

Singer Amy Winehouse dead at 27

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With the death July 23 of British singer-songwriter Amy Winehouse, aged just 27, the world lost a genuine and original talent.

Possessing remarkable vocal ability, Winehouse was a rarity in a popular musical environment increasingly monopolised by manufactured and bland music in that she was also a songwriter of some note.

Her serious musical career spanned only the years 2003 to 2007, during which she recorded two albums and several other songs. They include a number of memorable and, for the large part, autobiographical works. She had a wide range of musical influences and was open to various musical genres, particularly jazz and would also speak about her love of 1960s' soul, Motown and hip-hop.

Winehouse died in her house in Camden, north London. Toxicology and histology tests are presently being conducted. On Tuesday, Winehouse's funeral service was held, attended by her family and several hundred others. Her father has stated that she had been recovering her health recently.

Winehouse's health had been poor for years, as the result of her addictions to various drugs and heavy alcohol consumption.

There is no doubt that by the end of her life, Winehouse was suffering a great deal of pain, physically and emotionally. From the fresh-faced young woman who had recorded two best-selling albums by the age of 23, the terrible decline in her health and mental well-being had resulted in her being regularly unable to perform. During the hastily aborted "comeback tour" organised only last month, Winehouse was visibly burnt out and suffered the indignity of being booed offstage.

From an early age, she was enthralled by the jazz greats her taxi driver father, Mitchell, would play. He would often sing to young Amy. Her mother, Janis, a pharmacist, would later recall, "He would sing [Frank] Sinatra to her and because he always sang, she was always singing, even in school. Her teachers had to tell her to stop doing it in lessons".

When she was nine years old her parents separated.

Citing these influences in later years, Winehouse spoke of her love for many artists, including Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Dinah Washington, James Moody, Carole King and Minnie Riperton.

Her first album, *Frank*, was released in 2003. The title alludes to an attempt to portray her life and loves to that point. It was critically acclaimed and commercially successful, going on to

sell two million copies, including more than 300,000 copies in the United States. Winehouse wrote or co-wrote 11 of the 13 songs on the album and won an Ivor Novello Award.

The majority of the songs have an appealing edginess, with lyrics that capture the ebb and flow of her relationships, such as "Put It In The Box". Others comment on the obsession with the banal lifestyle of "celebrities" and the music industry. A standout is her rendition of the jazz standard, "There Is No Greater Love". The album also includes a cover of James Moody's, "Moody's Mood For Love", with a dub reggae rhythm.

In October 2006 she released her second album, *Back to Black*, which propelled her to global fame. In 2007 it was the number one selling album in the United Kingdom, with 1.5 million copies sold. A "deluxe" edition was released later and by June 2008, the two albums combined had spent a total of 90 weeks in the UK charts. In the US, 2.3 million copies are estimated to have been sold. The album had sold a reported 11 million copies by September 2008.

Back to Black is darker in content than *Frank* and portrays sadder experiences, including failed relationships. One reviewer commented, "Winehouse is sincere: this particular marriage of words and music mirrors the bittersweet dichotomy that sometimes frames real relationships".

The album won numerous awards. It is notable for its soulful and rich sound, with the production by Mark Ronson giving a platform to Winehouse's stirring contralto voice, piercing lyrics and memorable melodies. The title track, written by Winehouse and Ronson, includes the heartfelt chorus, "We only said goodbye with words/I died a hundred times/You go back to her/And I go back to black". It is sung with a genuine anguish.

Other songs of note are the ballads "Love Is a Losing Game" and "Tears Dry on Their Own".

"Rehab" famously documents her refusal to attend a rehabilitation clinic to address her increasing alcohol intake.

Winehouse also appeared on Ronson's second studio album in 2007, singing "Valerie", originally written by The Zutons.

Her life then began to spiral rapidly towards its tragic end. It was in 2007 that she was apparently introduced to harder drugs, including cocaine, crack and heroin. Her appearance began to change dramatically. Gone was the full figure of the *Frank* period. She lost weight, becoming slim, and later emaciated,

with her elaborate “beehive” in a state of disarray. She spoke in interviews of eating disorders and self-harm.

