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Exploring legacy and narrative in star performer popular music exhibitions: the Design Museum's *Amy: Beyond the Stage*

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a range of star performer popular music exhibitions about individual musicians or bands in British museums. This article offers a view on how these exhibitions can shape historic narratives about their subjects, influencing their legacies. Drawing on gallery observations and materials collected during multiple site visits, the article presents a scholarly analysis of a single case study, *Amy: Beyond the Stage* at the Design Museum in London. This case study illustrates some of the challenges faced by contemporary curators when structuring narratives and exhibiting performer legacies in popular music exhibitions, contributing to the increasing body of academic literature designed to critically evaluate practices of curation in popular music museums and exhibitions. By focusing on three themes: single narrative curation, nostalgia and empathy, and canonisation, the article illustrates that star performer exhibitions can, like other forms of biographical representation, treat their subjects with undue reverence. It argues that, to preserve the public legacies of their subjects, star performer exhibitions sometimes misrepresent or re-write historic events, which can lead to the whitewashing of history.

KEYWORDS: Amy Winehouse, Museums, Narrative, Legacy, Heritage, Popular music exhibitions, Star performer exhibitions

Introduction

In this article I discuss how the legacies of deceased musicians are shaped when they become the subject of exhibitions in British museums, by presenting a scholarly analysis of a single exhibition: *Amy: Beyond the stage* (2021), held at the Design Museum in London. My analysis illustrates how the exhibition preserved the legacy of its subject by offering a selective version of history, obscuring important details that are essential to a contemporary understanding of the Amy Winehouse story. I argue that *Beyond the Stage* is an example of how exhibitions can fall into a similar trap as other forms of biographical representation in failing adequately to address the complexity of certain historic narratives.

The article begins with three sections of contextual discussion. The first introduces some of the academic debates concerning Amy Winehouse and the construction of artists' legacies. The second discusses trends of contemporary curatorship and outlines relevant ideas and concepts from literature relating to museum studies and popular music studies. The third presents essential details about the museum and exhibition in question. Following this, I undertake a scholarly analysis of three exhibits from *Amy: Beyond the Stage*: 'Frank', 'In the Limelight' and 'Legacy'. The exhibits are addressed in three thematically titled sections. The themes discussed are: single narrative curation, nostalgia and empathy, and canonisation. The analysis presented is primarily focused on the curatorial presentation of Winehouse's relationship with the press. In these discussions I outline some of the potential pitfalls of the curatorial process and contribute to the ongoing conversation about inclusion and representation when exhibiting popular music history in museums. Occasionally I explore exhibits that focus on alternative themes to address legacy construction within modern-day curatorial practice.

The Mediation of Amy Winehouse and Legacy Construction

The years following the death of British jazz and soul singer-songwriter Amy Winehouse in 2011 have seen her become the subject of a range of academic publications (Polaschek, 2017; Annus, 2018; Sledmere, 2018). In these writings, significant attention has been paid to the way Winehouse borrows from various African American musical genres including jazz, soul and hip hop in her music (Weston, 2022), leading to accusations concerning the culturally appropriative nature of her work (Brooks, 2010). What has also dominated academic debate is the way that Winehouse has been depicted by the press and media, both before and after her death (Hearsum, 2012). Scholars have highlighted that the singer's press coverage was, at times, unfairly critical, and often blatantly gendered (Berkers and Eeckelar, 2014). However, what is not always recognised is how the unrelenting press and media attention afforded to Winehouse undoubtedly helped propel her to celebrity status on both sides of the North Atlantic.

In addition, the years following the death of Amy Winehouse have seen the artist's life and work become the subject of a range of commercially released biographical materials. These have primarily taken the form of "biographies, photobooks and films" (Weston, 2022: 154). Examples include Asif Kapadia's 2015

Academy Award winning documentary *AMY,* and Mich Winehouse's 2012 *Sunday Times* best-selling book, *Amy, My Daughter*. Commercial biographical materials about celebrated deceased musicians are common, evident in the abundance of cinematic biopics centred around dead North Atlantic popular musicians (Editorial, 2024), including the 2024 Amy Winehouse biopic *Back to Black*. In recent years, scholars in the fields of popular music studies and star studies have discussed how these materials shape the legacies of musicians. It is sometimes argued that biographical materials about musicians "contain predictable narrative structures" (Strong, 2014: 424) that replicate and reinforce dominant historic narratives without fully considering the complexity of historic events. It is also argued that certain materials can fall into the trap of presenting their subjects hagiographically (Custen, 2000: 142). Moreover, biographical materials can, at times, be largely uncritical of the accounts given during an artist's lifetime in "public appearances […] as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press" (Dyer, 1986: 3). These materials often commodify the passing of stars while contributing to a mythologising of their legacies.

