

High Times, Hard Times Study Guide

High Times, Hard Times by Anita O'Day

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Plot Summary

The "jazz age" in America is a unique and fascinating period in our history. Having it described and "exposed" by one clearly immersed in every part of it is the beauty of Anita O'Day's autobiography. Born at the beginning of the jazz era, O'Day knows at an early age that singing will be her personal quest, no matter where it might take her. From engaging in talent portions of dance marathons to singing in Chicago taverns at age sixteen, this vocalist is determined to take the risks that will ultimately catapult her into national fame. The path is neither straight nor even. From the taverns, Anita moves into headlining at jazz clubs and, eventually, to singing with some of the top jazz bands and orchestras in the country, including Gene Krupa and Stan Kenton. She tours Europe and Asia, to wildly receptive audiences. In between, she faces her demons, often succumbing to them. Her promiscuity leads to illegal abortions and emergency hospital procedures; with husband Carl Hoff and fellow musician John Poole, she moves from alcohol and marijuana to heroin, becoming so addicted that she sacrifices her career and lands in prison. Staging a successful comeback, it looks as if Anita is finally on the way to becoming the premier female jazz vocalist in America. She reunites with Gene Krupa for awhile, participates in jazz festivals in both the U.S. and abroad, and is booked into famous, high-end clubs all over the country. She and drummer John Poole, however, cannot resist heroin and, again, it controls their lives. Further, jazz is declining in popularity, giving way to rhythm and blues and rock and roll. Anita's career hits a plateau, and she is forced to take "gigs" in small clubs for whatever they will pay. Returning to New York for an engagement, she contacts an old supplier and overdoses in an office bathroom. Escaping the hospital and hopping a flight to Hawaii, she is able to avoid the police and has yet another opportunity to get clean. This time, it sticks. Anita returns to the mainland, revives her career, and culminates that revival with a fifty-year anniversary concert at Carnegie Hall.

The jazz aficionado will appreciate this work for its detailed accounts of both the music and the artists. Against the backdrop of her own life, Anita O'Day has written perhaps the definitive work on the chronology of jazz, from its beginnings in the 1920s, to its peak in the 1940s, to its demise in favor of the rhythm and blues and rock and roll of the 1950s and 1960s. Jazz, however, has its loyal followers, and it will remain a major piece of American musical history. *High Times Hard Times* is more than just a story. It is a piece of history.



Chapters 1-2: Excess Baggage, Cutting Loose

Chapters 1-2: Excess Baggage, Cutting Loose Summary and Analysis

Chapter one introduces the reader to the disruptive and emotionally bankrupt childhood of Anita O'Day. Anita's mother, Gladys, marries James Colton, once she discovers her pregnancy, early in 1919. The newly married couple move to Chicago where Anita is born and grows up. James is a gambler, drinker and womanizer, who barely provides for his family, and Gladys divorces him, having to go to work to support herself and daughter. Gladys is not a demonstrative person, and Anita grows up believing that she is unwanted and unloved, "extra baggage" for her dour, unhappy mother, who has neither friends nor a social life. A brief re-marriage between Gladys and James brings some happiness to the family, but it is short-lived, when James proves to be as irresponsible as before.

As an emerging adolescent, poor and incorrigible, Anita finds pleasure primarily in music and summers spent in Kansas City with her maternal grandparents. There, she attends church and sings a great deal. She is also involved in dance contests with an older man, often smoking marijuana, which is legal at the time. The money she wins is given to her mother in an effort to win her affection. At one point, faced with failing grades, Anita runs away from home, hitches rides with truckers from Chicago to Kansas City, from where she is promptly sent back home to the same rigid, unemotional mother.

Chapter two portrays Anita as a poor student, longing for a lifestyle more appropriate for adults. Most fourteen-year-olds, even during the Depression, are either in school or, having dropped out, involved in some wage-earning activity for their family's sake. When Anita turns fourteen, her Aunt Belle comes to live with them. Having been left by her husband for a younger woman, a penniless Belle arrives and shows more care and empathy for Anita than her own mother. Unable to find employment, Belle keeps house for the three females, but the budget is further strained.

Anita sees an add for a "walkathon" one day and knows this will be far more exciting than sitting in a classroom. "Walkathons" are dance marathons, and the winning couple can earn an amount considered quite substantial for the times. Assured by the sponsor that Anita will be well supervised, Gladys allows her daughter to travel throughout the Midwest, with a variety of partners, to try her luck in the contests. Participants in the marathons also have opportunities to display other talents, and Anita, who by now has changed her last name to O'Day, always sings, often collecting coins thrown on the floor during her performances. She begins to be noticed, and her name appears more often in the posted advertisements. Most marathoners participate for the money and free food and housing. Some, who entertain at these events, go on to become famous, such as Red Skelton, Betty Hutton, and Spike Jones, while others end up on "skid row." These



are people who simply cannot take menial jobs like "regular folk," during a time when jobs are scarce and money scarcer. They are adventurous, Anita included, and are willing to engage in raucous publicity stunts to remain on the "circuit."

Eventually, Anita's truant officer catches up with her, and she is returned to the same junior high school from which she escaped two years earlier.



