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Exhibition review

Amy: Beyond the Stage, Design Museum, London, 26 November 2021–10 April 2022

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Figure 1. Promotional poster advertising *Amy: Beyond the Stage* outside the Design Museum (photograph by author)

In *Marilyn: Norma Jeane*, Gloria Steinem reflected upon the already large volume of writing dedicated to Marilyn Monroe, and the impact of this upon how we understand her life, and inevitably, her death. For Steinem, these writings rendered the details of that narrative kaleidoscopic, whereby, 'if you read them and turn them over enough, they fall into a pattern' (Steinem 1986: 11). The analogy can be similarly applied to Amy Winehouse, who, like Monroe before her, became a site of public fascination and speculation. The resulting attention and scrutiny aimed at her private life would continuously threaten—and sometimes succeed in—overshadowing the critical recognition she garnered for her music.

Following her death in 2011, as with Monroe, the fascination surrounding Winehouse has only intensified. In the intervening years, Winehouse has become the subject of numerous biographies, photobooks, and films—most notably, Asif Kapadia's *Amy* (2015), which cemented itself as the definitive account of her life and death in the popular consciousness. As a consequence, the similarly kaleidoscopic details of Winehouse's life are frequently read in a now well-established pattern, one that renders her as a tragic figure, dominating how her legacy and the posthumous stardom generated by it are understood.

Held at the Design Museum in London, the exhibition *Amy: Beyond the Stage* is the latest in a number of cultural works which seek to rewrite the Winehouse narrative and reassess her life and work, emphasizing her contributions to, and influence upon music, fashion, and popular cultures. Outside the museum context, this process of recuperation and reclamation appears in numerous media forms, across the music press and in documentaries such as the BBC/RTÉ *Arena* film *The Day She Came to Dingle* (2012), and BBC Two's recent *Reclaiming Amy* (2021). To differing degrees, these works challenge the dominance of the tragedy narrative by offering an alternative account that contributes to more nuanced understandings of Winehouse's life, work, and in particular, her musical and artistic merits. *Beyond the Stage* represents the natural culmination of this process, with the exhibition timed to coincide with the tenth anniversary of Winehouse's passing.

Beyond the Stage follows the earlier US exhibit, *Beyond Black: The Style of Amy Winehouse*, held at the Grammy Museum in 2020. Adopting an interactive multimedia approach to explore the complex facets of Winehouse's cultural and musical legacy, *Beyond the Stage* is underpinned by two interrelated questions: what is Amy Winehouse's legacy and what does that legacy truly mean? After walking through the exhibition, visitors may

have answers to those questions. The exhibition is divided into three main areas, each with their own theme, exploring her childhood origins, musical influences, and lasting impact upon music, fashion, and popular cultures. Thoughtfully curated by Priya Khanchandani and Maria McLintock in collaboration with the Winehouse family, and stylist Naomi Parry acting as special advisor, the exhibition brings together personal objects and effects under private ownership, alongside photographs, performance footage, and interview clips to reunite Winehouse's public and private selves.

These surrounding contextual labels often work to negotiate what Bronwyn Polaschek (2018) has previously described as the 'dissonance' between Winehouse's 'fractured' selves, allowing them to exist in the same space. For example, while the exhibition rightly celebrates Winehouse's success and the many accolades she received throughout her career, the same level of care and detail is also taken in the decision to contextualize the realities of her highly-publicized difficulties with mental health, substance abuse and disordered eating, and the changing societal attitudes towards them in the intervening years since her passing. Placed at various points throughout the exhibition, these information boards offer a natural point for reflection. Their presence in the space not only illustrates the degree of sensitivity taken in the design of the exhibition, but also the experience of the visitor, ensuring it offers more than a surface-level engagement with Winehouse as a figure.

This engagement is deepened by the appearance of several types of ephemera. These range from pieces with which we might be familiar from seeing her on stage, such as clothing and accessories worn throughout her collaboration with designer Naomi Parry, and her many guitars—including her Daphne Blue Fender Stratocaster, so often captured in photographs during promotion for her first album, *Frank*—to the less familiar, which fall into the category of personal effects. Handwritten diary entries that detail hopes for the future and career aspirations give a sense of self, while lyric sheets offer insight into the creative process. Such documents flesh out who we understand Winehouse to be, offering a perspective distinct from spoken or written interviews shown elsewhere in the exhibition. Of the items featured in this section, one stands out: amongst the diary pages and lyric sheets is her acceptance letter to the BRIT School, a performing arts academy in Croydon. The letter is indicative of both her yet-unfulfilled promise and the creativity which would be curtailed by her death.