It is not only through commercial biographical materials that popular music histories are mediated in the 21st century; we should also consider the contribution of the press in developing historic narratives. The journalistic documentation of popular music histories is diverse. As Sarah Thornton (1990: 87) argued: "One of the things that distinguishes music from other forms of popular culture is that its consumption is accompanied by so much comment". This may be especially true following the death of a star. In his book *Stars,* Richard Dyer (1998:63) argued that obituaries and other forms of posthumous press and media coverage often "contribute to the shaping of public opinion about a star" by "expressing a widely held, pre-existing sentiment or view". In other words, following an artist's death, rather than constructing a unique response, Dyer maintained that the press and media tend to repeat narratives presented during the artist's lifetime.

Much of the posthumous commentary published about Amy Winehouse, however, complicates this notion. As mentioned, while she was alive the singer was the subject of frequent press criticism (Berkers and Eeckelar, 2014). However, since her death a new narrative surrounding Amy Winehouse has developed in the press and media. Coverage that follows this new narrative often minimises any mention of the singer's wrongdoing, instead remembering Winehouse positively "as a generational talent who released two cherished records – and someone who wasn't purely self-destructive, but a victim of systematic abuse and mental illness" (D'Souza, 2023: par. 8). Additionally, this coverage often discusses how aspects of her identity, such as her gender and North London Jewish background, have shaped her life and music (Hunter-Tilney, 2023). This new narrative also appears in many recently presented commercial biographical materials about the singer, such as in Asif Kapadia's documentary film *Amy,* as well as in the exhibition discussed in this article *Amy: Beyond the Stage* (Bakare, 2021; Moore, 2021).

Star Performer Exhibitions and Narrative Curation

Alongside the forms of mediation mentioned, a subject that is beginning to enter scholarly discussions of legacy construction and stardom are museum displays and exhibitions about popular musicians. Recent years have seen an increase in British

museums staging exhibitions about popular music, many of which are themed around an individual artist or band. In London such exhibitions include *Direct from Graceland: Elvis* (2024) at the Arches London Bridge, and *Pink Floyd: Their Mortal Remains* (2017) at the Victoria and Albert Museum (the V&A). In fact, some of London's most celebrated musicians have become the subject of several exhibitions in the city. David Bowie, for example, has been celebrated in *David Bowie Is…* (2013) at the V&A and *Aladdin Sane: 50 Years* (2023) at the Southbank Centre. Similarly, Amy Winehouse has become the subject of two major museum exhibitions: *Amy Winehouse: A Family Portrait* (2017) at the Jewish Museum London and *Amy: Beyond the Stage* (2021) at the Design Museum. Exhibitions themed around a single musical act are hereafter termed star performer exhibitions. We might categorise star performer exhibitions as part of a wider group of exhibitions referred to as "biographical exhibitions" that "bear similarities as cultural constructs" (Albano, 2007: 15) with some of the other forms of biographical representation discussed in this article.

The "growing phenomenon" (Cortez, 2017: 371) of museums exhibiting popular music, in both star performer exhibitions and more broadly, has been discussed in a small collection of scholarly writings. Within this literature there are several texts that outline the importance of narrative - or "the overarching stories that can shape exhibitions and guide visitors' interpretation of presented materials" (Baker, Istvandity & Nowak, 2019: 91) - when structuring exhibitions. Some scholars have highlighted potential problems caused by emphasising hegemonic versions of history when presenting uncomplicated singular narratives (Leonard, 2007; Knifton, 2012). However, it has also been highlighted that the stories museums choose to tell and how they tell them is changing, in part due to a noticeable "justice turn" (Baker, Cantillon and Nowak, 2023: 4), or move towards more representative, accessible and socially inclusive museum practice. This justice turn is affecting many North Atlantic museums, including both those who choose to collect and exhibit popular music's material culture, and those who do not.

The manner in which this justice turn is shaping the behaviours of curators and museum staff has been discussed by Barndt and Jaeger (2024: 2-3), who wrote:

> In ever closer dialogue with their communities and audiences and often under public pressure to reconcile with the institution's implication in the history of colonialism, nationalism, and exclusion, curators have enlisted contemporary artists and experimented with new exhibition formats to work towards redress and repair. More generally, museums across the globe deal with the challenge to find new ways of narrating difficult knowledge and entangled histories.

