

The death of Whitney Houston

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One receives the news of Whitney Houston's death at the age of 48 with genuine sadness. Houston was a tremendous singer, whose best performances contained a vibrancy and larger-than-life quality, which endeared her to millions of listeners. Her death at a young age is a tragedy.

Houston's body was discovered in the bathroom of her Beverly Hilton Hotel room in Los Angeles on Saturday, February 11. The cause of death has yet to be determined, but drugs or alcohol are suspected to have played a role. Houston had been struggling with addiction for years and there were reports that the singer was behaving erratically in the days leading up to Sunday's Grammy Awards ceremony. She was clearly a troubled individual in need of serious help.

One would not know it from the tawdry and predatory media coverage, which hounded her in recent years, but Houston was a widely admired superstar at the height of her career. She sold an astonishing 170 million albums, singles and videos worldwide. The Guinness Book of World Records lists her as the most awarded female performer of all time. She was one of a handful of truly global stars.

Houston's voice was remarkable. At her peak, she possessed a three-octave vocal range. She sang with startling force, in a beautifully rich and full tone. Her ability to pass smoothly in and out of her upper register seemed almost effortless.

Not all of Houston's material was terribly substantial. She sang light pop music early in her career and, later, mostly ballads designed only to provide a vehicle for her vocal prowess. Her talents nevertheless affected millions of people. Several of her hits from the late 1980s and early 1990s, including "Saving All My Love for You," "I'm Your Baby Tonight" and "I Have Nothing," are entertaining and appealing.

Houston, the daughter of gospel singer Cissy Houston and cousin of singers Dionne and Dee Dee Warwick, struck a wholesome image for much of her career and was built up into a kind of "America's Sweetheart" by the media and the industry executives who shaped her into a star. She seemed willing to go along for the most part. In response to those who claimed she had "sold out" and gone "mainstream," Houston told *Essence* magazine in 1990, "If you're gonna have a long career, there's a certain way to do it, and I did it that way. I'm not ashamed of it."

Among Houston's most celebrated achievements was a powerhouse rendition of the Star Spangled Banner during Super Bowl XXV in 1991, only days after the Persian Gulf War began. During the performance, Houston, dressed in red, white and blue, was surrounded by American flags and military personnel. As the performance came to a close, four F-16 fighter jets soared over the stadium.

The recording of Houston's version of the US national anthem, promoted as a great moment of national pride during the war, was an enormous hit for the singer and the song assumed a peculiar place in the culture during the Gulf War. It was not uncommon to hear her version of the national anthem played over the PA systems of many schools each morning. Houston, it should be said, went along with all of this far too eagerly, an indication of the rightward shift in the music world and among a more affluent layer of African Americans in particular.

The soundtrack to Houston's film *The Bodyguard* (1992) propelled the singer to even greater heights. Her version of Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You," with its difficult high notes, has become iconic.

This was probably the peak of Houston's performing career, although there were popular recordings and films that would follow. In the coming years, her voice would begin to falter after years of performing without

proper vocal training. For the last decade or more, Houston's life had been consumed by scandal.

Success in America often comes at a terrible price. For the music industry, one's talents are worth only as much profit as they can generate right now. For the artist, a number of compromises, both personal and artistic, are required. One does not always end up producing the kind of art one set out to make. Enormous wealth, and the insularity that comes with it, does terrible damage.

As we have noted many times, the worship of celebrity itself plays a deeply unhealthy role in the US. Under conditions in which masses of people have seen their living standards worsen, and official politics assumes an entirely unreal character, in which none of the major questions of life can find expression, the need to live vicariously through celebrities grows and helps to fill the vacuum. The media exploits this, promoting a voyeuristic fascination with figures like Houston, Michael Jackson or Lindsay Lohan.

When a celebrity, whose significance is blown far out of proportion, is then caught "slipping up" or showing signs of real human weakness, their status as an American icon is quickly revoked, and adoration turns into anger and resentment. The media leads the way in the vindictive demand for accountability and punishment. The entire cynical process is itself a big business.

For years, reports on the scandals of Houston and husband Bobby Brown, including rumors of drug abuse and Brown's frequent arrests, were common in the media. One especially ugly episode was an exploitative interview with Dianne Sawyer on ABC's "Primetime" in 2002, in which Sawyer attempted to exact from the star a confession that she was not prepared to give.

A 2005 reality show, "Being Bobby Brown", was a cheap and voyeuristic look into the lives of Houston and Brown. That Houston agreed to participate at all was a sign of serious distress on the part of the singer.

Following a 2007 divorce from Brown, Houston attempted a comeback, but her career continued to be plagued by voice troubles and concert cancellations. The singer entered a drug rehabilitation facility in May of last year. At the time of her death, she was set to star in a remake of the 1976 film *Sparkle*, about a female singing group and its problems.

Now that Houston has died, the media coverage will go into overdrive. The scandalous details will be replayed, alongside memorials and tributes to Houston's singing talents. There will be days of speculation as to the cause of death, until the official reports are released. There will almost certainly be new greatest hits packages from the music industry on the horizon and unreleased recordings will be made public. A great deal of money still stands to be made for those in the right position.



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