Chapters 3-5: Uptown, Walking on the Wild Side, Oh, For the Life of a Girl Singer

Chapters 3-5: Uptown, Walking on the Wild Side, Oh, For the Life of a Girl Singer Summary and Analysis

Chapter three finds Anita back in school, still a poor student, living only for Friday afternoon talent shows. Finally, at age sixteen, she climbs out of her bedroom window and heads for the tavern section of Chicago, where she begins as a dancer, working her way up to singing, at Planet Mars. Her idol is Martha Raye, a singer who uses body movements to help convey each song's message and emotion. Her best friends are two fellow singers, Betty Hall (also known as "Trilby") and Lea Roberts, and, with this new older crowd, Anita begins her regular use of pot and alcohol. Free from most restrictions on girls her age, Anita begins to frequent the other taverns in the neighborhood and becomes infatuated with Don Carter, a drummer at the Vialago. Eleven years her senior, Don is uncommunicative but talented and lives with his mother, spending all of his non-stage time writing arrangements. He teaches Anita to play the piano and eventually proposes marriage. At seventeen, Anita becomes his wife. Don belongs to a strange religious cult, and sex is evidently frowned upon. It is a marriage of friendship and musical collaboration, with mother always there.

Gradually, the tavern entertainment group begins to break up, as each go back to a "real" job or to other entertainment venues. Trilby is singing at Kitty Davis, a club far nicer than the Uptown taverns, and she arranges for Anita to work there, running a table dice game, waitressing, and singing in between. There, she is heard by Carl Cons, a magazine editor, who is building a new club, the Off-Beat, and she is offered a performance contract with no additional duties and a nice raise. At the same time, Don is offered a job in New York, and he and his mother leave with the promise to send for her. Anita moves into the Chelsea Hotel, peopled primarily by musicians, and drowns her sorrows with pot and cognac from the hotel bar.

Chapter four opens with Anita's hugely successful opening at the Off-Beat, where she demonstrates her great talent for improvisation in order to fill the twenty-four minute singing slots she is given. She sings strictly swing music, accompanied by a variety of bands that come and go, and has the opportunity to jam with musicians such as Gene Krupa and Paul Whiteman. Carl Hoff, the golf pro at the Biltmore Country Club, visits the club and is immediately infatuated with Anita. For quite a while, he dates her, always a gentleman, and eventually proposes marriage. At this point, Anita boards a train for New York to confront Don about their future. The trip is disastrous, with Don obviously unhappy about her arrival and his mother "cold as ice." Anita leaves, knowing that the marriage is over, and yet she cannot bring herself to marry Carl and become a middle-



class housewife. She moves out of the Chelsea and back in with her mother and Belle. Moving with a different, clearly looser crowd, Anita has her first sexual encounter and becomes pregnant. A painful and frightening abortion convinces Anita that "playing around" is not for her.

Carl re-enters Anita's life, and, after a short stint on the road with Raymond Scott's "Superb Orchestra," she agrees to spend the winter in Miami with him. Returning to Chicago, both hope that Anita will land the vacated vocalist spot with Gene Krupa. No such luck. Nevertheless, she and Carl rent an apartment together, as he attempts to manage her career by encouraging her to go where the money is, not necessarily the artistic freedom. Anita's big break comes when she is finally offered a vocal spot with Gene Krupa, but, unfortunately, she is pregnant again. Carl understands her dilemma and, stating that they have plenty of time for a family, accompanies Anita to her second abortion.

Anita's travels with Gene Krupa are highlighted throughout Chapter five. Most of the arrangements from the former vocalist are not in Anita's range, and she spends the first few events singing different renditions of "Georgia On My Mind" for huge and receptive audiences. As she tours, she comes to know Gene's background, which is similar to hers. He is married but unfaithful, having flings with both Dinah Shore and Lana Turner. After he divorces his wife, and the tryst with Lana fades, Gene turns to booze and pot, along with most of his contemporaries. The time with Krupa sees barriers broken in the music world. Tired of expensive gowns, Anita convinces Gene that she should wear the same uniform as the guys, something which causes some to question her gender preference. Roy Eldridge, a black trumpet player, is employed, not just as a featured soloist, but, rather, as a regular band member. This is a first in the world of big "white" bands. Krupa's band gains nationwide recognition, and Anita is a part of the musical experimentation that makes it famous. Anita and Roy are featured on a number of recordings, and the band tours the country. All band members abuse drugs and alcohol, but this seems to be normal behavior for musicians, and Anita participates regularly. She is horribly underpaid, compared to the male band members, but seems not to mind, so long as she can sing and experiment. World War II begins, and she quite literally fails to follow the events, other than to bid farewell to male musicians and her husband, Carl, as they are drafted.



Chapters 6-9, The Road That Leads to Fame, Sometimes the Road is Rocky, And You're Just Another Dame; Busted

Chapters 6-9, The Road That Leads to Fame, Sometimes the Road is Rocky, And You're Just Another Dame; Busted Summary and Analysis

Chapters six through nine show the roller coaster existence of a musician's life, clearly typified by Anita's own experiences. Life on the road leads to ambivalence. Anita loves the lights and the crowds that come with each performance. The constant travel, on the other hand, is stressful, and her use of pot and alcohol increases. The band begins to play on military bases, because they provide transportation to the next gig. In San Francisco, Anita reunites with Carl, having been corresponding with him for several months. She manages a leave of absence for a month, and they marry, with plans to be together until he ships out. During her absence from the band, Gene is arrested for possession of marijuana and contributing to the delinquency of a seventeen-year-old boy whom he sent off to destroy the evidence. After ninety days in jail, he joins Benny Goodman's band and, after that, plays with Tommy Dorsey. Anita settles in as a military wife, following Carl to air bases in California, Arizona and Texas. When in Hollywood, she often secures individual gigs but is thrilled when Woody Herman offers her the job of female vocalist at twice what Gene had paid. She spends six weeks with Woody's band but is determined to pursue her career as a single. She gets her chance in 1944, when her new agent books her throughout the country, though it is not the huge success she envisions.