In the passage above, Barndt and Jaeger introduce two ideas that are relevant to the exhibits analysed later in this article: difficult knowledge and entangled histories. Difficult knowledge is, for them, knowledge that doesn't fit within established historic narratives, and that challenges visitors to re-evaluate aspects of history that they might not have previously questioned. The term entangled histories refers to the idea that many narratives and stories are interconnected, and the way we present one can have implications for others.

It has been argued that certain popular music exhibitions fail to address entangled histories and difficult knowledge, instead presenting stories through

"singular, orthodox narratives" (Fairchild, 2021: 7) that fail to challenge the established order or address the complexity of historic events. The trouble with this is that it "can lead to a broad flattening of racial and social divisions" (Fairchild, 2017: 88). Presenting "dominant histories" (Baker, Istvandity and Nowak, 2019: 25) in such a way may allow exhibitions to preserve the legacies of their subjects, but they do so at the risk of delivering unbalanced representations of popular music history.

Of course, when considering such issues it is important to bear in mind that museums are complex entities to navigate, and the practical difficulties curators face often affect the exhibitions they stage. For example, it is true that a large proportion of visitors to any given popular music exhibition are likely to be fans. Therefore, museums and curators may feel compelled to create exhibitions that cater to audience expectations to avoid visitor disappointment. Moreover, exhibitions - including *Beyond the Stage* (Weston, 2022) - are often organised together with the estate or family of the artist in question. The benefit of this is that the curators are often granted access to invaluable materials, however, such relationships can serve to limit the scope of their critical evaluation. Therefore, this article is not intended as blanket criticism, and any apparent criticism of curators should not automatically be categorised as the fault of subjectivity or error, as it may instead be proof of the practical issues and burdens faced by museum staff.

The Design Museum and Amy: Beyond the Stage

Located in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea in west London, the Design Museum is dedicated to displaying various types of graphic, transport, costume, architectural, product and industrial design. The museum was founded by Sir Terence Conran in 1989 "in the belief that design has a vital part to play in shaping and understanding the world" (Sudjic, 2016: 11). The initial purpose of the museum was to combat the "residual cultural hierarchy" that frames functional design, or art "burdened by utility", as less deserving of museum attention. The museum contains a permanent collection of design-focused objects, and frequently programmes a range of temporary exhibitions which have historically been themed around aspects of design.

Amy: Beyond the Stage opened as a temporary exhibition at the Design Museum with the purpose of celebrating "the legacy and creativity of one of the greatest musicians of our time [Amy Winehouse]" (the Design Museum Website, 2021, par. 1). The exhibition received positive coverage in several major British Newspapers including *The Guardian* (Patterson, 2021) and *The Telegraph* (Haider, 2021). It presented the Amy Winehouse story through a combination of material artefacts, multimedia and creative labelling. Two types of material artefacts were particularly prevalent in the exhibition: Winehouse's outfits and stage costumes - selected by "special advisor" (Weston, 2022: 155) Naomi Parry - and various newspaper and magazine cuttings of Winehouse's press coverage. These items enabled the exhibition to emphasise elements of graphic and costume design, thereby connecting with the museum's design mandate. Alongside this, the exhibition also presented other material artefacts that have become ubiquitous amongst popular music exhibitions, such as guitars and hand-written lyrics (Weston, 2022).

Structurally, the exhibition broadly followed a chronological trajectory and was staged across three large rooms. The opening room was dedicated to discussing Winehouse's early life, displaying artefacts from her childhood such as pages of lyrics and her acceptance letter to the BRIT School. The second room was themed around her career and relationship with the press, illustrating the singer's rise to stardom, as well as her public difficulties, through a combination of stage costumes, instruments, press clippings and audio-visual materials. The final room was primarily focused on discussing Winehouse's legacy and cultural impact following her death, combining material objects such as costumes with a state-of-the-art immersive experience themed around a live performance of Winehouse's song "Tears Dry On Their Own", recorded at Shephard's Bush Empire, a music venue situated less than two miles away from the museum.

