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Amy Winehouse & The '27 Club'

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By Kelly Boggs

ALEXANDRIA, La. - The "27 Club" is not an en vogue New York City venue where the rich and famous gather to party. Rather, it is a designation given to a collection of music artists, primarily those of the rock 'n' roll genre, who have all died at the age of 27.

The most recent inductee into the inauspicious club took place on July 23 when British singing sensation Amy Winehouse was found dead in her London apartment. While the cause of death for the multiple Grammy Award winner is yet unknown, her untimely demise came as no surprise to family, friends or fans.

Winehouse's lifestyle had for some time been out of control. Dominated by alcohol, drugs and eating disorders, she had been in and out of rehab numerous times. So destructive was Winehouse's lifestyle that a website appeared in 2007 asking people to predict when she would die.

No doubt Winehouse's untimely death is tragic, especially to her family. However, it is intriguing to note that she died, as have so many other rock performers, at the young age of 27.

In fact, so prominent is the number of singers and musicians that have died at the age of 27 that a book was published in 2009 exploring the subject. Written by Eric Segalstad and

illustrated by Josh Hunter, "The 27's: The Greatest Myth of Rock & Roll" examines the lives and deaths of 34 musicians who each died at the age of 27.

The word "myth" in the title of "The 27's" is a bit misleading. Rather than referring to something that is fictitious, "myth" is to be understood as a story that explains a social phenomenon.

Among the more prominent members of the "27 Club" are: Brian Jones, founding member of the Rolling Stones; Jimi Hendrix, pioneering guitarist; soulful singer Janis Joplin; Jim Morrison, lead singer of The Doors; and Kurt Cobain, lead singer of Nirvana.

One thread that is common to the vast majority of celebrities who have died at an early age is they pursued with wild abandon what some call "the rock 'n' roll lifestyle." Simply put, they practiced unbridled hedonism. They did what they wanted, when they wanted and without any regard to negative consequences.

Are there lessons to be gleaned by examining the lives of the members of the "27 Club?" I think so. One is that fame and fortune are poor substitutes for meaning and purpose. It seems, in the end, that celebrity and wealth are empty pursuits.

Amy Winehouse, like other "27 Club" members, had it all. She was famous, wealthy and her talent was celebrated. Yet, it is clear that "having it all" did not quench a yearning in her soul. Something was missing.

I am convinced that a life that is void of meaning seeks to find purpose and fulfillment in experiences. And for too many members of the "27 Club" the experiences they pursued were self-destructive.

Another lesson is that the so-called "rock 'n' roll lifestyle" is simply unsustainable. A human body can only take so much abuse and then it breaks down -- physically, mentally and emotionally. A person running on a hedonistic treadmill succumbs, sooner rather than later, to drugs, disease or despair.

Many rockers who have escaped untimely deaths did so by leaving the rock 'n' roll lifestyle behind. While many still perform, their off stage hedonism has become nothing more than a memory.

"The No-No Song" sung by Ringo Starr sums up well the sentiment of celebrities who have changed their self-destructive ways. In the song the former Beatle turns down the

offer of drugs and alcohol by singing, "No, no, no, no, I can't take it no more. I'm tired of waking up on the floor. No thank you, please, it only makes me sneeze, and then it makes it hard to find the door."

Young people would be wise to look past the fame and fortune heaped on members of the "27 Club" to the reality they experienced. Rather than lives of meaning, significance and serene success, their private pursuits reveal souls that were writhing with unrest.

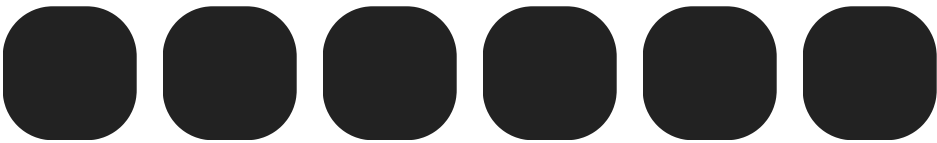
While members of the "27 Club" may have gained the whole world, they seemingly lost their souls. In the end their lives were, as Jesus indicated in the Gospels, personally unprofitable. And that is beyond sad; it is tragic.

Kelly Boggs is a weekly columnist for Baptist Press and editor of the Baptist Message of the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

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