5 Hard Truths on Human Nature From the Britney Spears Documentary



February 12, 2021 10 min read

On the face of it, there’s not a whole lot about Britney Spears’ story that your average Joe can relate to. She’s a superstar whose public meltdowns — triggered by abusive treatment by paparazzi and unkind media scrutiny — landed her in the “crazy” bucket and got her placed under an extremely unusual conservatorship. (These court-ordered guardian arrangements are typically reserved for elderly people who can no longer care for themselves.) Her dad Jamie Spears, whom she hadn’t been close with in years when he became her conservator in 2008, has been in charge of her $60 million fortune ever since.

In other ways, Spears, with all her messiness and imperfections, had proved deeply relatable to fans for decades. That's partly why a #FreeBritney movement has snowballed in recent years, with fans looking to Britney's often cryptic Instagram account for clues on whether she is trapped in the conservatorship against her will. Now, *New York Times Presents* documentary *Framing Britney Spears* takes a hard look at all of this: the #FreeBritney movement, the shrouded-in-secrecy conservatorship and how Spears was treated by the media before and after her meltdowns. In the film, it becomes evident how many different ways Spears was betrayed. And although we might not all have millions of dollars and paparazzi snapping at our heels, there are lessons to be learned about finding people in life we can trust, and how to push past the surface-level judgments of others to be the version of yourself *you* want to be.

1. You can't please everyone

This was made abundantly clear to Spears from the beginning of her career. Even as she skyrocketed to fame, sold out world tours, and entranced millions of fans, she was harshly criticized for her image and appearance. Her "Baby One More Time" schoolgirl persona enraged critics who accused her of sexualizing little girls — who also happened to be her most devoted fans. But Spears was just 17 at the time herself. It's hard to imagine that a teenager who had just signed to a powerful record label was a) making all the decisions behind the looks she wore or b) should be held accountable for how her outfits made little girls want to dress. And it certainly didn't warrant Diane Sawyer informing Spears in a 2003 interview that the wife of the governor of Maryland, Kendel Erlich, had said, "Really if I had an opportunity to shoot Britney Spears, I think I would." What's even worse is that Sawyer then seems to justify Erlich's comment, saying, "Because of the example for kids, and how hard it is to be a parent."

Spears, 21 at the time, looked genuinely aghast. But she retained her composure, saying, “Oh, that’s horrible. That’s really bad… that’s really sad that she said that. I’m not here to babysit her kids.” Sawyer continued to press, showing Spears pictures of herself in different revealing outfits, asking “What happened to your clothes?” Spears defended herself, saying, “It’s about doing a beautiful picture. I feel comfortable in my skin. I think it’s an OK thing to express yourself.”

2. If you don’t take control of your narrative, other people will

In that same interview (which was pretty awful by feminist standards beginning to end) Sawyer also questioned Spears on the specifics of her breakup with Justin Timberlake, including his unfounded allegations that she had cheated on him. Sawyer even asked whether Spears was still a virgin. Spears wouldn’t give any details about their relationship, though she later said she’d really believed they would get married. Timberlake and Spears were the first true celebrity couple at the height of the tabloids’ power. They’d met as kids on the *Mickey Mouse Club* and stayed friends until they started dating in their early twenties. They often professed their love for each other publically, and wore matching outfits to red carpets. The country was obsessed. When they broke up, Timberlake implied that she had cheated on him in his music video “Cry Me a River,” and told Howard Stern they’d had sex. The paparazzi attention and media castigation of Spears after this was brutal and undeniably contributed to her downward mental health spiral soon after.

In the documentary, *New York Times* culture critic Wesley Morris commented on how the media automatically took Timberlake’s side in all of this, saying, “What can you say about misogyny? There’s a whole infrastructure to support it,

and when it’s time for people to come, in a misogynistic culture, for a woman, there’s a whole apparatus ready to do it.”

3. If you’re a woman — especially a mother — expect judgment to be relentless

Things really started to go south after Spears married her backup dancer Kevin Federline and had two kids with him. As a new mom, her every move was photographed by paparazzi. They would crowd her and her sons the minute she stepped out the door, following her everywhere. Once, trying to escape a situation that alarmed her, she drove away with her oldest son on her lap, and the condemnation was swift. In a 2006 interview, Matt Lauer told Spears that people were saying she was a bad mother. She responded, “That’s America for you.” But later in the interview she broke down crying, saying she didn’t know what it would take to get the paparazzi to leave her alone.