Beyond the Stage was the second of three popular music themed exhibitions staged at the Design Museum between 2020 and 2025. The museum programmed a 2020 exhibition about electronic music entitled *Electronic: From Kraftwerk to The Chemical Brothers* and is planning a 2025 exhibition entitled *Blitz: the club the shaped the 80s* about the Blitz Club, a famous Covent Garden nightclub associated with the new romantic musical and subcultural movement. Within this small collection of popular music exhibitions staged at the Design Museum it is important to acknowledge that *Beyond the Stage* is the only one focused on a single star musician.

There are several reasons why the design museum may have chosen to programme an exhibition specifically about Amy Winehouse. Firstly, star exhibitions about celebrated local musicians have the potential to generate large numbers of ticket sales. This point is illustrated by the fact that a previous exhibition about Amy Winehouse held at the Jewish Museum, London "broke all former visitor records and over 1,500 people attended the final day alone" (The Jewish Museum London, 2014: 3). This is important to consider as ticket sales are often an important way of generating revenue for museums (Baker, Istvandity and Nowak, 2019: 34). Secondly, exhibitions about *local* musicians enable museums to curate "displays [that] present a perspective on local social history" (Leonard, 2007: 156), connecting with the audiences they aim to attract by making local "social history accessible and relevant" Leonard, 2010: 174). These factors are important to consider as we move forward into the exhibition analysis, as they may have contributed to why the exhibition presented largely uncritical representations of Amy Winehouse's life and legacy.

Before moving on, it is important to highlight that *Beyond the Stage* is one of several popular music exhibitions in London choosing to focus on the contributions of women performers. Other examples include *DIVA* (2024) at the V&A and *Yoko Ono: Music of the Mind* (2024) at the Tate Modern. These exhibitions provide an important counter to the tradition amongst many popular music exhibitions that "reinforce the gender dynamics of the music industry" (Baker, Istvandity and Nowak, 2019: 28) by downplaying the contributions of women musicians.

Exhibition Analysis: Amy: Beyond the Stage

Single Narrative Curation

The response from the press following the release of Amy Winehouse's (2003) debut album *Frank* was generally favourable but not unanimous. Initial reviews from news outlets in the United Kingdom were mostly positive: the album was awarded four stars out of five by *The Guardian* (Lindon, 2003). However, later articles published in international publications such as *Pitchfork* (Wolk, 2007) were more censorious. In a particularly contentious piece for *The New Yorker*, critic Sasha Frere-Jones (2008: par. 5) wrote "I bought Winehouse's first album, "Frank" in 2004 at a Heathrow Airport music kiosk. I listened to it on the plane home and dropped it in a garbage can on the way to baggage claim". Like many of popular music's most celebrated artists, some critics suggested Winehouse's debut left room for improvement.

Beyond the Stage however, presented a less nuanced version of events. The negative and mixed reviews awarded to *Frank* that were published later internationally were omitted from the 'Frank' exhibit; the press cuttings included were instead suggestive of widespread critical acclaim, implying that Winehouse's early work was universally well received. (1) The cuttings displayed also included positive editorial content and interviews, such as a lengthy feature about Winehouse taken from *the Sunday Times Culture Magazine* (2003: 1), the headline declaring Winehouse to be "The biggest, boldest new voice in pop", and a front page spread for *the Sunday Telegraph Magazine* (2004: 1) which held the headline "A driven woman". By narrowing down the geographic and temporal scope of the press coverage presented, the 'Frank' exhibit provided the visitor with a selective version of history at odds with the complexity of actual events.

This simplified singular narrative was supported in the exhibit information label which accompanied the selected newspaper clippings. The label stated that Amy "presented herself with unmediated honesty", painting a picture of a genuine, outspoken artist who left little to the imagination in interviews. The label went on to suggest "reviews of her songs […] show she was considered entertaining and appreciated for her voice" (*Amy: Beyond the Stage*, 2021), making no mention of the mixed response *Frank* later received internationally.

There may have been several reasons that affected the curatorial decision to limit the timespan and geographic scope of the reviews included in the exhibit. For example, it may complicate the narrative of the exhibition to consider reviews published long after the album's release. As well as this, it is important to consider that both the Design Museum's location, and decision to focus on a local artist, mean it is more likely to highlight British narratives over international ones.

Perhaps most importantly, by downplaying the mixed coverage afforded to Winehouse at this stage, the exhibition was later able to paint a picture of a media who once adored Winehouse, turning on her, compounding her addiction struggles with daily vilification. This was evident in several displays presented shortly after the *'Frank'* exhibit about Winehouse's most commercially successful album *Back to Black* (2006), which focused on Amy's personal struggles with substance misuse and public behaviour. The perceived narrative of Winehouse's press coverage changed from adored to vilified in the space of a few metres.