Winehouse apparently had a predisposition toward addictions, whatever the emotional or physiological source of that may have been. Her way of seeking to overcome these problems was through music. On her initial refusal to go into rehab she had said, “I’d rather be playing the guitar somewhere. Music will always be my outlet”.

In “Rehab”, she sings, “I’d rather be at home with Ray [Charles]/I ain’t got seventy days/Cos there’s nothing, nothing you can teach me/That I can’t learn from Mr [Donny] Hathaway”.

Following her death, the media pundits have expressed their “shock” and “sadness”. In many cases, however, there is something terribly false about this pose of regret. For the last five years, Winehouse’s physical decline and the tiniest details of her private life have been remorselessly and graphically served up on a daily basis by the press and television. Her downfall was portrayed as a freak show—evoking scorn and cynicism, and lurid fascination, where concern and pity would have been the healthy response.

Yet this coverage seems to have been welcomed by her record label. In the words of Universal Music International’s Hassan Choudry in early 2008, “There’s no getting away from the fact all the coverage has kept Amy Winehouse’s profile at the highest level. Everyone [at the label] is extremely happy with the amount of records we’ve sold and a lot of it has been down to some amazing marketing opportunities in the market when the artist wasn’t available”. The artist “wasn’t available” because she was in desperate trouble.

Upon her death, the media were queuing up to report that Winehouse had joined the so-called “27 Club”, the age at which a number of significant popular musicians have died, in different circumstances, including Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Brian Jones, Jim Morrison and Kurt Cobain. The clear subtext was that her early death was more or less inevitable. Many commentators have echoed the *Daily Mirror*’s conclusion that she was “a talent dogged by self destruction”.

However, to attribute such a death simply to individual failings or the supposedly inevitable wreckage that great musical talent brings with it seems highly questionable. Winehouse may have had serious psychological difficulties, but it is difficult to imagine that the exacerbation and ultimately lethal character of these problems had nothing to do with the intense—and for the most vulnerable, perhaps unbearable—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”.

At the very least, one imagines that the singer’s emotional issues could have been addressed in a calmer and more rational manner if the media and industry had not been fixated on her situation. Interest and criticism, therefore, ought to be focused on that issue and the general problem of music and art making

within the profit system and not on speculations about her individual decisions and motives. Equally, no one in the North American or British media in particular can ever explain why great popularity *on its own* should bring on tragedy and death.

It certainly seems reasonable to ask why, when her health and mental state was clearly so fragile, Winehouse was even allowed to perform last month in Belgrade, the first date of a planned 12-city tour. The Belgrade show took place on June 18, less than a month after she entered the Priory Clinic for rehabilitation on May 25, where she stayed one week. Following the “concert”, in which Winehouse could barely stand up, one observer stated that she had been forced onto the stage. According to Ana Zoe Kida, who performed at the festival with her band Zemlja Gruva, “Four British bodyguards simply pushed her to step up on stage. She did not want to and was making a scene trying to escape them. It was distressing to see, she obviously needed help”.

Amy Winehouse possessed an extraordinary talent. Russell Brand, the comic, actor and friend of Winehouse movingly recalled first seeing her on stage: “Entering the space I saw Amy on stage with [Paul] Weller and his band; and then the awe. The awe that envelops when witnessing a genius. From her oddly dainty presence that voice, a voice that seemed not to come from her but from somewhere beyond even Billie and Ella, from the font of all greatness”.

Speaking to the music critic Neil McCormick in March this year, while recording a duet with another of her idols, Tony Bennett, Winehouse said she had plans for the future:

“I would love to study guitar or trumpet. I can play a lot of different instruments adequately but nothing really well. If you play an instrument, it makes you a better singer. The more you play, the better you sing, the more you sing, the better you play”.

It is unclear how much of her planned third album was completed before her death.



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