Anita returns to California in Chapter seven, where she is convinced to join Stan Kenton's band, and, as the vocalist, gives Stan his first million sale recording. For eleven months, Anita remains with Stan, a workaholic who drives himself creating arrangements and innovations, maintaining a "tight ship" within his band. Anita never truly fits into the band, comprised of men who read and play bridge in their free moments. When she announces her decision to leave, Stan asks only that she find a replacement. Anita finds Shirley Luster, whose stage name later becomes June Christy.

Carl spends the war training pilots, but in 1945, with the war almost over, they buy a house in Los Angeles. Immediately, Anita rejoins Gene Krupa's re-organized band, and Carl is contracted to become part of the management team, responsible for advance publicity and travel arrangements. The whirlwind schedule of the new Krupa band brings Anita face-to-face with her demons. Overworked and not eating, Anita finds her energy during performances from alcohol and occasional pot. By the time they reach the Palladium, she is ragged, walking away from a performance and climbing into a closet in her home. For days, she remains there, refusing to come out and believing that



the food Carl brings to her is poisoned. Gradually, over a period of six weeks, Anita is able to recover enough to resume small measures of normalcy. A doctor diagnoses her with "anxiety neurosis," and Krupa has already hired a replacement vocalist.

While Anita suffers her neurosis, Carl and friend Ray Forman buy a piece of property and begin to construct their own club. Another friend, John Shuler, provides the investment capital. Difficulties with the city over permits and eminent domain stop this project in its tracks, and Carl moves on to booking Anita where he can. Both are drinking, smoking pot, involved in extramarital affairs, and the marriage is falling apart. Drug agents eventually raid their home, finding a bag of marijuana and arrest them both. Out on bail, Anita files for divorce and goes on tour.

By Chapter eight, American music has moved into the increasingly popular rhythm and blues styles. Anita chooses songs, she states, that she can "feel." Jazz is a style giving way to newer rhythms and beats. At the same time, Anita loses her appeal on the marijuana charge and goes to prison. She does not address this period in depth, only to state that she eats regularly and passes the time exercising and sleeping. In her business, moreover, it is not unusual for colleagues to spend time in jail, so there is not the stigma that would have been attached to those in other professions when she emerges ready to rejoin the music world.

Once out of prison, in 1947, Anita begins independent gigs at a variety of clubs and re-connects with her father and his tenth wife, Vivian. By this point, they enjoy one another as people, and the old hurts are forgotten. Anita also drops the divorce proceedings against Carl, though they agree to go their separate ways. The most exciting contract is a booking at the Royal Roost in New York, during which time Anita sings with Count Basie's band. Also on the bill during the three-week stint is Dizzy Gillespie, whose band is moving toward the "bop" period, a place Anita wishes to go as well. Although she is unaware of this at the time, most of Dizzie's band members are abusing hard drugs, specifically, cocaine and heroin, and Anita does not, at thus point, see herself involved in such activity.

By 1948, Carl has re-entered Anita's life, and Chapter nine finds them settled in Chicago, a town in which increased convention traffic has resulted in a large growth of clubs. Many of the night spots, however, become known as "clip joints," businesses that take advantage of drunk conventioners, often slipping drugs in their drinks, stealing their money, and dumping them in places far away. When the police move in to clean them up, many clubs are closed. Carl and Anita join forces with Marty Denneberg and buy one, re-naming it the Hi Note. Max Miller's band is featured with Anita, but many others are brought in as guests, including singer Carmen McRae.

At the club, Anita meets Denny Roche, a trumpet player with a guest band. Though he is seven years younger than she, they immediately begin an affair. When Carl realizes that the relationship is going to be long-term, he leaves for Wisconsin to work with his brother at a country club. The Hi Note begins to decline, and Anita takes a brief booking at the Apollo Theater in Harlem and then begins to take engagements all over the country, many of them booked by Carl, who has once again become involved in the



music booking business during the winter season in Wisconsin. Her career continues to climb, with bookings in top clubs and new recordings with a variety of name bands.

Anita states that during these years, she often feels like two people—one good, one bad. The good Anita wants to perfect her style and talent and settle into one permanent relationship. The bad Anita loves the thrill of risky behaviors, including alcohol, pot, and multiple love interests. She is arrested, then acquitted, on a marijuana charge and moves on to heroin. As law enforcement in the Los Angeles area begin to crack down on drug use, Anita returns to drinking, knowing that she is probably under scrutiny. She is singing at the Samoa in Long Beach when the piano player passes a packet of heroin to her. Suspecting a "frame up," Anita ditches the packet in the restroom, but is arrested on stage, in the middle of her performance. After two trials, she is convicted of heroin possession. Awaiting sentencing, Anita discovers that she is again pregnant. A botched abortion and surgery for an ectopic pregnancy ensue. Anita's sentencing includes six months in jail and five years probation. The prison time is spent on Terminal Island, where Anita works in the kitchen, begins an exercise class, and becomes the in-house hair stylist. Released a month early, Anita walks out of prison on February 25, 1954.



