

[front page](#)

[news](#)

[back issues](#)

[comment](#)

[letters](#)

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[about us](#)

[contact us](#)

[back page](#)

## Just as you are

**Gail Brown remembers Amy Winehouse and wonders whether we should take a new approach to the lives of performers.**

On Saturday 23 July Amy Winehouse was found dead at her London home. Part of the world laments the loss of an incredible recording artist, singer songwriter and narrator of this generation; others say that if you get involved with drugs death and despair will follow. No matter what you believe, Amy's death is a great loss to those that know and love her and her music, quirky style and beehive extraordinaire. She will be truly missed. It seems unfair in a way as she had just recorded new work, including a duet with Tony Bennett on his new album due for release in September.

Bennett said in a statement to the online music site Spinner, "Amy Winehouse was an artist of immense proportions and I am deeply saddened to learn of her tragic passing. She was an extraordinary musician with a rare intuition as a vocalist and I am truly devastated that her exceptional talent has come to such an early end.

"She was a lovely and intelligent person and when we recorded together she gave a soulful and extraordinary performance. I was honoured to have the opportunity to sing with her. It had been my sincere hope that she would be able to overcome the issues she was battling and I send my deepest sympathy to her father Mitchell, her entire family and all of those who loved her."

Another death in the performers' world is a timely reminder that more support is sometimes needed to live in full view of the public on a day-to-day basis. Over the years the world of art and culture has bid farewell to many people, some of them having lived a full and prosperous life, others checking out earlier than any of us could have anticipated; many of them through tragic accidents or suspicious circumstances. Stars such as James Dean, Marilyn Munroe, Kurt Cobain, Heath Ledger, choreographers Jeremy James and Rashpal Singh Bansal, who took his own life, allegedly after finding out that a funding bid had been unsuccessful.

Then there have been the very public celebrity/star signs that need the attention of the medical profession as opposed to the press. Who can forget the Britney Spears meltdown of 2007, resulting in her attacking paparazzi and shaving her hair off? In 1996 Margot Kidder – Superman's love interest Lois Lane – suffered a manic-depressive episode while in LA and spent several days living on the streets, sharing a cardboard box with a homeless man named Charlie. By the time police found her hiding in a stranger's garden, she was dirty, dazed, missing her front dental bridge and had hacked off her hair to escape detection from CIA agents and one of her ex-husbands. This was part of her ongoing paranoia. Whitney Houston started to slide in 1997; performances became confused, she forgot lyrics and eventually confessed her drug addiction live on TV. Robert Downey Jr spent more time in front of the magistrate than was healthy, yet with support and self-discipline has turned his life and career around, personified by his success as two great heroes, Iron Man and Sherlock Holmes. So what's different about him? What is different about other people in the limelight that make it work? For example Beyonce, Johnny Depp (another large turn-around lifestyle) and Ewan Macgregor are never caught flashing anything other than a smile at the appropriate opportunity. Can it be as simple as a grounded upbringing, shared foundations with a life partner, staying indoors, recognising that to be safe at home you have to create an alter ego, in Beyonce's case, Sasha Fierce?

The list of celebrity/star meltdowns and deaths goes on, as do the questions. What is the difference in people that will lead them to make life or take life? Beyond your agent, producers and product drivers does anybody really know

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what is happening in the minds of performers? Should people know? And actually isn't the question really why is mental illness or topics related to mental wellbeing still such a taboo subject? Mental illness affects an incredible number of people. One possible cause is hidden feelings and who of us can say that we are able to articulate all of our emotions in a relatively healthy way? Not many. Given the lengthening list of people in the public eye that are taking their last breath, losing their sense of self or getting ill in one way or another, wouldn't it make more sense to pay attention to our mental health as opposed to the latest bag, shoes, cellulite-reduction cream, zero-calorie diet or celebrity wedding? Is Cheryl Cole rekindling an affair with a philandering ex-husband good reading? Is it good for the mind? Not at all. Will you influence your personal choices? Does it make you healthy?

Amy Winehouse loved to make music, her lyrics resonated with countless numbers of people and in the wake of her death perhaps we can all try a little bit harder to be honest with ourselves, to see strength in asking for help and to understand that in a world that expects so much of us we should perhaps expect the most from ourselves and not pay too much attention to what others think. That way in this time of changing journalism and reporting, hackers and illegal trackers might find solace in truth that changes the world, not disrupts it or costs privacy and lives. The last thing any family wants is to have to go back to black because they are mourning. If anything. Amy reminds us that today is a day to celebrate who we are and embrace what we are. Find yourself a mirror and, in the words of Colin Firth in *Bridget Jones*, say to your reflection, "I like you, just as you are." If nothing else it'll make you smile and wear anything but black.

**Gail Brown is chair of advocacy and research for the National Association of Local Government Arts Officers**

**For previous columns by Gail Brown visit the comment page**

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