

## **BACK TO BACK TO BLACK:** A music campaign for social awareness



During my first year as a Crossmedia Design student, I had the task to design a music campaign. For this purpose, I chose one of my all time favorite albums: Back To Black by Amy Winehouse. It's cover was already good, I was not seeking to improve it or impose my own aesthetic criteria to it. Instead, I wanted to imagine the album's artwork being updated in a new context; a hypothetical re-release after the artist's tragic passing.

What does revisiting Back To Black represent after Amy is gone? From my point of view, it should mean a call for empathy and compassion. Her lyrics spoke about depression and loneliness in a straightforward manner. She was brutally honest about her struggles through her songs, the same songs that she performed for millions of people and became massive hits.

With this in mind, I decided to take an original Back To Black cover as a starting point. It was the typographic version of the Deluxe Edition released in 2007, which was also the first copy of the album that I owned. I took this image and worked with the paper lithography technique in my school's Graphic Workshop. This allowed me to reproduce a laser print several times, just adding more ink and rolling the press again while the original image got more worn out and distressed each time. With each new print, I embraced the visual documentation of its self-destruction; providing the raw and imperfect look that I was looking for.

It served its purpose for the assignment, I was very happy with it and so where my teachers. I got great feedback. Still, I felt the need to develop this project further so I chose to keep working on it for another class; this time thinking of it as a potential real project that could be presented to the Amy Winehouse foundation. After all, there's a high chance that the album will be re-released at some point, probably for the album's 20th anniversary on 2026. If this is the case, I would love being the person in charge of its visual campaign, because it could serve as an opportunity to raise awareness. Hopefully, Back To Back To Black could symbolize a powerful reminder of the calls for help that should be heard with attention before it's too late. The proceeds of the albums could be donated entirely to the Amy Winehouse Foundation who currently helps young people struggling with addiction and mental health issues, making it a social project instead of a commercial one; while keeping Amy's musical legacy alive.

This sounds great all in my head. After I presented the concept in class, I got asked "but is it a social campaign or a music campaign then?" this simple question made me think a lot. For me, it was obvious that it could be both, it should be both! But maybe this was just me, being a longtime fan of the artist, combined with my idealistic tendencies and frequent interest for activism. This is the point where I knew I have to choose between constraining the original idea or simply pursue it. I chose the latter; and for this, I had to convince myself first.

After some reflection and research, I arrived to a statement that I chose to stand by, answering to the question about the purpose of the project: Graphic Design should always be Social Design. It is a strong statement but I'm especially convinced of this transcendental role after looking at some definitions of Graphic Designer.

A standard definition is "a person who combines text and pictures in advertisements, magazines, or books." In my opinion this falls short so I'm relieved to find other alternatives. That's how I got to this text from AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts):

"If design was merely about organizing text and pictures on a page, machines would have already replaced graphic designers. Beyond simply communicating, graphic designers strive to stimulate intellectual and emotional responses. The role of graphic design is not only to communicate and explain, but to be the catalyst that propels a viewer to a new way of seeing, experiencing, or thinking about the world." <sup>1</sup>

I couldn't agree more with it and I immediately recognized this is what I wanted to achieve with this project, a new way of experiencing an album in an empathic and emotional way.

Now that I had this reassurance, I returned to analyze this particular case and how it could make sense to other people who might not be so familiar with the artist. I wondered... what do people know about Amy Winehouse?

**We knew her for her image.** It was very distinctive after all. Despite her jazzy voice, she had the irreverent look of a rockstar with both of her arms filled with tattoos, a Monroe piercing, flashy eyeliner with an edgy cat eye style and of course, the distinctive beehive which she adopted as a direct influence from 60's girl groups like The Ronettes which also inspired the retro sound of Back To Black.

<sup>2</sup> [Read about Barnbrook's book cover here](#)

<sup>3</sup> Taken from [I Told You I Was Trouble](#)

<sup>4</sup> Taken from [Amy](#)

So far, all of her album covers are either typographical or feature a portrait of the her. It seems like an obvious choice. Even after her death, the poster of her documentary and the book covers about her life also featured simply her face in a very delicate manner, usually black and white along with pink or red details. There's barely a creative process in the graphic representation of the content of this movie or the books. For the book, Barnbrook Studio designed a custom typeface based on her eyeliner. <sup>2</sup>

She's reduced to her physical image which is the easy way out to represent her as a character. This focus is perhaps even a bit contradictory for films or books that claim to present "the raw side of the artist that people didn't know of" since Amy herself had a lot of trouble with self-confidence regarding her personal image. Not only did she struggle with anorexia, but it turns out that even the peculiar beehive was symbolic of low self-esteem as she claimed "The more insecure I felt, the more I drank and the bigger my hair had to be." <sup>3</sup>

**We knew her for her struggles.** The life of this artist became a recurrent theme in the tabloids. Her name was printed mentioned often, related to wild night outs of partying and drug abuse... Earlier in her career, she stated that she didn't want to become famous, she didn't even believe she could: "I don't think I'm gonna be at all famous. I don't think I could handle it. I'd probably go mad." <sup>4</sup>

Famous people seem to be envied by "mortals". There are tv shows about their spending habits and their luxurious houses, we want to know how they live, how they dress, who they're dating, who wore it best, how they named their kids... Being famous means belonging to an elite, it is about more than money, it is about recognition and power. But of course there's always the downhill... where fame can act as a barrier to block empathy from the rest of humans who act as spectators. Could envy be the core reason for this? After all, why would someone feel sorry for a person who seems to have it all? Of course, paparazzis need to earn their living and will continue to do this as long as there's the demand for it so this brings us to a chicken and egg situation... Do we consume the yellow press because it's out there? Or is the yellow press out there because we consume it?

