

Between trainwreck and rebel: the 1960s feminism in Amy Winehouse's performance of „Back to Black“ (2008)

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Abstract

When in 2006 her album “Back to Black” was released, the dominant discourse around singer and songwriter Amy Winehouse not only broached the issue of her new style of music. A lot more often, the media seemed to thematize her drug abuse and her rebellious habitus along with her newly adopted 1960s clothing and tattoo style. Until her early death in 2011 caused by alcohol abuse, she was predominantly attributed with the celebrity stereotype of the “trainwreck” or the “disordered celebrity” (Holmes and Negra 2011, 3).

Celebrities are strategically created in a temporally and culturally constrained context. So far, the celebrity studies' blind spot of the celebrity construct Amy Winehouse in its context seems to be the attachment to the feminist performances of 1960s female music groups with a white working-class background. Based on her performance of the song “Back to Black” at the *V Festival* in Chelmsford in 2008, in which Winehouse incorporates the song “Remember” (1965) by the US girl group The Shangri-Las in her own musical work, this project aims to conduct an analysis of the above mentioned performance. For this, on the basis of feminist studies on (mostly white) working class girl groups of the 1960s, it intends to explore Winehouse's retro clothing style and musical performance. Thereby, it questions the ascribed victim role of the celebrity. The project argues that what in the postfeminist context of the early 21st century has been comprehended as trainwreck is not exclusively, but certainly partly, inspired by the feminism of the mostly white working-class girl groups of the 1960s.

“One specific aspect of Winehouse's musical references which is central to her self-constructed celebrity persona is a nostalgic sensibility for the working-class girl groups of the 1960s such as *The Shangri-Las*, *The Shirelles* and *The Ronettes*.” (Polaschek 2017, 9)

2) Winehouse's 1960s retro style and musical performance

- Incorporation of the song „Remember (Walking in the Sand)“ by 1960s girl group The Shangri-Las in W.'s performance of “Back to Black” (Winehouse YouTube 2019, 2:27-3:06)
- Distinctive style of 1960s pop-music groups through her retro demeanor: beehive hairstyle, tailored (often belted) dresses, and heavy-winged eyeliner (cf. Newkey-Burden 2009, 69), see picture in box 1)
- Women tattooed onto her arm are reminiscent of the iconography of 1950s and 1960s pin-up magazines (Polaschek 2017, 9)

1) Amy Winehouse – V Festival August 17, 2008 (Back to Black), Hylands Park, Chelmsford, UK



(Amy Winehouse, Youtube 2019, 3:02)

Tabloid reaction:

- Title of an article by the Daily Mail reporting about her performance: “Amy Winehouse is back to her worst after two V Festival gigs in two nights”
- Trainwreck, frail-looking, dishevelled, and drug-marked artist, dismal and stuttering performances, “the hair of her famous beehive hung in matted clumps” (Daily Mail Reporter 2008, n.p.)

“So much music these days is like ‘You don't know me. I don't need you'. And all the music then was kind of like ‘I don't care if you don't love me. I will lie down in the road, pull my heart out and show it to you'. I love all that” (Amy Winehouse, 2018, 10:55-11:04).

3) Class and 1960s romanticism

- Strategy of public self-presentation: the evocation of the romanticism and gendered relationships of decades earlier, → female musicians were asserting an active feminine sexuality associated with a working-class desire for escape from the restrictions of their economically disadvantaged lives (vgl. Gripp 1990, 66)
- Looking back to the 1960s: W. actively refuses aspects of the contemporary, postfeminist context of the music industry (see above quote)
- Performance on stage aligns W. with a group of female celebrities who the tabloid press reserve harsh criticism for: women of a white, working-class background (cf. Gies 2011, 348).
- Class addressed in popular culture → often negatively connoted as a lack of something. Looking at stereotype ascribed to W., the trainwreck lacks fortitude. Through this cultural coding of the alleged lack of Amy Winehouse, her rebellious behavior is framed as the manifestation of personal failure (cf. Raisborough 2021, 253f.)

“Her transgressions of acceptable femininity, her refusal to exert the degree of self-control and self-discipline deemed appropriate in the contemporary neoliberal context and her active foregrounding of her working-class origins through her musical references, themes and personal style are reframed as pathological.” (Bell 2008, n.p.)

4) Between trainwreck and rebel

Trainwreck as a genderspecific term

- Tabloids frame W.'s excessive behavior more negatively (rock and fall) than the habitus of male celebrities (rock and roll), e.g. Pete Doherty: She is usually described as a victim of drugs and male influence (cf. Berkers and Eecklaer 2014, 3).
- Pathologization of feminist performances: W. is one of the celebrities, whose performances made her being marked as a misfit of society. She is transformed from a bad girl who actively refuses to conform to social norms, to a mad girl who is not capable of doing so (cf. Bell 2021, n.p.)

Conclusion:

Celebrity Amy Winehouse was proven to consume high amounts of drugs and alcohol, which demonstrably altered her performances and ultimately caused her death. It seems that the visible consequences of drug use eventually became part of the celebrity image. However, what in the tabloid press in the postfeminist context of the early 21st century has been comprehended as “trainwreck” (Holmes and Negra 2011, 3) is in the case of Winehouse not exclusively, but certainly partly, inspired by the feminism of the mostly white working-class girl groups of the 1960s. The 1960s feminism is characterized by an active challenge to social norms of femininity. This very challenge can be found in Winehouse's musical performance, her outward appearance, and also, to a certain extent, in her drug abuse.

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