

New Demi Lovato YouTube documentary 'Dancing with the Devil' takes a raw look at trauma

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Upstairs, the singer Demi Lovato is dying. Downstairs, her assistant frantically dials 911 because no one else in the house is doing anything to help.

"I didn't want to get in trouble for calling 911," the assistant says, adding that someone there (she doesn't reveal who) has told her to instruct dispatch to turn off the sirens – presumably to avoid drawing attention to Lovato's house and the scene within.

Even if she is putting forth a less-than-honest narrative, isn't she entitled to a little deception? Does Demi Lovato really owe us anything?

The dispatcher sounds horrified at the suggestion: "No, no, no, no, this is a medical emergency," he says in the 911 call. The sirens will stay on. Even as Lovato is fighting for her life, there are people fighting to maintain control over her.

Lovato's search for control is one of the main focuses of the YouTube documentary "Dancing with the Devil," available to the public Tuesday. Director Michael D. Ratner provides a blunt look at her struggles with fame, drug addiction, and sexual trauma, and the narrative is, unfortunately, a familiar one: A talented girl achieves celebrity at a young age, loses control of her identity, suffers a traumatic sexual assault, and turns to drugs, self-injury, and disordered eating in a desperate bid to reclaim agency.

But unlike many recent documentaries about pop culture icons, including "Framing Britney Spears," "Dancing with the Devil" spends less time on the toxic elements of celebrity culture, and focuses instead on Lovato as a drug addict in recovery and a potentially unreliable narrator of her own story.

For someone who has built a reputation on authenticity and confession, this juxtaposition between radical honesty and possible deception makes Lovato a compelling and complex interview subject. Her addiction narrative is not traditional, it's not wrapped up with a bow amid fervent claims of sobriety. She basically says that life is fluid and ever-evolving. This feels refreshing at a time when mental health professionals are becoming more vocal about the fact that recovery doesn't always look the same for everybody

The centerpiece of "Dancing with the Devil" is Lovato's overdose July 24, 2018, on heroin and fentanyl. On that night, she returned from a party and called her drug dealer after her friends went home. She overdosed and was left for dead until her assistant, Jordan Jackson, discovered her the next morning and called for an ambulance.

Later, it was determined Lovato had suffered strokes and a heart attack; we hear from a doctor about the brain damage she suffered (Lovato still has difficulty with her vision and is unable to drive). Most significantly, Lovato tells us that she didn't stay away from heroin after that night: "I wish I could say the last night I ever touched heroin was the night of my overdose, but it wasn't."



Lovato has always put forth the appearance of being an open book. She has consistently been candid about her mental health struggles and is considered an advocate in the community. It's a lot to take on, as she explains: "This is a very powerful disease. And I'm not going to pretend like I'm invincible. I have to work every day."

The documentary makes a provocative point about how much pressure one must feel to be the poster child for struggling and coping with mental health issues; that the line Lovato walks must be absolutely straight with no room for mistakes,

and that's not realistic. What she says – and what we need to listen to – is that mental health is a journey, and people will make both good and bad choices no matter how far along they are in their treatment.

However, the documentary tentatively asks if Lovato's assertions of having things under control even to the extent she presents them as such in the documentary are merely wishful thinking. After all, as the documentary shows, she has claimed sobriety in the past while using drugs. Demi Lovato, as Jordan Jackson says in the documentary, can "hide stuff really, really well."

Still, the singer's presence in the documentary comes across as forthright. She seems in control of the narrative. And even if she is putting forth a less-than-honest narrative, isn't she entitled to a little deception? Does Demi Lovato really owe us anything?

In contrast to a production like "Framing Britney Spears," in which Spears was conspicuously absent as an interview subject, Lovato is front and center throughout the new documentary. She is a formidable presence, squarely staring at the camera as she recalls a difficult childhood as the daughter of an addict, her struggles with bulimia, the pressure to be a role model, substance abuse, and, of course, her near-fatal 2018 OD.

She's aware that being the narrator of her own story gives her power, and she has consciously used that to combat the suffering she's endured. In two traumatic sexual experiences – being sexually assaulted by a boyfriend at age 15 and being taken advantage of by the drug dealer who sold her drugs on

the night she overdosed – Lovato explains how she tried to wrest control of her rape narrative – by revisiting these men and initiating sex with them.

This moment in the documentary is vitally significant, as unfortunately society still does not understand how victims of sexual trauma process the violence done to them. Lovato risks looking like a “bad victim” (there is no such thing, obviously) to share her experience and how she tried to cope with being violated.

For Lovato and many people who suffer from trauma and addiction, making poor decisions can often feel like regaining control or even surviving. But what “Dancing with the Devil” suggests is that empathy, honesty, love, and support are the path to recovery as Charles Cook, identified as Lovato’s case manager, says in the film: Try reframing the situation. “You must have been in so much pain to put yourself in that position again,” he says.

In film and fiction, cutting one’s hair is a way to symbolize freeing oneself from a traumatic past. It’s fitting, then, that “Dancing with the Devil” ends with Lovato chopping her locks. But for her, cutting her hair is more than breaking with the past – it’s a way to embrace a future in which she doesn’t have to be trapped by the shackles of compulsive femininity, a way to explore her sexuality and her identity: “It’s very symbolic of letting go of my past, letting go of the old me, part of me that was too afraid to really live my truth,” she explains.

“Dancing with the Devil” will hopefully open up discussions about what compassionate drug treatment can look like, how

survivors cope with sexual violence, the pressure our culture places on young pop icons to be automatically designated role models – and whether confessional artists such as Lovato can help lead those conversations so survivors, including herself, arrive at a better place.

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