began writing her first award-winning debut album *Frank* (which was released on October 20 in 2003), alongside someone she considered a very good friend and coworker Salaam Remi (Hombach, 2012). Remi is an infamous music producer that has aided in the musical releases of many well-known artists such as Nas, Fergie, Estelle, etc. Remi and Amy's friendship was one that emanated pure joy and creativity. Their working relationship kept Amy intrigued and inspired, as they continued working together for the rest of her time in the spotlight. Remi encouraged Amy to write music that she would be proud of (Stutz, 2012). As a result, *Frank* topped the United Kingdom's music charts, flooded with outstanding reviews and a great number of listeners. It was during this time that Amy began to achieve some of her greatest accomplishments. She received the Ivor Novello Award for the Best Contemporary Song for "Stronger Than Me" as well as two BRIT Award nominations in two of the show's major categories "British Urban Act" and "British Female Solo Artist." Amy ended the *Frank* era by performing at some of the most notorious music festivals, including V Festival, Glastonbury Festival, and Jazzworld. (Hombach, 2012)

Within three years of her album's first release, Amy befriended award-winning producer and musician Mark Ronson (Kellman, n.d.). The major impact that they had on each other's careers has been well documented. They both gifted each other iconic pieces of music that are staples in their legacies, as well as cult classics. What was so unique about this friendship was

that Amy and Mark were unapologetically blunt with one another (Hombach, 2012, p. 3). If Amy did not like a song that Mark created, she would tell him automatically and vice-versa. Mark always encouraged Amy's blunt behavior in the studio, as she had lacked creative control on a few songs from her previous album. As a result of Amy's lively personality and Mark's additional encouragement, Amy released her second studio album *Back To Black* on October 27 in 2006. This album contains Amy's most iconic songs, such as "Back to Black," "Me and Mr. Jones," "Tears Dry on Their Own," and the critically acclaimed "Rehab." (which was labeled as the "Best Song of 2007"). *Back To Black* earned Amy her final major accomplishments, as this album lived at the top of both the United States and United Kingdom's music charts. As a result of the album's popularity and Amy's growing name in the music industry, Amy received five Grammys, sold over one million physical copies of *Back To Black*, received multiple award show nominations, and much more (Hombach, 2012). Sadly though, it was only a matter of time before all of Amy's hard work and dedication began to crumble right before society's eyes, all as a consequence of her toxic relationship with Blake Fielder-Civil.

A Tragic Downfall

During the *Frank* era, Amy met an interesting soul that would soon change her life for the worst. Blake Fielder-Civil is a former video manufacturing assistant that had enticed Amy since their first encounter. Prior to meeting Blake, Amy was already a fairly heavy drinker and partier, costing her several canceled performances. As opposed to that, Blake had always been on the more unhealthy side of things. He was an avid user of merciless drugs and partook in self-harm. However, the couple emanated similar personas. As a result, Amy and Blake united in marriage, dragging Amy into his dangerous world. Here is where Amy started to face a series of challenges in her life. She began using heroin, engaging in self-harm, and drinking more alcohol

than ever. Soon, the couple even became notorious for their rocky relationship. News of their arguments, both verbal and physical, circulated throughout the media, and instead of speaking words of concern for Amy, a series of judgmental statements and opinions were thrown her way, completely ignoring the toxic spell that held her captive (Hombach, 2012). Amy and Blake's relationship was not healthy by any means. According to Doctor Vera E. Mouradian, a healthy intimate relationship is one that "Shares an equal amount of love and support between two people, in which they are protective of and safe for one another." Although the two did love each other, their relationship was filled with signs of emotional abuse, such as prohibiting a partner from searching for different forms of help, constant yelling, and preventing a partner from working (2000). These actions proved evident in many of the couple's shocking moments, as they are seen transparently in Blake's prevention of Amy receiving the help she needed for her addiction, recommending self-harm to cope instead (Hombach, 2012), their many public arguments, and Amy's frequent cancellations of performances as a result of her extremely intoxicated state.

Unfortunately, unbeknownst to Amy, her biggest challenge was yet to come. As society began to view Amy's behavior in a negative light, she was no longer thought of to be a genuine artist, but rather an irresponsible party girl. With her songs and albums still topping the charts, Amy held on to her credibility through her past music but struggled to continue pursuing her passion. After many years of fights, drugs, and hospitalizations, Amy decided that enough was enough. She quit using narcotics in 2008 and eventually divorced Blake in 2009. Though Amy suffered a depressive episode after the divorce, she knew this is what was needed to better herself (Hombach, 2012). Sadly, Amy's hope, which encaptured those that idolized her, would soon dissipate. The worst was yet to come.