Chapters 10-12: Got the Name, Will Play the Game, What a Difference a Hit Makes, Hard Times

Chapters 10-12: Got the Name, Will Play the Game, What a Difference a Hit Makes, Hard Times Summary and Analysis

Anita begins her comeback, in Chapter ten, with Vido Musso, a tenor saxophone player who has organized his own band and has a long-term engagement at the Club Starlite in Los Angeles. She lives in a small hotel close to the club, drinks heavily, and attempts to deal with the anger she houses for her unjust incarceration. She admits she is a mess and uses alcohol to escape the truth of her flailing career. The drummer, John Poole, fascinates Anita, because he does not smoke or drink and insists that she take his gift of a Bible. John has idolized Anita many years before and was particularly crushed when she refused to autograph his snare drum. John, however, is a heroin addict, and he introduces it to Anita, who sees it as a means to replace alcohol and prevent cirrhosis and/or admission to a treatment facility.

John and Anita begin an eight year relationship that is completely focused on heroin and music engagements. They leave the Starlite because of low pay and receive permission from their probation officers to leave California to seek better gigs. With a combination of speed, Dolophine, and heroin, they head for Detroit. Following Detroit, they travel to Kansas City, becoming entangled in the legal system as local police and federal agents attempt to implicate them in heroin use. Certainly, they are using, but law enforcement officials clearly engage in harassment. John develops hepatitis, and Anita gets an offer in Chicago, but once he re-joins her, the drug use begins again. Throughout 1953, the only goal is dope, and both lives spiral into poverty. Finally, back in California, former manager Maynard Sloate takes Anita on, promising he can guarantee her seven hundred fifty dollars a week. She quickly signs on.

Norman Granz owns a recording company and, unlike major record companies, he promotes many jazz and "bebop" artists who are also junkies. He collaborates with arranger Buddy Bergman to form Verve Records, and, as Chapter eleven opens, Anita is given the opportunity to record with a full band. The selected musicians are the best in their fields, and a twelve-song album is created, which Granz enthusiastically promotes. This success launches a period, from 1955-1963, during which Anita rides a career crest, receiving rave reviews and cutting a number of albums. Norman's top recording artist, however, is Ella Fitzgerald, and she always has first place, probably because she is free of vices. Anita and John are still junkies, and obtaining cabaret work permits to perform in jazz havens like New York City are impossible without greasing a lot of palms. Finally, New York City agrees to grant a legitimate permit, if Anita can pass



a drug test. She and John hole up in their New York apartment and conduct their own withdrawal, through the use of cough syrups that contain codeine. The process takes three-to-four weeks, but the test is passed and the permit obtained. Drug use immediately ensues and continues throughout the time that Anita works at the Village Vanguard, the oldest jazz club in New York.

Popular recordings and work in well-known clubs result in jazz festival invitations from all over the U.S. and Europe. The 1958 Newport Festival is a key moment for Anita. The event is filmed, and Anita finds herself a part of the movie, "Jazz on a Summer's Day," a hit all over the world. In 1959, Anita accompanies Benny Goodman on a tour of Germany and Sweden. John goes along to play drums for Anita's songs. Both wean themselves from heroin prior to the trip, but manage to find suppliers in every European city. Anita and Benny Goodman do not get on well during the tour. Evidently, Goodman does not tolerate other individuals in his band "upstaging" him, and he undermines and shortens Anita's performances as the tour progresses. Still, the experience was a broadening one.

Chapter twelve puts Anita back home in California, where she and John continue their addiction, scoring heroin in every town. Unlike pop and rock and roll stars, jazz musicians do not make huge sums of money from recordings and performances. They have a loyal but small following. Add to that a heroin addiction, and Anita is not a financial success. In fact, she and John are selling and pawning much of what they own in between gigs. A piano player from Boston, named Joe (last name purposely omitted), moves in with Anita and John and introduces them to paregoric and other cough remedies that can be boiled down and which are much cheaper than heroin. These are used in between fixes. Joe, however, begins to bother the druggist for prescription medications, and John, worried that police will be called in, finally gets him on a plane back to Boston. Eventually, Joe gets clean and currently resides in Palm Springs, entertaining prominent people.

Fearful that the police are closing in, following a close call on a heroin run, Anita and John leave their apartment, store their belongings, and move in with friends. Anita is still able to line up engagements through Joe Glaser. John is arrested, in Anita's new car, for transporting drugs, and soon the house they recently purchased is auctioned in a foreclosure sale. Sam Glaser loans them money for an attorney, in return for an extension of Anita's contract, and John eventually receives five years probation, an unusual outcome for a second offense.

The years 1961-1966 are a blur for Anita. John gets married, and Anita moves around a great deal, never accumulating much money but receiving rave reviews for quality performances. In 1964, she has the opportunity to perform in Tokyo with pianist Bob Corwin. Her personal life, however, is "in a shambles," (p. 255). In Los Angeles, Anita's drug connection is Bruce Phillips, a man who becomes obsessed with her and begins to follow her to performance cities. At times, he is threatening as well, and Anita is only rid of him when he is finally imprisoned for dealing, eventually being transferred to a California drug rehabilitation center. A previous acquaintance, a gay woman by the



name of Dee, re-enters Anita's life as Bruce exits, and she becomes Anita's new supplier.

