Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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You Know That I’m No Good — Amy Winehouse & the Trouble Barrier

Or, The Semipermeable :Trouble: Membrane

How long is the lifespan of someone who grows up in public? Winehouse died at 27, a luckless seven years after her debut album, Frank, turned eyes and ears on Amy. As a child actor, she was not unaccustomed to attention. Frank reintroduced an enormously talented, anachronistic vocalist who belted and cinched her own material, and assured all mics that she had more to give. She backed it up with 2006’s Back to Black, as she reached beyond Frank’s jazzy frame, embracing r&b, soul, ska, and ’60s girl-group pop. Damn. And damned by her own hand—she wove and wavered stories of dissolution and ache, popping her eyes under flared eyeshadow that obviated an eye-tooth wink.

On July 23, 2011, sighs were mixed with flip are you surprised comments in the culture web, as her media carcass was sewn up for the day. Details would be forthcoming, but the judgment had been cast years ago: another cracked doll for fame to toss onto the pyre.

But a funny thing happened to anyone who put the music on again. It sounded 50 years old and right now, not always in the same song. A few days later, it sounded back from the pyre, side two to Phases and Stages\(^8\) side one: at turns degraded and destroyed, and back in the game. Climbing out of the whole mess. The strength of her voice became re-apparent. She sounded alive. Proud, in pain, alive. Broken, alive. Once again, her voice the best rebuttal to the worst footage of her we could find. The

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7 To listen to her B-side cover of Phil Spector’s “‘To Know Him Is to Love Him” is to know, know, know and lose time and place; to hear “Rehab” is to nod no, no, no in 2006. To know and not know, to no — this is trouble, with Amy Winehouse.

8 Willie Nelson’s 1974 broke-up-and-get-it-together concept album breaks it down side-to-side.
candor of her music made us fresh — who were we to think she wanted us to know her?

Here, we have her at her best, so overfull and leaning in we know there’s more. Now, Back to Black is another old soul record — we can’t believe it ever ends.

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9 The B-side “Valerie” is the crook-fingered siren calling us to the vault; we barely register the rattlesnake warning at the end of the track.