



## AMY

### Discussion Guide

Director: Asif Kapadia

Year: 2015

Time: 128 min

#### You might know this director from:

Ali and Nino (2016)

Senna (2010)

Far North (2007)

The Return (2006)

The Warrior (2001)

## FILM SUMMARY

If you live in the Western World and have access to the mainstream press in any capacity, you've most likely heard of Amy Winehouse. Regardless of your knowledge of her before spending two hours in her filmic company, you probably have some notion of her – in many cases, not the most squeaky clean perception. Whenever Amy made it into the headlines, it was generally some kind of self-damaging drama that dragged her there.

So when asked by Universal Records to make a documentary on the life of this renowned international pop star, director Asif Kapadia felt compelled to challenge the widely accepted notion of Amy as a train wreck. Lucky for him, hours and hours of amateur footage was offered his way, portraying a younger, fresher, happier, and healthier Amy, a young woman as of yet untouched by the destructive claws of fame, money, and addiction.

Over the course of 128 hypnotic minutes, Kapadia takes us on a chronological ride through Amy's short-lived time on earth. By adopting this approach, he grasps his audience by the heartstrings with early images of a charming and very talented young woman. As time progresses and success tsunamis her way, the natural arch of her life, however fast-lived, gains a clearer context, as does her untimely death.

Despite the cast of dubious relationships and her substance-abusing decisions, Amy maintained an incredible natural talent up until her death. Though the press steam-rolled any hopes of much-needed privacy, and the public eye was incessant and unforgiving, Amy was a musician above and beyond anything else she was made out to be. "I write songs because I'm fucked in the head and I need to put it on paper. I write songs to feel better about it. Something good out of something bad," she declared. The music she left behind, coupled with the broad light AMY shines upon her immense life, may be the good emerging from all that mass media of bad.

## FILM THEMES

Known around the world in equal parts for her immense musical talent and overpowering struggle with substance addiction and life disasters, Amy's story is a tale of our times, where fame, greed, and money rule.

### NATURAL TALENT

Upon meeting her, Tony Bennett - one of Amy's biggest idols - stated, "She had the complete gift." An old soul in a young body, many others declared, and anyone touched by Amy's music, reached through her power of song, recognized the rare talent she possessed. Writing her own lyrics and music at a time when the music industry manufactures pop stars and hires songwriting teams to create hits for artists, Amy was a one-off. Regardless of the messy face she showed the public, she was the real deal in songwriting terms, and the musical legend she left behind serves as testimony to the raw talent she possessed.

### DEPRESSION, DISORDER, DEPENDENCY

When reflecting back on her music, Amy's keyboardist Sam Beste states, "She had one of the most pure relationships to music, such an emotional relationship, as if she needed music, as if it was a person and she would die for it." Such was the case with most everything in Amy's life. Not one to live by half measures, Amy gave herself fully and completely to the music, people - and addictions - in her life. With self-declared depression, even admitting, "I think it (depression) is a musician thing. That's why I write music," Amy struggled to tread an even road. Instead her dependency on drugs, alcohol, her husband, and an unhealthy body image exacerbated by an eating disorder led to her demise.

### MEDIA AND THE FATALITY OF FAME

"No one would leave her alone," stated Amy's manager Nick Shymansky. To the media, Amy offered a feeding frenzy of material on which they preyed. The bottom-feeding tabloid press, the incessant nature of paparazzi, the blinding flash of countless cameras documenting her every move applied an inhumane pressure that even the most balanced individual would struggle with. Considering the fragility of Amy's body and mind at its worst, it's no wonder she buckled. Rather than offering a hand, the modern media seems to seek out the weak and slaughter.

### WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY

When news of Amy's death reached the world, many wondered: how could this happen? Her suffering was so clear. Why didn't anyone stop her? With many people riding on the waves of Amy's success, it beggars belief that she was left to die on her own. With whom does the responsibility of an adult life rest? The obvious answer seems to be: with that individual. Yet in the case of Amy, who had become so dependent on her network of managers, bodyguards, partners, musicians, and lovers to make decisions for her, that she seemed unfit to be able to defend her own existence. Though an individual has to want to get clean and each life should in practice rest in the hand of that person, Amy was pushed into unhealthy places by those who benefited from her success. In a sense her well-being could be placed with them.