Seeing these objects in a new context, preserved behind protective glass, raises questions about the changing nature and function of the

archive: what is classified as an archive, what is not; and which objects can be considered archivable, within the broader context of what Andreas Huyssen calls the 'musealisation' of culture (Huyssen 2003: 168). This is exemplified by similar exhibitions and dedicated museums (Marilyn Monroe, Princess Diana, Alexander McQueen, the ABBA Museum), where mundane items once considered 'rubbish' are reinscribed with new value through their auratic connection to a previous owner. In the context of *Amy: Beyond the Stage*, the inclusion of these items at first feels strange and invasive. Like looking through a keyhole, it prompts self-examination, prompting us to consider whether we should be able to see these items at all, drawing attention to our own voyeurism.

This feeling is undoubtedly exacerbated by understandings of Winehouse's own difficult relationship with her self-image and the attention brought by her fame, where the lines between public and private became evermore blurred. However, as Huyssen would later observe, 'museums go a long way in keeping memory alive precisely through the representation of objects' (Huyssen 2016: 108). In the case of *Beyond the Stage*, this is precisely how these objects ultimately function. They both bring Winehouse back and keep her memory alive.

The balance struck within the exhibition is a respectful one, with the later sections featuring press clippings and awards, allowing us to consider her representation in the public eye in contrast to that of her own thoughts and feelings. These depictions often contradict each other, making their appearance all the more important, ensuring that the exhibition does not fall into the trope of hagiographic eulogizing or perpetuate mythologizing. *Amy: Beyond the Stage* is much more than a morbid display of show-and-tell, and so surpasses the 'audiovisual post-mortems' that Hannah Andrews suggests have come to define her posthumous stardom, and contribute to the consolidation of her status as an 'authored icon' (2017: 351). While the sense of authoring and consolidation that naturally occurs through such culture work remains, here Winehouse is no longer solely the sum of parts that created her iconographic image—now reduced to levels of caricature—or indeed, a focal point for negative press attention and moral scrutiny. Instead, the picture of Winehouse represented by the exhibition is a more fully-realized and multifaceted one.

This is primarily achieved by ensuring that Winehouse maintains an active presence within the exhibition space, both in sound and image, facilitating the reclamation of her own story and returning some of the agency lost during her lifetime. Whether as part of the large video walls which loop

performances, or the smaller interview excerpts shown on iPads and listened to on headphones, it is significant that almost all of the words we hear are Winehouse's own. The use of headphones emphasizes the intimacy of her recorded voice, and brings her closer to the listener. The experience of seeing and hearing all these versions of Winehouse, captured at different times in her life is, at times, a strange experience that overloads the senses. Each sound and image is recontextualized and embedded with the knowledge of her death, creating an uncanny, hauntological space where Winehouse exists simultaneously in the past and present tense.

The blurring of temporal boundaries that occurs within the exhibition space is of course apt for a singer-songwriter who equally blurred the boundaries of musical genres, drawing on vocal and musical signatures that reference jazz, soul, hip hop, and everything in between. The origins of this unique blend are explored in great detail in the section 'Harmony: Musical Influences'. The impetus behind this section of the exhibition is made clear by further contextual captions, which describe Winehouse's 'intellectual engagement' with a range of music genres, first building her depth of knowledge as a listener, and later, as musician and artist in her own right. The tracible trajectory of this wide sphere of influences is made visible in the featured musical mind maps created for *Frank* and *Back to Black*; themselves a testament to her musical tastes and changes in the production of her music throughout her collaborations with Salaam Remi and Mark Ronson. Here, music is not just creation, but a product of cultural work.