But it is wrong to place famous people in a different spectrum as us. Especially when we think about musicians who sing about their personal experiences. We listen to their songs because we can relate to them, even if we're not famous. In the case of Amy Winehouse, I'll wonder if her songs were hits because lots of people related to it or simply because of it's refreshing and catchy melodies? If we can experience a similar pain with a breakup to the person on stage why would we think of them as different to us or less vulnerable to suffering?



**We knew her for her music.** Back To Black was a huge success, the album received great reviews, it topped the charts, first in UK and soon all over the world. It won numerous prizes from the Brits to the Grammys.

<sup>5</sup>[Wake Up Alone full lyrics](#)

<sup>6</sup>[Back To Black full lyrics](#)

The single Rehab was certified platinum for sales of over 1 million copies. It is a song about drinking and about refusing to go to rehab. But it is also a song about loneliness. “They tried to make me go to rehab I said no, no, no” was part of the chorus which explains why it is maybe more memorable than the verse “I don’t never want to drink again. I just... oh just need a friend”.

This is not the only song in which she expresses in a raw way a feeling of loneliness and depression, here are some other examples of songs from the album Back To Black:

#### **Wake Up Alone <sup>5</sup>**

*I stay up clean the house*

*At least I'm not drinking*

*Run around just so I don't have to think about thinking*

...

*This ache in my chest*

*As my day is done now*

*The dark covers me and I cannot run now*

#### **Back To Black <sup>6</sup>**

...

*And life is like a pipe*

*And I'm a tiny penny*

*Rolling up the walls inside*



After having mentioned that we knew her for her struggles, what side of were most people actually seeing? On the surface she's a troublemaker, chaotic, a junkie... but not sad or lonely or ill or in need of help

<sup>7</sup> [Read about Blackstar here](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Paint a Vulgar Picture full lyrics](#)

One of the moments where this was experienced more harshly was during her final performance in Belgrade. She could barely stand still, not to mention remembering her own lyrics. She was a person having an emotional and mental breakdown right there on stage and was forced to continue until she couldn't take it more because lots of people spent money on their tickets. Some of the heart-breaking images of this concert we can see her crying and hugging herself. I found this because I was digging deeper into the topic during my research but this is rarely an image that appears often compared to the images of her most chaotic moments.

Who is to blame for this handling? Is this the industry's fault? The family's fault? The audience's fault? Everyone's fault

Sadly, Amy is not the first nor will be the last artist to be exploited as a money-making machine. We can think of countless examples where success has been prioritized over a talented artist's health and well-being, from Michael Jackson to Britney Spears. Even worse, the exploration doesn't stop even after an artist is dead. Unless you're David Bowie and you brilliantly turn your own death into your own final masterpiece to the posthumous enjoyment and reflection of your fans<sup>7</sup>, there seems to be no escape from this. Given the fact that there will be no new material from the artist that died, record labels will always find a way to release every tiny bit of an artists existing work. This phenomenon is described in the song Paint a Vulgar Picture<sup>8</sup> by The Smiths:

*At the record company meeting  
On their hands - a dead star  
And oh, the plans they weave  
And oh, the sickening greed*

*At the record company party  
On their hands - a dead star  
The sycophantic slags all say :  
"I knew him first, and I knew him well"*

*Re-issue! Re-package! Re-package!  
Re-evaluate the songs  
Double-pack with a photograph  
Extra track (and a tacky badge)*

*A-list, playlist  
"Please them, please them!"  
"Please them!"  
(sadly, this was your life)*



Of course, it already happened to Amy Winehouse as well. The same week that she died, Back To Black was topping the charts again. This is not the industries fault this is just the expected way of acting by all the people who were shocked by the news, including myself. But perhaps, this success sparked the opportunistic intentions of releasing the posthumous album “Lioness: Hidden Treasures”, only 5 months after the artist passed away, in December as a potential Christmas gift for Amy Winehouse fans. Some of the songs included were the original down-tempo demos of some of the previously commented songs “Wake Up Alone” and “Tears Dry On Their Own”, which were produced with an upbeat tone to make it to the original album.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> [Read more here](#)

This makes me think again of a possibility of the reissue. If I want a re-release to happen am I contributing to this cycle of exploitation? Not if it's done correctly with the good intentions that the concept was initially conceived. After all, reflecting the artist's struggles visually seems to be closer to the essence of the album itself if we really think about its content. Reflecting on this topic extensively has persuaded me to pursue this project further and have the confidence to present it. Even if it sounds idealistic, I'd rather be naïve than an indifferent.

And while we're at it, thinking in more general terms and going back to the original statement of “Graphic design should always be social design” this is something that could also apply to other professions. We always have the option and the responsibility to not be indifferent. This applies to a crowd in a concert that is witnessing a person collapsing on stage, or the copywriter who's in charge of writing a headline about a person who's struggling. In this sense, maybe the world would be a better place if journalism was always social journalism, if music producers and managers were team players, and well... if humans were simply as humane as possible?