**"My destructive side has grown a mile wide."**

Amy Winehouse

**"There's nothing that can prepare you for that level of success. You can warn an artist...but at the end of the day, until you've been through it, it's unlike anything you've ever encountered."**

Monte Lipman

**"She was a natural true jazz artist."**

Tony Bennett

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What was your general impression and knowledge of Amy Winehouse and her music before watching the film? Did the film alter that impression? How would you describe Amy to someone who had never heard of her?
2. Do you feel the film did a good job of representing Amy? Was there anything you felt the director overlooked in the telling of her tale?
3. Discuss your thoughts on fame, especially the degree of fame achieved by Amy. Did Amy have a responsibility to the public, something she was bound to due to her fame?
4. Amy and Blake Fielder-Civil had a clearly co-dependent relationship, and her rehabilitation was at many times impeded because of their intimate involvement. Can he in any way be held responsible for her death? How did their co-dependency strengthen her addictions?
5. Minor reference is made to Amy’s bulimia. Discuss eating disorders and their effects. Do you have any personal experience with eating disorders? Do you consider them to be an isolated illness or a sign of something else taking place within an individual?
6. Amy’s father Mitch played a great role in her life, and she was very influenced by him. Did he fail her as a father? What responsibility do parents have over their children once those children are adults?
7. The film alludes to the fact that jazz music is best suited in a small, intimate setting, while pop music packs out stadiums. Discuss the inherent differences between jazz and pop music. Do you gravitate towards one or the other type of music?
8. Amy, as many artists, used her craft to process her troubles, and the masterpiece album “Back to Black” deals with an turbulent, heartbreaking time in her life. Does an artist have to be troubled in order to create brilliance? Can a happy life lead to powerful art?
9. Many musical legends and record label associates define Amy as a true, natural talent. Is talent something an individual is born with, or can the level of talent Amy displayed be encouraged and nurtured over time?
10. Amy was worth a lot of money, and many people had an interest in sustaining her career for their own ends. Discuss the power of money to contort an individual’s perception. What evidence did the film provide of Amy’s manager, record label, father, husband, or any other individual closing their eyes to her suffering for money?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- AMY had its global premiere at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival. Since then it has taken the film world by storm, grossing \$22 million at the international box office in 2015 alone. It has also won many awards, including a BAFTA, an Oscar, and a Hollywood Film Award, in addition to being nominated for dozens more.
- Amy Winehouse was born and raised in London, her father a taxi driver and mother a pharmacist. Amy had one older sibling, a brother named Alex. Jazz music surrounded her as a child, with her father, many of her uncles, and her paternal grandmother all performing jazz music.
- Director Kapadia and producer Gay-Rees began work on the film just one year after Amy's death. At this point, the people close to Amy had never spoken with anyone from the outside about her death, and each person interviewed broke down at some point in the course of filming.
- Having seen Kapadia's film "Senna," David Joseph, Chairman and CEO of Amy's record label Universal Music, approached him regarding turning Amy's story into a film. Kapadia held interviews with over 100 people for the film.
- At the age of 10, Amy and a friend formed a rap group called Sweet 'N' Sour, where Amy was "sour." In her teens Amy started bingeing and purging, first showing signs of bulimia, something her brother said the family knew about but never addressed. In his words, "It's a real dark issue."
- Over the course of her swift career - from the release of "Frank" in 2003 to her death in 2011 - Amy was nominated for an awe-inspiring 60 awards, winning many, including a Brit Award, 7 Grammys, a Q Award, and a MOJO Award.
- In 2009, Amy established her own record label entitled Lioness Records, and her first release was her 13-year-old goddaughter Dionne Bromfield's debut album.
- Eating disorders, such as the bulimia nervosa Amy suffered from, are categorized as mental illnesses, due to an individual's unhealthy relationship with food. Around 50% of people struggling with an eating disorder also suffer from depression, as Amy did. Besides vomiting, bulimia symptoms include using laxatives, smoking cigarettes, skipping meals, and fasting.
- Director Asif Kapadia is from North London, as was Amy. Although not a huge fan of hers initially, he was proud of her success as she was from the same streets that raised him. When setting out to make the film, he wanted to reassess the public opinion held of Amy as a "train wreck," a mess, a lost soul, and worked hard to strengthen the positive aspects of her talent, intelligence, and beauty.
- Cynthia, Amy's grandmother, encouraged Amy to take singing lessons. At the age of 12, Amy was accepted into the Sylvia Young Theatre School, a prestigious performing arts school.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Learn** about the [Amy Winehouse Foundation](#) and their work preventing drug and alcohol abuse amongst teens and young adults. The foundation was established by Amy's family on what would have been her 28th birthday. adults.
2. **Read** one of the many books written about Amy, including "Amy Winehouse: The Biography", her father's take "Amy, My Daughter, and Loving Amy: A Mother's Story".
3. **Help** a loved one with a substance abuse problem - or eating disorder. It is much easier said than done. [The Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation](#) and [Mayo Clinic](#) both offer some practical advice for intervention.
4. **Be** conscientious over the media you consume. The often vicious tactics employed by the tabloid press are fuelled by readership.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**