This shift in tone was perhaps most obvious in an exhibit entitled 'In the Limelight' which displayed eleven press cuttings, all of which placed journalistic focus on one or more of Winehouse's personal struggles. The press clippings variously described Winehouse as a "Tabloid mess" (Tyrangiel, 2008: 72), a "big-voiced, big haired lunatic" (Quirk, 2006: 64) and "the nation's high priestess of hedonism" (Doyle, 2007: 64). The examples were all evidently selected to depict a singular narrative of an artist whose dramatic tribulations were considered more print-worthy than her music. (2) This, however, does not show the whole story. During the *Back to Black* era Amy received plenty of positive press coverage focused on the quality of her music. We only have to look at Dorian Lynskey's (2006) review of *Back to Black* for *The Guardian* or Christian Hoard's (2007) assessment of the album for *Rolling Stone* for examples of some more musically focused press coverage.

Accompanying 'In the Limelight' was a label which provided a small amount of context on the display. The label stated:

> Rather than focusing on her music, the press - particularly the tabloids - drew attention to the trouble she faced, and were often very critical. Flippant references to her body shape ignored the possibility she might be suffering from disordered eating or struggling with substance misuse. It also failed to recognise the strength and determination she showed in confronting those issues and seeking help (*Amy: Beyond the Stage*, 2021)

As with the '*Frank'* exhibit, 'In the Limelight' presented a narrative focused on a singular version of history, this time presenting Amy Winehouse as a victim, hounded by a press determined to document and publicise her every misstep.

Both the '*Frank'* and 'In the Limelight' exhibits invite us to consider an interesting question: are curators right to highlight a single, simplified historical narrative without considering other versions of the story? This is difficult to answer as, on the one hand, shaping a captivating narrative and creating a flow is paramount within curatorial practice to optimise visitor experience (Harvey *et al*., 1998), but on the other, by showing visitors a singular version of history without considering other entangled narratives, curators risk omitting much of the nuance and detail of historical events (Leonard, 2007: 156-157). As Robert Knifton (2012: 22) discusses, "the tension […] is between the celebrated and the overlooked, dominant narratives and hidden histories, and how these should be told".

The reason museums persist in presenting history in such a way is likely rooted in visitor experience. Museums have been shifting away from traditional paradigms over the last twenty years, placing visitor experience at the forefront of curatorial decision making. This, in turn, has made museums "more inclusive and engaging places" (Cohen, 2021: 47). However, to display history in all its nuanced multiplicity may detract from exhibition flow and continuity, making exhibitions less focused and harder to digest. To a certain extent the hand of a curator is forced into presenting a streamlined version of events due to the need to prioritise visitor experience which ultimately affects attendance figures and ticket sales. As Lanir *et al*. (2016: 314) put it "many museums are becoming more consumer oriented, focusing more and more on the visitors' experience and needs, as a means of bringing more visitors to the museum, and expanding the museum activity." As

museums attempt to become more participatory, inclusive agents for social change, the challenge is to consider ways of prioritising diversity and representation alongside visitor experience, finding ways of displaying history in a manner that benefits a wider demographic.

The question we should therefore be asking is not "if" but "how". How do curators present history in a heterogeneous form whilst benefitting from the engagement and inclusivity that stem from prioritising visitor experience? One possible answer is to move away from structuring museum narrative around chronology and look to alternative methods (Adamson, 2021). If curators are encouraged to explore ways of exhibiting history in a more plural sense, replacing temporality as the central feature when structuring exhibition narrative, progress might be made. By looking at different ways of presenting narrative in exhibitions, it might finally be possible to exhibit history not as a consecutive series of events, but as countless intertwining stories, or entangled histories, creating more representative exhibition practices that avoid perpetuating singular canonised narratives.

As Barndt and Jaeger (2024: 2-3) highlight, there are many curators and other museum professionals deliberately attempting to address this issue by exploring new creative and critically engaged methods of narrating history in a non-linear manner. One example might be the 2024 *DIVA* exhibition at the V&A, in which the curatorial team created an immersive sound guide that enabled them to follow what Baker, Istvandity and Nowak (2019: 10) might label a "concept-based approach" when structuring their exhibition narrative. When attending *DIVA*, visitors were invited to wander around the top floor of the exhibition in any manner they wished. The benefit of this approach was that the curatorial team were able to platform the music and stories of artists from various diverse perspectives, such as important trans artists Arca and Sophie, without disrupting a pre-determined chronological narrative flow. In doing so the exhibition creatively invited audiences to consider certain political issues and introduced lesser-known perspectives. *The British Music Experience* (2009) at the O2 arena is a separate example of a popular music exhibition that explored the issue of temporality in a different way, providing a separate compelling structural alternative to linear chronology (Brooker, 2013).

