

'Amy:' the story you only think you know

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Courtesy A24

Amy

Rating: ★★★★★

The first footage of [Amy Winehouse](#) in the new documentary “Amy” is of the singer at the age of fourteen, singing “Happy Birthday” at a friend’s birthday party. As soon as the teen opens her mouth, the voice hits you head on and you remember who you’re dealing with: Amy Winehouse, whose breakout single “Rehab” became such a joke. You’re likely to think you know this story.

The filmmakers beg to differ.

Amy Winehouse’s massive success resulted in relentless, invasive media attention, which coupled

with Amy's troubled relationships and losing struggle with drug addiction and alcoholism, saw her life tragically begin to unravel, resulting in her untimely death in July 2011 at the age of 27. An excerpt of an audio interview with Winehouse shortly after she rented her first apartment foreshadows the end that was less than a decade away. When she innocently mentions that she likes living in her own place because she couldn't "smoke weed all day" at her mum's, it's a little like the first glimpse of the fire in the storeroom in "The Towering Inferno."

The archive work on "Amy" is one of its singular triumphs. Director [Asif Kapadia](#) ("Senna"), "Amy" tells the story of six-time Grammy-winner Amy Winehouse largely in her own words. Featuring extensive unseen archival footage and previously unheard tracks, this strikingly modern and moving film paints a painfully intimate portrait of a massively talented and massively troubled artist. Her music is an essential key to understanding her. In addition to broadcast interviews, Amy Winehouse's voice is also heard in recordings that were not intended for public airing and even telephone voicemails. The story is also told through Winehouse's own lyrics, which appear on screen throughout the film, either as subtitles or sometimes glimpses of the singer/songwriter's own handwritten notebooks.

That device might have might have come off as hackneyed, but actually underscores Winehouse's talent as a surprisingly sophisticated lyricist for so young a songwriter. In an early interview we hear Winehouse make the claim that she couldn't write anything that wasn't personal to her. It's the sort of claim made by any number of self-aggrandizing and modestly talented songwriters, but the biographical revelations in the movie actually back her up. There is a fascinating disconnect between the precocious adolescent and the jazz songwriter creating songs mature beyond her years. It only makes her premature death the more tragic.

It is evident that Amy Winehouse was a completely different person to people in different places of her complex, compartmentalized life. Juliette Ashby and Lauren Gilbert, Winehouse's oldest and closest friends, had taken a vow of silence between themselves and had to be carefully coaxed into cooperating with the filmmakers. Their presence in the movie contextualizes Winehouse. Despite her meteoric rise in the music industry, she remained a suburban, Jewish kid from North London. To Ashby and Gilbert, that's who she remained. They clearly couldn't identify with the international, media freak show object.

The filmmakers were able to secure the cooperation of the Winehouse estate, which is controlled by Amy Winehouse's father, Mitch Winehouse. Whether Mr. Winehouse is oblivious to how he comes off in video footage not intended for broadcast or simply doesn't care, he emerges in this documentary as an unashamed opportunist - a bourgeois, exploitative moneygrubber always willing to put his own financial gain above the well-being of his obviously troubled daughter. The filmmakers seem to have little doubt that Winehouse at least inadvertently contributed to her demise, with both a cavalier attitude to her bulimia and her alcoholism and drug addiction.

Her ex-husband, Brad Fielder, doesn't come off much better. Like many female alcoholics, Winehouse apparently married her favorite drinking buddy, with predictably disastrous results. Fielder introduced

the already regular pot-smoker to heroin and crack, which upshifted her out-of-control lifestyle into dangerously high gear, all mercilessly documented in minute detail by Britain's unrelenting tabloid press. Fielder also resisted any serious attempt at rehab for Winehouse, who was, after all, paying for the non-stop drugs and liquor.

The filmmakers have assembled footage that demonstrates Winehouse's fishbowl existence with chilling, if not infuriating, power. Her entire life outside her home must have looked like the climax of "Rear Window" to her. The woman simply could not set foot anywhere without being assailed with a ferocious lightning storm of photo flashes. Inside her home, during reclusive periods, photos, presumably selfies, emerge, showing an emaciated, underweight wreck of a young woman whose eating disorder, alcoholism and drug addiction were devouring her as surely as whatever inner demons the unconfident artist battled. Meanwhile, she became the butt of cruel jokes in the media. To Jay Leno, for whom she had appeared as a musical guest, she became nothing more than monologue fodder.

Inevitably as the film enters its final act it becomes a death watch. Some behind the scenes rehearsal footage of Winehouse performing a duet with her idol, Tony Bennett, only months before her death, provides a poignant counterpoint, that she might have revived her career. Bennett, unabashedly maintaining that her name and legacy should be preserved with the likes of Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday is poignantly unguarded.

Intimate, powerful and heartfelt, "Amy" will break your heart while giving you new appreciation for a deeply troubled artist who died too soon. No getting away from it - none of us really knew this story. None of us knew it at all.

“Amy” opens Friday, July 10th, at the Spectrum 8 Theatre on Delaware Avenue in Albany.



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