The sense of music history as a continuum rather than a linear process is highlighted in the exhibition's first installation. 'In the Studio'—designed by Chiara Stephenson in collaboration with Luke Halls Studio—is a recreation of Metropolis Studios, where Winehouse recorded parts of *Back to Black* (Luke Halls Studio 2021). Complete with foam soundproofing, musical instruments, light-up recording sign and a seating area modelled on a mixing desk, archival footage of Winehouse and her artistic inspirations are layered together and projected onto the studio set. The installation honours both the recording studio as material space and as Winehouse's own creative process, offering a visual representation of that process while also consolidating her own position in music history. This consolidation is reinforced by significant artists who feature elsewhere in the section. The spotlighting of Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington, and Ella Fitzgerald not only function as a way to contextualize music history and Winehouse's place within it, but also to create clear links between the past and present; links

that are felt as clearly as they are heard. They are markers of Winehouse's own tastes and reflect her musical genealogy, made clear in the fondness with which she spoke about these artists in interviews or, indeed, the affection in her delivery when given the opportunity to sing one of their songs. This is epitomized by her cover of Washington's jazz standard, 'Teach Me Tonight' on *Later … with Jools Holland* in 2004, one performance of many that features in the exhibition.

Winehouse's connection to and with music culture past and present is embodied by the inclusion of her personal jukebox, given a central position within the exhibition space, itself a site of fascination. The modified 1959 Automatic Musical Instruments' J-200 stereo jukebox contains records collected between 2007 and 2011. Featured alongside photographs of Winehouse with the machine in her Camden home and handwritten title cards for some of the records included—Errol Dunkley's 'OK Fred', Billy Fury's 'Open Your Arms', and Lloyd Price's 'Stagger Lee', amongst many others—the jukebox is a testament to the depth and diversity of Winehouse's music collection, operating as a kind of musical time capsule. In addition to material that showcases Winehouse's musical knowledge and tastes, this section of the exhibition also emphasizes vocal abilities and musicianship, ranging from an early video of a young Winehouse performing with an acoustic guitar for Island Records executives, to detailed reflection and analysis of her singing style, and her roots as a jazz singer. One such example is an excerpt from the documentary *Amy Winehouse: The Girl Done Good* (2007), made following the success of *Back to Black*. In the documentary, jazz musician Chris Ingham examines her performance of two standards, Billie Holiday's 'There Is No Greater Love' and King Pleasure's 'Moody's Mood For Love', noting her aptitude for musical interpretation and emotionality beyond her years.

Fittingly, the exhibition culminates in a second video installation dedicated to a final performance of 'Tears Dry On Their Own'—deftly demonstrating the emotionality Ingham describes in relation to jazz standards, this time translated into Amy's own music. Originally recorded at Shepherd's Bush Empire in 2007, it is recontextualized into an immersive experience, once again designed by Chiara Stephenson, this time in collaboration with Studio Moross. The installation's animation aesthetic echoes that of Winehouse's own stage sets (Studio Moross 2021). Constructed within a mirrored semi-circle, this rendition of Winehouse's performativity brings her back to life momentarily, refocusing our attention on her music and her voice. The poignancy of this remediated performance is only intensified by the intimacy and darkness of the room, with the sound design making

it seem as if Winehouse is actually *in* the room. In this way, the exhibition ends with a restatement of Winehouse's tangible presence.

Beyond the Stage is a timely and fitting tribute to Winehouse's talents. A celebration of her life and work, it reinstates her significance as a musician and a songwriter, demonstrating the long reach of her influence on other artists, whether as subject in well-known photographs by Charles Moriarty and Jill Furmanovsky, or as muse in paintings by Liz Johnstone and Marlene Dumas. Often deeply affecting, *Beyond the Stage* exemplifies what Steinem called the 'poignancy of incompleteness' (1986: 18). While this bittersweet feeling of 'what if?' undoubtedly remains, the exhibition's finale reminds us of a different, equally powerful corpus: that of Winehouse's music, which underlines part of why the fascination with her endures. During the exhibition's finale performance, we are asked to listen as well as hear, perhaps engaging with her music for the first time or re-engaging with it again. The 'Tears Dry On Their Own' installation is an ellipsis rather than a full stop on Winehouse's story, acting as a catalyst to seek out more of her work. The excerpts we hear throughout the exhibition, and those final, immersive three-minutes-and-twenty-one seconds do not feel enough.

Curated with a care and respect often absent in Winehouse's life, *Beyond the Stage* sets a high standard for future exhibitions seeking to explore the complex lives and legacies of figures like Winehouse. For Winehouse's own life and work, it offers the opportunity to rediscover what has been left behind and reconsider its true value, and makes clear that her legacy may be underpinned by her music, but does not end with it.

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