Nostalgia and Empathy

Through examination of the 'In the Limelight' exhibit, it is possible to explore the role of nostalgia in popular music exhibitions. Recent thinking suggests that nostalgia has become a "shaping cultural force in the contemporary world" (Hamilton *et al.,* 2013: 101) and it can be a valuable asset, affecting how curators structure popular music exhibitions (Mortensen & Madsen, 2014). *Beyond the Stage* was at an advantage in that it dealt with a recent piece of British cultural history, meaning many of the exhibition's visitors will have had personal memories of Winehouse's life and work. Memories such as these are often exploited by curators to evoke powerful nostalgic reactions in visitors (Leonard & Knifton, 2014). Visitor nostalgia, or historical reminiscence (Sheng & Chen, 2012), is now considered to be a powerful curatorial structuring tool able to enhance visitor engagement and promote exhibition attendance (Baker, Istvandity & Nowak, 2020).

One of the ways in which 'In the Limelight' engaged visitor nostalgia was through its use of emotive language. When the exhibit's label emphasised: "Her press

coverage is peppered with casual references to what were serious issues, implying that Amy was dysfunctional rather than in need of empathy or support" (*Amy: Beyond the Stage*, 2021) it presented Winehouse as a victim of the press, encouraging an empathetic response from exhibition visitors towards the singer. Alongside blaming the press for Amy's worsening problems, the label also suggested that events may have transpired differently had the press behaved more ethically. The exhibition presented visitors with an alternative version of reality in which Amy might still be alive, evoking a nostalgic response through the creation of an idealised but fictitious past.

Beyond the Stage also used nostalgia in the exhibition's promotion. For example, to celebrate the exhibition's launch, a large "hand painted mural was displayed on Camden High Street" (The Design Museum Website, 2022: par. 10). Because of the well documented connection between Amy Winehouse and Camden (Thorne, 2024), the location of the mural was especially significant. By positioning the mural on Camden High Street, certain passers-by would have been simultaneously reminded of the connection between the singer and Camden and of her absence, evoking a nostalgic response for a time where Winehouse was frequently spotted around the borough. It may be significant that the mural had something of a feel of a large billboard similar to those frequently used by artists and their teams to promote live performances and album releases. The billboard style of the mural may have also evoked nostalgic emotions for a time in which Amy was still alive and scheduled to perform or release new music.

Nostalgia is a powerful but potentially problematic tool available to museums exhibiting aspects of musical heritage. Music exhibitions can evoke powerful memories amongst museum visitors (Collins & Long, 2015), however the problem with using nostalgia is that it can offer a rose-tinted version of the past, sanitised of its more problematic elements (Leonard & Knifton, 2014). As with singular narratives, nostalgia has the potential to distort history, warping visitor perceptions of how things were through omission of negative aspects of the past. It is worth considering the wider problem that any attempt to edit, distort or re-write history can have deeply problematic repercussions for diversity and representation (Adelt, 2017; van der Hoeven, 2018).

It is not just in 'In the Limelight' and in the exhibition's promotion that *Beyond the Stage* used nostalgia. Parts of the exhibition felt like an exercise in emotional provocation, drawing an empathetic nostalgic response from visitors. The exhibition repeatedly channelled Winehouse's tragic early death through emotionally charged displays of ancillary objects but ultimately pressed home a narrative that Winehouse had been making steps towards recovery. An obvious example of this was an exhibit displaying the last dress ever worn on stage by Winehouse, displayed in a standalone glass case in the corner of the main room. The accompanying label to the display read:

> Amy wore this dress for what was to be her last solo performance, on 18 June 2011, at the Tuborg Festival in Belgrade, Serbia. She had been undergoing treatment for alcohol addiction, to set her on the path to recovery and enable her to continue to perform. However, this performance unfortunately had to be cut short and the rest of her European tour cancelled, leaving much of her concert wardrobe unworn. (*Amy: Beyond the stage*, 2021)

The exhibit illustrated how, through creative positioning and emotive labelling, an object can be manipulated within an exhibition to provoke powerful nostalgic and emotional reactions amongst exhibition visitors. Although factually correct, the label failed to address the underlying reason for the performance and subsequent tour's cancellation, which was due to Winehouse's relapse following the completion of an alcohol rehabilitation course (BBC, 2011).