When The World Stopped

Although her infamous song “Rehab” offers an opposing message, Amy did attend rehab many times. She became devoted to helping herself, which gave her the strength to never partake in hardcore drugs again. Her main issue with her recovery, however, stemmed from her alcoholism. Many relapses resulted from this addiction, although Amy did try her absolute best. She even hired a medical practitioner to monitor and better her drinking habits (Peele, 2019) and maintained sobriety for about a month. Unfortunately, this addiction bested her, resulting in a tragic death that shook the whole world. On July 23, 2011, Amy was found dead inside her apartment, in the presence of multiple empty bottles of alcohol. Although many theories have circulated the internet in regards to the cause of Amy’s death, her death was confirmed to be a result of alcohol poisoning. (Slavitz, 2011)

Because of her past addiction, many fans felt this announcement was not accurate. They wondered, “If Amy was able to consume such a large amount of alcohol before sobriety, then how is alcohol poisoning even a possibility?” Neuroscience journalist Maia Slavitz believes that her previous large alcohol consumption is proof of legitimacy. According to Slavitz, “Significant periods of abstinence can eliminate or dramatically reduce tolerance.” (Slavitz, 2011) With Slavitz’s statement in mind, it is a great possibility that in a fit of relapse, Amy consumed an amount of alcohol that she deemed normal for her prior drinking habits. Due to the month-long sobriety leading up to her death, Amy’s body could no longer endure that unhealthy behavior, causing a death that impacted millions of music lovers. This clear media fixation on Amy’s death had ignited the new interpretation of her legacy, taking the focus away from her past accomplishments and placing it onto her deadly struggles.

Amy's death enacted a national stage of mourning that affected millions. Her passing, however, impacted those that idolized her the most. As human beings, we are attracted to those who personify our goals and aspirations, while making us feel understood in the process. As a result, celebrities commonly find themselves as a backbone for their fans' lives, and oftentimes are the reason their fans continue to live. Thus, when a celebrity passes unexpectedly, their fans experience a period of grief, often just as strong as if it were the death of a family member. Resulting from their grief is a tribute for the deceased, giving fans the ability to pay their respects to the star that once gave their lives purpose (Radford & Bloch, 2015). The death of Amy Winehouse perfectly exemplifies a genuine fan-to-artist connection. Upon the announcement of her passing, thousands of dedicated fans paid tribute to Amy, both via the internet and in person. Millions of heartfelt messages regarding her impact on their lives flooded social media platforms, and masses of people left gifts, letters, and alcohol bottles surrounding a shrine in her honor (Kingsley, 2011). Although her death impacted many, her legacy inspired countless big names in the music industry today. Popular female icons of this generation, including Adele, Florence Welch, and VV Brown have thanked and ascribed their career's success to the blueprint Amy developed for future female musicians. Infamous pop icon Lady Gaga has even credited Amy for paving the way for eccentric musical artists, and shamelessly putting her persona on display (Hombach, 2012).

The Hardest Struggle

From a promising beginning to a tragic end, Amy's life and legacy are ones for the books. Amy was a promising soul that had her whole life ahead of her. Due to the influences of her toxic relationship, Amy was bested and left as a societal example of the consequences of addiction. As a result, many still view Amy's death as an irresponsible decision made on her

behalf, rather than viewing Amy's then-current situation as a whole. The reason why this false perception remains persistent falls in line with Amy's relationship with the course material; it is a result of gender inequality. Since beginning her career, Amy was already at a disadvantage as a result of being a woman in the music industry. It is common knowledge that the music industry in itself is male-dominated, while its gender ratio stands at a not-so-shocking four men to every one woman (Kelley, 2019). So, to prove herself in the industry, Amy was forced to follow an unspoken set of guidelines that are expected of female artists. These guidelines impact female artists' behavior and oftentimes the music they produce. It is evident that these guidelines exist at the beginning of Amy's career, being that she was more of an introvert, added songs to her *Frank* album that she did not enjoy, and steered clear of any controversies. However, as the end of the *Frank* era came about, Amy was rid of these principles and began to behave in ways that were not "appropriate" for female artists, but expected of male artists.

While some people would argue that gender inequality has nothing to do with how Amy's actions were perceived by the public, it has been proven a significant factor time and time again by the behavior of male artists in the music industry. By way of illustration, take a look at musician Pete Doherty. Ironically enough, Amy and Pete did have a secret affair shortly after her divorce in 2009. In turn, the pair were very similar behavior-wise, each major alcohol drinkers and partiers. Although their behavior was parallel, Pete was praised for his behavior, as it is a gender norm for male musicians to live the "rockstar star lifestyle." Amy, however, was looked down upon and forbidden to be looked at as a role model. This difference in perception stems from the idea within gender inequality that states certain behaviors digress from expected femininity. As a result, male dominance is threatened. Simply speaking, a part of society had frowned upon Amy's behavior because of her attack on a sexist societal belief, which also made

them blind to the struggles Amy faced during her relationship with Blake (Berkers & Eeckelaer, 2014).

With a story as unfortunate as Amy's, it is hard for society not to think about her legacy in terms of her passing. However, as it is evident above, there are so many other aspects to Amy that deserve remembrance and time in the limelight. For a woman as impactful and culture-shocking as her, carving a pathway for future women in the music industry, Amy's legacy deserves to be thought of in light of her impactful accomplishments. No longer shall Amy's legacy be tainted by blame and disrespect, but rather reimagined with appreciation and gratitude.

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