By the 1960's, rock is where the money is. Anita has very few engagements, John has moved to Hawaii, and she becomes concerned about meeting basic necessities, not to mention heroin. She moves in with Arthur, a fan, whose wife has left him, and enjoys a year at his Malibu beach apartment. She earns a little money styling hair for a few women and counts on Arthur for food and lodging. Finally, she obtains an engagement at the Downbeat in New York. With some of her earnings, she returns to California, purchased a used car, and says goodbye to Arthur. She manages to scratch out a living with gigs in small jazz clubs, but, clearly, her career is gone. The years of alcohol, drugs, and bad eating habits have taken their toll on Anita's health. Though her doctor and John, who has cleaned himself up in Hawaii, try to help her, Anita simply does not want to quit. She attempts "cold turkey," but, eventually finds herself in Dee's office bathroom, where she is found with the needle still in her arm. At this point, Dee hides the paraphernalia and calls an ambulance, insisting that Anita has had a heart attack.



Chapter 13: I'm Still Here, Epilogue

Chapter 13: I'm Still Here, Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Escaping the hospital and obtaining airfare to Hawaii, provided by John, Anita is settled into an efficiency apartment to undergo withdrawal again. She has a supply of Dolophine pills (comparable to Methadone) and uses them sparingly to make them last. She begins to read the Bible and finds help in many passages. Anita meets an elderly man, Alfred Harned, who offers her food and lodging. He was once a guitar player who now has a position with the musician's union. Alfred writes a song, "Candlelight and Wine," which Anita later successfully records. She credits Alfred with giving her the wonderful support to remain clean and to once again pursue her career.

Eventually, in 1968, Anita is well enough to complete a six-week tour of the Far East, organized by friends now living there. Achieving success, she returns to the states and opened in a Greenwich Village night spot. She stays with Charles Cochran, a man of means who assists recovering addicts. Judy Garland and her husband, Mickey Deems, move in as well, but Judy is completely dependent upon drugs and alcohol by then. She dies not long afterward in England. Her death strengthens Anita's resolve to remain clean. Anita obtains a long-term engagement at the Half Note in Greenwich Village and participates in the Newport Jazz Festival in the spring of 1970, obtaining a small movie role as well. She meets a twenty-nine year old freelance television newsman with whom she eventually lives. When she manages to obtain some television and radio work, as well as dates around the country and an opportunity to tour England and Germany, her newsman, who remains unnamed, is not happy, exposing his angry and controlling side. Anita ends the relationship, applauded by her friends for doing so.

The 1970s bring a steady climb for Anita. She sells records and has bookings all over the country. One of her biggest successes is a tour in Japan in 1975. She forms a permanent record company, with John Poole and friends Larry and Carol Smith as partners. Though jazz aficionados are a relatively small group, they are loyal. At fifty-five, Anita O'Day is clean, sober, and a growing success. Television interviews, a "Sixty-Minutes" segment, and this book came quickly. By 1980, money is materializing.

Epilogue: Once her autobiography is published, Anita has a bit of a setback. She feels shame for having revealed so much of the sordid parts of her life to the public. Turning down interviews and cancelling the book promotion tour, she isolates herself in the California desert. Gradually, she re-enters the music world, however, by moving to Las Vegas and performing at hotels, to rave reviews. Other celebrities became her fans as well, and, ultimately, she celebrates her fifty-first year as a professional singer with a concert at Carnegie Hall. "Interspersed with the music and reminiscences were congratulatory letters and telegrams from President Reagan, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Governor Cuomo, and Mayor Koch. At the end, with the audience on their feet

screaming for more, more, more, I couldn't help thinking that if you stay in the business long enough, you get it all," (p. 300).



Characters

Anita O'Day

Anita Colton is born to James and Gladys in 1919, the product of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy and a quick marriage. An irresponsible man, James leaves Anita and her mother to fend for themselves, and Gladys becomes an unhappy, grim individual who can show no affection toward her only child. Anita grows into a strong-willed adolescent who wants nothing to do with school and who, at thirteen, leaves home to participate in dance marathons, a popular activity during the Depression. At this point, she changes her last name to O'Day. Her one love is singing, however, and she begins to participate in the talent portions of the marathons, gaining some small recognition. Forced back into school by a truant officer, Anita then hits Uptown Chicago on the weekends, thriving on jazz singing and obtaining a few opportunities to sing, as she is hired to dance, waitress, or run dice games. During this time, she is introduced to both alcohol and pot, two vices that remain with her most of her life. She gets her first break at age 16, when a newspaper reporter turned entrepreneur hires her for the opening of his new club in downtown Chicago. From there, Anita begins her climb in the world of jazz, as a single vocalist, as the singer for numerous jazz bands and orchestras, and as a recording artist. Along the way, she meets and marries two men, and participates in the vices common to musicians during the time, specifically alcohol, marijuana, and, eventually heroin. After two prison stints and a career in ruins, Anita flees to Hawaii, where she undergoes withdrawal, manages to stay clean, and, eventually, launches a successful comeback. Her culminating experience is a concert at Carnegie Hall, to celebrate fifty years as a jazz vocalist, and international recognition as one of the greats.