Canonisation

The penultimate exhibit in *Beyond the Stage* was entitled 'Legacy', a display that featured a series of artefacts, press cuttings and videos focused on the reaction to Amy Winehouse's death, alongside the lasting impact of her work. Through 'Legacy' another shift in curatorial narrative can be observed, as the tone of the exhibition moved from nostalgic and idealistic to sombre and mournful. The objects and press cuttings selected were organised to present the final chapter in the Amy Winehouse story in a way that maximised an emotional response from visitors.

One interesting artefact presented as part of 'Legacy' was a copy of the NME from the 26th of July 2011. Printed just three days after Winehouse's death, the publication's cover featured a black and white photograph taken in 2006 by Dean Chalkley. The accompanying label described the content of the magazine as including "tributes to Amy from rock star Courtney Love, comedian Russell Brand, Mick Jones from The Clash and Guy Garvey from Elbow" (*Amy: Beyond the Stage,* 2021). By highlighting the range of celebrities and noteworthy musicians who contributed tributes to *NME* after Winehouse's death, the label emphasised Amy's significance as a cultural icon and therefore her historical importance, validating the museum's decision to stage the exhibition.

Marion Leonard discusses the role of canonic representation in relation to popular music exhibitions, stating that many exhibitions staged around the work of an individual artist "are underpinned by Thornton's criteria for the identification of historical importance" (Leonard, 2007: 155). (3) In other words, many of the musicians chosen for major exhibitions are assumed to be historically significant by virtue of their sales figures and celebration in wider popular culture. We might however consider that through the whitewashing of music history in textbooks (Byrd, 2009), popular culture and cinema (Benthaus, 2021), many African American women whose contribution to popular music deserves to be celebrated remain relatively unknown (Mahon, 2020).

Through its presentation of *Beyond the Stage,* the Design Museum decided to commemorate an artist whose work has been considered fundamentally problematic in its appropriation of Black British and African American cultural production, with little to no mention of the questionable nature of her work. The cultural appropriation in Winehouse's music has been broadly deconstructed by Daphne Brooks, who contextualises Winehouse's work as part of a "wave of British white female soul singers – Duffy, Adele, and Alice Russell, for instance [who] continue to make their way across the Atlantic and are, to some, brilliantly bamboozling their way through the most seductive female minstrel show" (Brooks, 2010: 40). Winehouse's voice acts as a "conduit of black pop music memory" (Brooks, 2010: 52), the singer commercially benefiting from a repackaging of African American cultural production, a phenomenon that has occurred regularly throughout popular music history (Tate, 2003; Tanz, 2007). (4) Contextualising

Winehouse's legacy as part of a lineage of British singers profiteering through repurposing African American cultural production for commercial gain is important, as it allows a key omission within the exhibition to be exposed.

Beyond the Stage repeatedly displayed photographs and discussed the biographies of some of Winehouse's key influences. The artists depicted throughout the show included Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, Lauryn Hill, John Coltrane and Frank Sinatra. (5) When considering the artists cited as Winehouse's influences it is important to note that the majority were African American. Alongside the musicians mentioned we must also consider those whose contributions to Winehouse's musical legacy are downplayed in the exhibition, most notably the singer Sharon Jones.

Sharon Jones was an African American soul and funk vocalist who released several albums as the lead singer of the Dap-Kings (the ensemble employed by Winehouse and Mark Ronson to record *Back to Black*). The relationship between Winehouse and Jones was complicated. For lengthy periods Jones was "sidelined during her band's gigs with Winehouse, which put her in an awkward position" (Johnston, 2016: par. 5), and it has been suggested that by employing the Dap-Kings as her backing band, Winehouse may have (unwittingly or not) appropriated Jones' sound. By displacing Sharon Jones from the Dap-Kings, Winehouse was able to reap all the rewards that a collaboration with such a credible musical outfit would entail, but in doing so stole the spotlight, hindering Jones' success. In other words, she "hijacked Jones' retro-soul sound" (Brooks, 2010: 46).

