

A Mad Musical Tragedy (The Toxic Effects of Fame, Substances and Disability in Popular Music)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

“I detest audiences. Not in their individual components, but en masse I detest audiences. I think they’re a force of evil.”

~Glenn Gould

In 21st century contemporary cinema, the subject of musical talent and genius is intertwined with an all-powerful music industry that often leads into an eventual (and seemingly inevitable) downfall of the famed musical performer in question. This film essay will examine the difficulties of being on the big stage and how mental health/addiction conditions and/or disabilities coupled with the desire to escape these pressures can have tragic and disastrous effects further along in an otherwise successful music career.

In Amy (1), singer-songwriter Amy Winehouse whose characteristic jazzy sounding vocals made her popular to the point of winning a 2006 Grammy for album of the year, was later at the mercy of paparazzi, press and music producers, who pushed her to the brink and sent her onto an intimidating stage world very different from the small gig jazz-type scene that she grew up loving at a younger age.

In Control (2), singer Ian Curtis, who grew up in the small town of Macclesfield, England idolizing David Bowie, the Sex Pistols and Iggy Pop, was instrumental in the rise of popular punk-rock band Joy Division, who were spotted at a regional “Battle of the Bands” in the 1970s before ending up on a bigger stage through a television spot. Curtis later finds himself having to juggle the tempting world of record deal stardom with the life of a married man working a 9 to 5 type shift in his hometown.

In Genius Within: the Inner Life of Glenn Gould (3), pianist Glenn Gould who grew up in Toronto and went to the Toronto Conservatory of Music at a younger age than most of his peers, experienced a meteoric rise and soon became a musical prodigy when he was signed in his early twenties by Columbia Records following a performance in New York City. However, Gould quickly grew weary of ‘concertizing’ while in his thirties and preferred the world of broadcasting with his rising fame and obvious musical talent.

While the big stage is already full of incredible pressures for any successful musician, mental health and addiction-related problems play the role of exacerbating inevitable stress and stage fright, often leading to potential performance meltdowns.

In Amy, wild parties with ‘hard drugs’ such as crack cocaine and heroin combined with alcohol, lead Winehouse (who also suffered from an eating disorder) into a rehab facility and later into a stage collapse while on a comeback tour. Alcohol later becomes an even bigger factor than the illicit drugs taken earlier on, when larger amounts of the substance are binged leading to heart complications.

In Control, Joy Division singer Curtis, who is seen helping the disabled as an employment office worker, later is diagnosed with epilepsy which compromises his two very different (and even opposing) careers. While he is prescribed a cocktail of pills to counter the intense seizures (which were called ‘fits’ at the time), he is advised by a

doctor to get 'plenty of early nights' and to 'steer away from alcohol'. However, Curtis chooses to continue performing on a bigger and bigger stage and ignores the health risks and consequences to his love life. In his early twenties, while struggling with side-effects from medication, drinking profusely and having trouble handling the pressures of touring internationally with his condition, Curtis descends into a downward spiral of depression following a divorce brought upon him being caught having an affair.

In Genius Within: the Inner Life of Glenn Gould, famed pianist Glenn Gould was said to be someone who never missed a note and was perfect while being quite quirky and eccentric at times both on and off the stage. He was also known to 'control the situation' without 'controlling people'. A partner of his later noticed Gould's paranoia set in and affect his well-being, leading to him being prescribed anti-depressants and anti-anxiety pills. A biographer of Gould's talked about his hypochondria and fear of going to hospitals which were places that were full of germs to the artist. A year before his death in 1981, Gould recorded the "Goldberg Variations" a second time and appeared to be 'a different man playing' the same pieces that made him famous earlier in his musical career.

In Amy, the artist talks about taking anti-depressants as a high schooler and finding an outlet with a guitar to feel better. However, her desire to disappear from the spotlight led her into a dangerous world of intoxication with beach getaways and stints in rehab facilities not able to buffer her bigger addiction woes.

In Control, Ian Curtis, who as a teenager took stolen prescription drugs as a temporary escape from his small town life, later chooses to quit his day job and exclusively pursue a precarious music career with risks of suffering humiliating high-stress seizures during regional and international tour stops. While Curtis is married with a young baby girl, he starts feeling apathetic and flees his obligations as a marital spouse and father to lead a dual life involving his partners in a love triangle. With mounting pressures from his musical career, his diagnosed disability, and substances (such as alcohol) cause increasing anguish and loss of "control", Curtis succumbs to severe depression as his marriage disintegrates.

In Genius Within: the Inner Life of Glenn Gould, the Canadian music icon Gould is said to "only [be] ever at home when he was playing music", enjoyed going to his parents' cottage in Lake Simcoe to escape urban living and prepare for upcoming piano performances. As his fame grew, he was said to prefer a private life, heading straight home rather than attending the trendy parties that he was invited to as a famed guest. Conductor Leonard Bernstein said he was notorious for "cancell[ing] concerts whenever he could" and "cancell[ing] whole tours, because he couldn't face it." A childhood friend said that when he played, "I think he forgot where he was. He was in a trance." When Gould stopped performing in concerts and worked prolifically in the world of broadcasting, he travelled to the Arctic in sub-zero temperatures to meet with isolated communities which he seemed to identify better with. Later on in life, the "genius nut" and recluse described himself as a "nocturnal" being who disliked "the light of day".

In Amy, Control and Genius Within: the Inner Life of Glenn Gould, prescribed and un-prescribed substances seem to add complications to the already demanding and exhausting lifestyles of three drastically different types of star musicians. While a mean music industrial machine seems at first to be causing much of the highs and lows of fame and temptation, each musician's unique health conditions (and disabilities) play an

additional role in the musical tragedy, forcing these artists into a world of terrifying intoxication, seizures and suicidal depression with musical escape as the last outlet of hope and salvation.

Sources:

1. Amy (2015), Dir. Asif Kapadia. Altitude Film Distribution. UK. 128 min.
2. Control (2007), Dir. Anton Corbijn. Momentum Pictures. UK. 122 min.
3. Genius Within: the Inner Life of Glenn Gould (2009), Dir. Michèle Hozer and Peter Raymont. White Pine Pictures. Canada. 106 min.