Gladys Colton

Born and raised in Kansas City, Gladys Gill becomes pregnant while she is single, a catastrophic event in 1919. She quickly marries James Colton, the father and fellow worker in a local box factory. They move to Chicago. Gladys divorces James, who drinks and gambles his paychecks, and goes to work to support herself and her child. In the words of daughter Anita, Gladys was a "straitlaced old-style martyr who pitied herself because she had to work and was left with a daughter to raise." A brief re-marriage to James seems to heighten her mood, but that is short-lived. James begins his old ways again, and another divorce follows. Eventually, her sister Belle, whose husband has left her for a younger woman, moves in with Gladys and Anita and becomes the housekeeper while Gladys continues to work, barely making enough to keep the threesome afloat. Gladys allows Anita to grow up too fast, consenting to her travels to participate in dance marathons and to her forays into the tavern scene while still under the age of sixteen. She does not appear to have had a normal motherly love and concern for her daughter, and there is not a great deal of communication between them for years at a time. Eventually, Gladys marries a man twenty years younger than she and lives in California, not far from Anita.



Carl Hoff

Carl is the golf pro at the Biltmore Country Club in Barrington, a wealthy suburb of Chicago. He hears Anita sing one night and, immediately smitten, pursues her relentlessly. He is rewarded finally with marriage, and, during the winter months, becomes involved in promoting Anita's career. During World War II, he trains as a pilot and eventually becomes a flight instructor, encouraging Anita to settle down with him as he moves from base to base in the west. Once the War is over, he and Anita move to California, and he becomes immersed in her career, first as a partial manager and then as an entrepreneur, attempting to build clubs in which she will be featured. Both Carl and Anita engages in pot smoking, and both endure legal troubles for the activity. As well, Carl engages in several extra-marital affairs, and the marriage sours. Carl remains peripherally in Anita's life, as a booking agent, but, eventually, they divorce.

Don Carter

Anita meets Don Carter at a club, where he is the drummer for a jazz band. He is good-looking but uncommunicative and unsocial, spending his spare time writing musical arrangements in the apartment he shares with his mother. He is no match for an aggressive Anita O'Day, and they marry, much to his mother's disdain. He and Anita live with his mother, an arrangement that causes a great deal of tension. Don is a follower of a strange religion, and the marriage is never consummated. Eventually, Don receives an offer in New York City, and he and his mother pack up, promising to send for Anita once they are settled. Don is a minor success in New York. Never having been sent for, Anita finally takes a train to New York and receives a cold reception from Don. She returns to Chicago and divorces him.

John Poole

A talented drummer, John hooks up with Anita, when they play at the same club. John does not socialize with other musicians much, probably because he is not a drinker or pot smoker. He does, however, shoot up heroin and is responsible for introducing Anita to the substance. For a period of eight years, John and Anita travel the country as a duo, obtaining gigs wherever they can, but primarily spending all they make on heroin or heroin substitutes, in order to satisfy their addictions. Both are arrested, and both serve time in prison for their activities. Eventually, John, who has a strong religious background, marries, cleans himself up, and moves to Hawaii. Later in life, when Anita is at her lowest point, having overdosed and looking at a police investigation, John pawns some of his drums to fund a month's rent on an efficiency apartment in Hawaii for Anita, so that she can escape the mainland and attempt to clean herself up as well.



James Colton

The father of Anita, James is a responsible worker who then drinks and gambles his paychecks, twice causing the breakup of his marriage to Anita's mother. He is a womanizer as well, marrying a total of ten times during his lifetime. Late in life, Anita reunites with her father and states that they are able to develop a friendship as adults, and they remain in contact for the rest of his life.

Gene Krupa

A jazz legend, Gene begins his career as a drummer for Benny Goodman. Deciding to strike out on his own, he forms his own band and begins to hit the jazz circuit across the country. He employs Anita O'Day as his vocalist for two lengthy tours, and she is thrilled to be a part of his organization. Eventually, Krupa is arrested for cocaine possession and contributing to the delinquency of a minor, and spends time in jail. He re-marries his former wife, Ethyl, who is able to provide funds for his defense and early release. He goes on to play for other bands, ultimately forming a large orchestra of his own.

Norman Granz

A jazz aficionado, Norman collaborates with Buddy Bregman, a junior-high classmate of Anita's, to form Verve Records. Using Anita as the vocalist, Granz turns out top-selling album, giving Anita a return to her career in the early 1950s.

Stan Kenton

A band leader who experiments with Progressive Jazz, Stan hires Anita to go on tour with him in the 1940s. He is a workaholic who has no time for socializing or leisure. His style of jazz is difficult for Anita, and they part ways after several months.

Raymond Scott

A well-known arranger, Raymond Scott begins his own band and hires Anita as the vocalist when he goes on tour. Scott is a perfectionist and demands that every instrument and the vocalist perform exactly as he has arranged the music. One night, Anita forgets the words to a new song she has just learned, and he fires her.

Harry Reasoner

Co-host of the television show, 60 Minutes, Harry Reasoner films and produces a piece on Anita for a segment that airs in June, 1980.



