



Asif Kapadia on Amy: 'The drinking, the bulimia, the drugs - nobody stopped it'

The Senna director fought hard to tell Amy Winehouse's true story in his hugely hyped biopic and the result is a film that makes everyone feel complicit

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Sat 27 Jun 2015 08.59 BST

Talking to Asif Kapadia can feel like talking to an obsessive; someone so fascinated by one thing that they have not only consumed all they could about their subject, but sworn to preserve the truth about them, too. That subject is Amy Winehouse. That truth is the complicated conjunction of circumstance and agency that led the singer to die from alcohol intoxication at the age of 27.

"There's a point in the process where you can start correcting your interviewees because you know the story now. I know it," he says. "I know when someone's telling me something true and when they're making it up. I know when they're putting themselves in her life. Or, I'll start saying to people who say they met Amy: 'I don't think you really met Amy. The person you describe, that's not Amy, by that point she'd changed and I don't know what you're talking about.'"

A 43-year-old Londoner, Kapadia is the man behind *Amy*, a documentary that chronicles Winehouse's tragic decline from bright-eyed prodigy to doomed tabloid obsession. Assembled from 100 interviews and incorporating 20 months of editing in a process that took three years in total, the film presents what feels like a true version of events. It is also incredibly moving.

The film has already been the subject of controversy, particularly with Winehouse's father, Mitch, who told the film-makers they were "a disgrace" and believes the film is "trying to portray me in the worst possible light". He also claims that interviews he gave for the film were edited, specifically those regarding what is now perceived as a turning point in Amy's life - an attempt to send her to rehab in 2005 to deal with her drinking. The attempt failed and became the material for Amy's biggest song. The film claims, like the song, that Amy didn't go to rehab only on the say-so of her father. Mitch says he only thought Amy shouldn't go to rehab "at that time". He claims that those three words were edited from his interview.

"He says that quite a lot, I think," sighs Kapadia, who doesn't use Mitch's name once during our interview. "I interviewed him twice. The first time he didn't say 'at the time'. But the story is in the present. The lyrics of her song don't say 'at the time': 'Daddy says I'm fine, at the time,' it doesn't say that. When Amy writes something down [in song] it's based on a real experience. That whole incident happened exactly the way [it's described in the song]. Everyone involved admits that's exactly how it happened."

Kapadia came to fame as the director of *Senna*, another study of a talented but tragic figure, the racing driver Ayrton Senna. The film used an innovative style Kapadia sometimes likes to call “true fiction”. Constructed almost entirely from archive footage, the story was told without any guiding voiceover, a weirdly unheard-of break with convention in the documentary format. *Senna* was also edited to feel like a drama, every moment put in service to the story. As it unfolded, the film grew from a chronicle of a sporting life into a study in ambition, bravery and – again – obsession. It went on to become a touchstone for other film-makers and a driver of the boom in cinematic documentary. For a while, conversations across the country began: ‘I’m not into motor racing but...’



Asif Kapadia. Photograph: David Levene

The success of *Senna* led directly into *Amy*, thanks in part to Nick Shymansky, who had been having just that conversation with his girlfriend. It was the summer of 2011, it was raining, so the couple had ducked into a west London cinema. They loved the film they saw, despite not loving motor racing, and the format also inspired an idea in Shymansky. He had been Amy Winehouse’s first manager and was very much of the mind that someone should tell her story. Then, a few weeks later, Amy died.

By 2012, Kapadia had been approached by Universal, Winehouse’s label, and invited to make a “warts and all” documentary, with full access to her back catalogue. Getting people to open up about her life, however, was to prove a different challenge. “There was no go-to person who knew Amy’s story, that’s what I found very early on,” he says. “There’s no definitive book. She just seemed to have a lot of people in different compartments. That’s what I started to find with the people I spoke to. And no one liked each other, they were all arguing, there was a lot of tension around her, always.” The first door that opened was with Nick. “When I called him, he said it was too soon, to leave her alone, let her rest in peace. But he told me the story [about *Senna*]. He said: ‘I’ll meet you, but I’m not interested.’”

The pair eventually met in a Soho editing suite. On the wall, Kapadia and his editor Chris King had assembled a collage that resembled something from *CSI* or *Homeland*; a massive, interlocking mural telling the story of Amy’s life as they knew it. It struck Nick as being more effort than anyone had previously made in understanding what had happened to her. And so he began to talk.



