

Amy (2015)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hour 8 min.

Our content ratings (1-10); Violence 2; Language 2; Sex 8/Nudity 1.

Star rating (1-5): 5

How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words?

Job 19:2

Janis Joplin, Brian Cole, Tim Buckley, Sid Vicious, Tim Hardin, Andy Gibb, Jimi Hendrix, Johnny Ray, Curt Kobain, Dee Dee Ramone, and Amy Winehouse—what do these people who died years apart have in common?* All died relatively young (except for Ray), their deaths either alcohol/drug related or suicides, and all rose to great fame as singers or musicians. Director Asif Kapadia lets singer-songwriter Ms. Winehouse, her friends, fellow musicians who worked with her, family, and songs tell her story through home and archival video and numerous interviews. It is a story that is sad and chilling, and yet which also manages to celebrate her great gifts.

In one clip the teenaged Amy says, almost prophetically, to a friend who told her she would become famous, “I don’t think I want to be famous ... I couldn’t handle it. I’d go mad.” But, as we see in an earlier home video in which, along with two friends, she sings “Happy Birthday” with such gusto, her talent was so great that it would have been hard for her to avoid fame—and the hounding, even vicious, paparazzi eager to catch her in an unguarded moment. She was blessed with life-long friends such as Juliette Ashby and Lauren Gilbert, as well as by her first manager Nick Shymansky, who became a friend as well. But she did not luck out with a father who

seemed to see her as his own ticket to fame (and as she notes in her famous song "Rehab," advised her against going into a treatment clinic). And, of course, there was her druggie boyfriend to whom she was married for a couple of years husband Blake Fielder-Civil. In addition to the vulture press there were comedians who made her alcohol addiction into fodder for their jokes. The clip of Jay Leno poking fun at her on his show seems excessively cruel, given what we learn about her struggle in this documentary. Her death at the age of 27 in 2011 from alcohol poisoning makes her story seem like a Greek tragedy.

The most heartening part of the film for me are the shots of her with her idol Tony Bennett, first joined by her TV set as she watches from a London stage the 2008 Grammy Awards. When he announces her as the winner she is thunderstruck. (Sadly backstage she says that it was boring without her drugs, and soon she is back on them again, leading to an audience in Belgrade booing her when, unable to pull herself together, she sits down on the stage.) Later he asks her to sing with him on an album. He pays her a tremendous compliment, calling her one of the greatest voice talents to come along in years. I am glad she was able to hear this directly from him, even if it was not enough to sway her from her tragic trajectory. (This also increases even more my admiration for this great singer, who also gave so much of himself to the Civil Rights movement.)

It would be easy for preachers to mine *Amy* for scenes to use in a moralistic sermon on "the wages of sin." This would be as callous as Jay Leno's use of her for a cheap laugh. The film provides us with an intimate glimpse of a fragile greatly talented but flawed child of God who succumbed to the tremendous pressures of fame. It leaves us wondering "what might have been" had her father encouraged her to enter rehab, but does not pass judgment on him, leaving the latter up to us to decide. That the world is better, richer, because of her

brief presence needs no argument—just listen to the recordings she has left behind. You will be hearing a lot more about this documentary around Academy Award-winning time.

* These are a tiny portion of stars from the voluminous list in Wikipedia's article "[List of deaths in rock and roll.](#)"

This review with questions will be in the September issue of VP.