Objects/Places

Planet Mrs

Tavern in Chicago and site of Anita's first singing engagement at age 16.

Down Beat

Jazz magazine popular in the 1940s and 1950s

Jazz on a Summer's Day

Movie based upon the Newport Jazz Festival in 1958

Village Vanguard

Oldest jazz club in New York City

Half Note

Club in Greenwich Village and site of Anita's return to the American jazz scene

Martys

Upscale jazz club in New York City

Biltmore Country Club

Club in Barrington, IL where Carl Hoff is the golf pro

Newport Jazz Festival

Annual festival at which prominent jazz musicians perform

Carnegie Hall

Famous concert hall in New York and site of Anita's fiftieth anniversary concert

Uptown

Section of Chicago known for its taverns in the 1930s and 1940s



Themes

Strength of Human Spirit

Much has been written about the human spirit in times of stress, distress, tragedy, and catastrophe. Somehow, many humans are able to reach within themselves and draw upon reserved strength to not simply endure, but, indeed, to triumph. If Anita O'Day has one personality trait that controls her behavior, it is strength of spirit. From early childhood, she exhibits a tenacity of will that she will use to pursue her goals, whether to have a bike, to drop out of school, to pursue singing, or to develop a vocal style that is both unique and respected. Her quests are marred by poor choices, including substance abuse, promiscuity, abortions, unhealthy relationships and, above all, impulsivity. Through all of these, however, Anita exhibits a strength of spirit that drives her to overcome and to move forward in her career. She sings with some of the biggest bands of her time, tours foreign countries, and becomes a national figure in jazz. In between her successes, however, she endures poverty, imprisonment, and degradation. At her lowest point, hospitalized for an overdose and facing arrest once again, Anita again draws upon her inner strength, "escaping" to Hawaii, enduring the torture of withdrawal, and staging a comeback which culminates in an anniversary concert at Carnegie Hall. While Anita O'Day's life story is certainly not a model for others, her ultimate triumph is.

Destructiveness of Addiction

Whether the addiction is to alcohol, drugs, gambling or other activities, the individual with an addictive personality disorder has two choices—fight the addiction in responsible and proven ways or succumb to it. Anita O'Day appears to have an addictive personality, reflective in her early obsessions with risky behaviors, to include truancy, theft, alcohol and marijuana use, and a willingness to travel by herself at a very young age, in order to participate in dance marathons with much older people. As her singing career begins to take off, Anita finds herself confronted with the alcohol and drug abuse so prevalent with the performing arts community of the time. She participates willingly and, eventually, becomes addicted to heroin. The need to obtain heroin comes to consume Anita's daily life activities, to the point of selling or pawning her possessions and losing her career path through arrest and imprisonment. Further, her drug use history is passed to authorities throughout the country, making it more difficult to obtain the more coveted engagements. Ultimately, Anita overdoses, and this "wake up" call causes her to flee the mainland for Hawaii, where she finally manages to overcome the addiction and revive her career. Anita O'Day is fortunate. As she states herself, many of her fellow junkies die or endure long prison terms. In the end, Anita's sheer will power, along with a renewed faith and support, allow her to overcome and emerge to fulfill her career goals.



Music as a Profession

The autobiography of Anita O'Day probably typifies the life of those who choose music as a life's work, particularly with whatever type of music is popular with the masses of the time. Whether it is jazz, swing, rock and roll, or rap, many artists who pursue success and, indeed, achieve it, seem to follow similar patterns of behavior and possess similar personality characteristics. Anita O'Day typifies these creative artists. First, she commits herself to her music, and is willing to take risks to pursue professional singing. She begins at the bottom, as most do, and her path can be described as rocky, at best. Whether fame and recognition comes quickly or after years of effort, musicians face demons that their lifestyles magnify. The temptation to abuse substances in an effort to enhance performance or to numb the physical and mental stress is common. Anita succumbs to this temptation for many years, as do many musicians before her and those who come after. The stress of travel, long hours, and disappointments can be emotionally devastating, as evidenced by two mental breakdowns for O'Day. Yet they continue, in order to perfect a style, a sound, or an innovation that will set them apart from the others and confirm a coveted place in musical history. Those who achieve their goals enjoy fame and popularity, as well as personal wealth. They are a special breed, willing to take the risks, to face and often submit to their demons, and to subject themselves to emotional extremes and rigorous demanding work and schedules, in order to achieve professionally.



Style

Perspective

Obviously, as an autobiography, the perspective is singular, that is, it is the story of Anita O'Day as told by Anita O'Day. The world of O'Day has been replete with success and musical innovation. She perfected a vocal style which catapulted her to national recognition, singing with top jazz bands and orchestras and producing top-selling recordings. As she clearly and honestly relates, however, her life was filled with poor choices, risky behaviors, and impulsivity. The honesty with which her tale is told, along with the ability to recall copious detail, allows the reader a truly intimate understanding of the chronological progression of her both the events of her life and her personal responses and reflections. Upon publication of the work, her embarrassment for being so candid caused a minor breakdown, as she recounts in the Epilogue. At the same time, however, the reader is certainly left with the understanding that, looking back, Anita may not have done much differently. From her perspective, the highs and the lows, the successes and the failures, and the "good" and the "bad" Anitas brought her to the place of ultimate personal and professional success. A bit of religious perspective is apparent, as well, as she seems to believe that every experience had a purpose and was fashioned specifically to take her beyond the addictions and the risk to a more permanent health and productivity.