Back in white: a young Winehouse plays at home.

“I had no idea what this film was...” says Kapadia. “I had no thesis, I had no plan. I had the idea of doing a documentary but it’s all controlled, because I know what the beginning and the middle and the end is but if it changes I’m going to go with it and find a way to rewrite it. This was my research. But Nick just started to talk and talk. He spoke for five hours without thinking about it. He then said that wasn’t the half of it and we talked again. I probably recorded 15 hours but we would speak non-stop off the record and on email. No one had ever heard of this guy, but he had this huge story. Then he opened his laptop and said, ‘I’ve got these videos that I shot,’ and there’s all of the opening of the film.”

The first section of Amy shows her as a teenager. Someone at once both precocious and diffident, she is eager to please but also to subvert. Shymansky's footage was shot on a Mini DV camera and usually involves him cajoling Amy into playing up. She doesn't want to perform, she hides her face behind a pillow, she's trying to sleep. But when she's eventually persuaded to play, she looks down the camera and you feel the charisma burn its way right through you.

As Amy's story develops, so the audience watching her grows larger. From Shymansky talking one-to-one to the global audience that pored over YouTube footage of Amy's final, chaotic concert in Belgrade, Serbia. Amy, says Kapadia, was born at the wrong time, caught on the cusp of an analogue and a digital world where notions of privacy were changing rapidly. "So there's Nick talking to her and she's looking straight into the camera. She's talking to us, obviously, we become Nick. Then it goes on to TV cameras and we're the audience. Then it gets darker and darker and it's the paparazzi footage, and then there's a point in St Lucia [in 2011] where she literally points at the camera and we're caught out, we look away. I thought that was the most interesting thing, how the audience changed from Nick saying, 'Go on give us a little flash it's only us' in the car to the paps going, 'Come on, cheer up...'"

The idea of Amy as the object of our attention is central to the film. It's difficult to watch without feeling in some way guilty, responsible in however small a way, for helping to push a vulnerable person into a spiral that ultimately claimed her life. Kapadia says many Londoners drifted in and out of Amy's world, drinking in the boozy culture of Camden Town, assuming a vicarious glamour, then going home (this includes Kapadia himself: "I keep on expecting to pop up in the background", he says).

Then there's the journalists, like me, who spent the years of 2007-9 writing up every drunken fight she got involved in, every bizarre late-night trip to the newsagents. After watching Amy, the first thing I did was to Google my name and hers looking to see if I'd indulged in the mockery that is caught in the film; Graham Norton explaining to Jackie Chan in 2008, "Amy Winehouse, now she's a mad person." I found that I had not, that I was mocking the mockery. "A number of journalists have said that," Kapadia smiles. "They say: 'It's fine, I was just commenting on everyone else.' No one's sure, and not just journalists. It's interesting, isn't it, because everyone did it. Everyone's seen [the concert in] Serbia. How did we see Serbia? We looked it up, we shared it."



The calm before the storm... a young Amy Winehouse.

Amy is a film that makes you feel culpable, but it also stirs up waves of sympathy, of a desire to protect her and, also, an anger at those in her life who - you feel - could have done so much more to save her. This extends to pretty much everyone with whom she had a professional relationship (oh yes, and Blake Fielder-Civil). "It brought out the worst of a lot of people in her life," says Kapadia. "If one looks carefully, there are lots of people who make lots of decisions or who were aware of one thing - whether it was the drinking, the bulimia, or the drugs - and nobody stopped it. That's what the film is really about. It's pretty heavy. You can't quite imagine what it's like when they're in the film. To go through it all again, it's really tough. There's certain people who just can't watch the second half.

"But the second half is where most of the audience come on board," he continues. "It's not just about her any more, it's about us. It's about the city, it's about the media, it's about everything, people who have taken this in, enjoying, laughing at her. There's a line I get a lot now when a certain person keeps saying stuff about me: 'Well, it's all right, isn't it? All publicity is good publicity.' Well, I'm not sure it is..."

Amy is in cinemas from 3 July



Amy at 20. Photograph: Murdo Macleod

This article was amended on 27 June and 29 June 2015. An earlier version said Amy Winehouse's final concert was in Sarajevo, Serbia; the location was Belgrade, Serbia. The article was also amended to correct a reference to Nick Shymansky's "new wife"; the marriage took place after Amy Winehouse died.

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