Although *Beyond the Stage* did provide Sharon Jones with a few courtesy mentions, it failed to address any of the more problematic elements of Winehouse's behaviour that defined her relationship with Jones. In doing so *Beyond the Stage* provides a clear example of the whitewashing that can occur in contemporary museum practice. By failing to highlight the cultural appropriation on display, *Beyond the Stage* contributed to a cover up, allowing Winehouse's legacy to remain untarnished after directly benefitting from the cultural production of another, not only through mimicry, but directly through displacement. Winehouse's albums recorded with the Dap-Kings vastly outsold Jones', in a similar manner to "when Elvis Presley ran off with Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog"" (Brooks, 2010: 46).

The considerable downplaying of Sharon Jones' legacy in *Beyond the Stage* allows several key observations to be made. We see how problematic behaviour such as cultural appropriation can easily be erased from history. We see the true damage of perpetuating a singular dominant historic narrative and obscuring hidden histories in exhibitions (Leonard, 2007; Knifton, 2012). We see how, through subjectivity, history is shaped and controlled by individuals and institutions (Baker, Istvandity & Nowak, 2016). We see how nostalgia can act as a sanitising force, airbrushing problems from the past (Leonard & Knifton, 2014), and through the inclusion of one artist and exclusion of another, we see how certain demographics are excluded from the musical canon (Jackson, 2022). By failing to properly address the contribution of Sharon Jones, *Beyond the Stage* provides an example how suspect curatorial practice can lead to the re-writing of history.

The omission of Jones' story in *Beyond the Stage* may serve to undermine many of the themes of fairness that were so often discussed in the exhibition, often in relation to the treatment of celebrities by the press. As I have illustrated (for example in discussions about the 'In the Limelight' exhibit and label) the exhibition was often

explicit in its condemnation of how the media selects and treats stars. Considering the omission of Jones' contribution in the exhibition, this commentary may appear somewhat hypocritical. Just as the press treated Winehouse unfairly through its overly critical coverage, the exhibition was, in many ways, unfair to Jones by minimising her contribution and underplaying her importance to the Amy Winehouse story.

Conclusion

In a scholarly review of *Beyond the Stage*, Weston (2022: 154) describes the exhibition as "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." She also aligns *Beyond the Stage* with other forms of biographical representation about Winehouse which "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". Although Weston is correct in pointing out that the exhibition challenges the dominance of the old tragedy narrative presented about Amy at the time of her death, it is also worth considering how it omitted some of the problematic elements of Winehouse's behaviour that are worth remembering.

Throughout this article I have illustrated how certain curators programming star performer exhibitions about popular music can fall into pitfalls seen in other forms of biographical documentation. Through this analysis I have argued that *Beyond the Stage* was an exhibition that was often, as Fairchild (2021: 11) might put it, "more concerned with hagiography than critique and more accepting of dominant narratives than critical of them", one that illustrated the damage that can be caused to under-represented voices through the re-writing of history. Considering the Design Museums formal commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (Marlow, 2020) I suggest they look to the National Museum of African American History and Culture's *Musical Crossroads* (2016) exhibition in Washington D.C., the Museum of London's (2022) *Grime Stories: from the corner to the mainstream,* or the V&A's *DIVA* for positive examples of exhibitions telling the stories of some of music's more underrepresented voices.

Popular music exhibitions are still a relatively new phenomenon in British museums. Because of this, curators are undoubtedly still experiencing teething problems, working out the best ways to present the history of an intangible art form in the most captivating, honest and inclusive manner. It is my hope that this article encourages further discussion on how the legacy of musical icons might be preserved without sanitising the past through nostalgia or "well-worn linear narratives" (Leonard, 2007: 154). In doing so, we might be able to move towards a future in which popular music exhibitions are more representative and inclusive in the way they exhibit the narratives and legacies of their subjects.

Endnotes

1. The exhibit also displayed a copy of Jazz in London from March 2004 featuring Winehouse's name in the event listings from the Pizza Express Jazz Club.

2. As the exhibition is presented chronologically, the marked shift in tone suggests that the change in press coverage was also chronological, however this is never explicitly stated.

3. Thornton's four criteria are "sales figures, biographical interest, critical acclaim, or amount of media coverage" (Thornton, 1990: 87).

4. It is important to categorise Amy Winehouse as North London-Jewish. For more detail on the London Jewish Experience see David Baddiel's book Jews Don't Count (2021).

5. It is worth noting that Frank Sinatra, much like Winehouse, became hugely successful from the performance of African American music.

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