Related: Hollywood’s Go-To Divorce Attorney Has an Online Solution so …

4. People’s lives can’t be reduced one picture or headline

Perhaps the seminal image of Spears’ unraveling was the picture of her with a shaved head, attacking a paparazzo’s car with an umbrella. That moment was mocked relentlessly by the media and talk show hosts. The reaction was almost giddy. But the paparazzo who took the images, Daniel Ramos, was interviewed for the documentary, and his account brings to light a fuller picture of what happened.

Firstly, while her decision to shave her head was then seen as irrefutable evidence of her having descended into insanity, on closer examination it was obviously a calculated – if impulsive – statement, and a desperate plea to be left alone. It was a way of stripping away the last of the bubbly, innocent Britney that the media lambasted her for not living up to. In the documentary, Morris says: "She's saying essentially, with no hair: I quit. Whatever you guys are looking for, in terms of me coming back and being that person again, that person is gone, and you have destroyed her. The idea that people could look at that and only see a crazy person… well, that just tells me what a vulturous society she was working with to begin with."

Moreover, the night that Spears attacked the paparazzo's car with the umbrella, she was in an understandably bad headspace. She had just attempted to see her kids, who were with Federline. By then she and Federline were in the midst of a messy divorce, and Federline wouldn't let her into the house. Afterward she was bereft, sitting in the car at a gas station waiting for her cousin to come out. The paparazzi came up to her car and started taking pictures right by her face in the window, while asking her how she was doing. After making an anguished entreaty for privacy, she grabbed the umbrella.

In the documentary, Ramos said, "Working on her for so many years, she never gave a clue or information to us that 'I would appreciate you guys leave me the eff alone.'" The documentary interviewer asks, "What about when she said, 'Leave me alone?'" Ramos responds, "There were times when she [was] like, 'Can you leave me alone for the day? But it wasn't like, 'Leave me alone forever.' You know what I mean?"

5. Money brings out the worst in

people

During that time, Ramos tells the interviewer, he could get $1 million for a photograph of Spears. The messier, more candid the shot the better. “It sucks you in,” he admits, “and it’s hard to get out of it once you start making the kind of money that these guys were making.” But the paparazzi weren’t functioning in a void. The celebrity gossip machine that was out of control. Everywhere from nighttime talk shows, to print mags like *Us Weekly,* to sites like *Perez Hilton* and *Jezebel* reported breathlessly on Spears as a spectacle, and got a lot of eyeballs doing it. Spears was begging for relief from the attention, but no one cared, because covering her was fun and financially lucrative.

The motivations of the people closest to her were no less suspect. In 2007 Spears met Sam Lufti, a sketchy figure who has been associated with numerous vulnerable celebrities, including Amanda Bynes. He attached himself to Spears during a period when she was in desperate need of support, and her family became alarmed that he was controlling her for his own financial benefit. In a restraining order filed against him in 2008, Britney’s mom, Lynne Spears, says that Lufti “essentially moved into Britney’s home and has purported to take control of her life, home and finances.”

Lufti has continued harassing the family for the past decade, and in 2019 a judge granted the Spearses another five year restraining order. During the trial for that case, however, while Britney’s father Jamie Spears was being questioned by the judge, he admitted, “Me and my daughter’s relationship has always been strained.” From the beginning, critics of the conservatorship have stressed that Jamie Spears was enriching himself from his daughter’s wealth. Apart from a $130,000 yearly salary the conservatorship paid him, he also made 1.5% of the $137.7 million his daughter earned for her Las Vegas residency. In August 2020, Britney made it clear

that she wanted out of the conservatorship, and her court-appointed lawyer said she “strongly opposed” her father being in charge of her affairs. The judge ruled that a third party (a bank) would share the conservatorship with Jamie, reducing his power, but did not remove him from the conservatorship.

Related: 5 Lessons ‘The Queen’s Gambit’ Teaches Us About Achieving …

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/365345