Tone

There is no overriding tone in this work, and the reader is somewhat at a loss to find one. So much of the recounting is impersonal and objective, that it is as if O'Day is an outsider looking in. Strong emotion, in fact, is almost entirely lacking. When she is caught as a child, having stolen a bike, there seems to be almost no response, no fear, no shame, but, rather, just an objective reporting of the incident. When she is arrested and imprisoned as an adult, again, the entire experience is treated objectively. O'Day's relationships with men, her abortions, and her addictions remind one of news reporting, rather than the potentially emotional recounting of the individual experiencing them. Certainly, there are spots of humor, joy, and sorrow, but, again, none particularly powerful. O'Day appears to experience subjective emotion when crowds are positively responsive, and this praise is obviously what she covets. During her lifetime, moreover, she suffers two mental breakdowns, one from stress and one from embarrassment for revealing so many of her behaviors in her newly published book. Again, however, the reader is given a primarily objective recounting of the events, without insight into O'Day's emotions or reflections. Perhaps the overriding message about O'Day herself is that, early in her life, she learned to suppress emotion in favor of pursuing her goals. This suppression impacted all of her relationships with others, so that she stood alone, even though others surrounded and supported her. That suppression of emotion resulted in a book which is a wonderful account of the "Jazz Age" and her part in it, but does not allow the reader to become emotionally involved with its author.



Structure

This work is meticulously steeped in chronology, as it recounts the life of Anita O'Day from her early childhood to a pinnacle of triumph at Carnegie Hall. The first three chapters cover O'Day's childhood and youth, in a loveless household, in unfulfilling schools, traveling as a dance marathon participant, singing, dancing and waitressing in the taverns of "Uptown" Chicago and her completely loveless marriage to her first husband, Don. These chapters set the foundation for the remainder of her life and expose the realities of the Depression. Chapters four through seven focus on O'Day's career rise, including periods as the vocalist for Gene Krupa, Stan Kenton, and Dizzy Gillespie but, as well, her immersion into alcohol and marijuana abuse. The next section, Chapters eight through ten, recount that portion of Anita's life in which drug use results in prison, in which her career is flailing, and, most destructive, in which her relationship with drummer John Poole results in full-blown heroin addiction. The final section of the book focuses on the 1950s and 1960s, a time during which jazz had given way to rhythm and blues, bee bop, and, eventually rock. Anita's career during these years was a series of crests and valleys, as she continued to fight addiction and, at one point, overdosed. The final chapter and the Epilogue show her ultimate triumph, in both her personal and professional lives. She emerges as a strong, independent individual whose music and song, though not the hallmark of the times, still has a place in America.

Quotes

Looking back, I also realize I was always alone, fending for myself, doing the best I could without the family support a seventeen-year-old ordinarily gets. Smoking pot, drinking, playing it cool were my ways of hiding the pain and deprivation I wouldn't let myself recognize. (Chapter 3, p. 56)

Anyway, I can tell you now that musical intimacy is on a completely different plane—deeper, longer-lasting, better than the steamiest sexual liaison. Passion wears out, but the longer you work with a really rhythmical, inventive, swinging musician, the closer you become. (Chapter 3, p. 59)

In all, I did twelve choruses of "Oh, Lady, Be Good!" and when I finished, the place exploded. People shouted, stamped, applauded, whistled, stood on their chairs and cheered. It was the response you dream about, made sweeter by the fact that it came from people who understood what I was doing. (Chapter 4, p. 73)

Carl had loved introducing me to big-name stores and restaurants and he'd taken me out to the Biltmore in Barrington where nobody talked like a page out of *Down Beat*. When I came on with my hip chick lingo or made a social boo-boo, he took it in stride. (Chapter 4, p. 83)

Much as he liked jazz, he couldn't understand that artistic fulfillment with an obscure jazz group was more important to me than singing with a Mickey Mouse band for a lot of bread. It was one of those arguments which nobody wins. (Chapter 5, pp. 92-93)

Show business is like a cocoon. Doing a show, packing up, traveling, relaxing with booze or pot, sometimes getting in town just in time to freshen up before doing a gig, sometimes repeating that routine over and over blots out things that ninety-nine percent of the public is involved in. (Chapter 5, p. 112)

We were playing gigs every night so we could test arrangements to see whether they were going to jell or not before we took them into a recording studio. When you were working every night things happened that weren't written and the arrangements grew. (Chapter 5, p. 104)

If only I'd been lucky enough to have been under contract to a movie studio or a big agency, I'd have placed a call to the head of publicity and he'd have known who to pay off...There were lots of others whose drug use mysteriously never made police records. (Chapter 7, p. 154)

I like to start and finish a song the way it's written but in between there are all kinds of choices to be made. And the choices we make determine the picture we paint. (Chapter 8, p. 167)



Maybe a lot of my drive came from sneaking around and getting away with it, like a kid, even if I was thirty-three years old. Maybe that was a cause of my promiscuousness. (Chapter 9, p. 197)

I knew heroin was for me because I didn't feel angry about what had happened to me in Long Beach, and I didn't feel sorry for myself anymore....I stopped drinking as soon as I began using heroin, and for the next eight years I hardly touched booze. (Chapter 10, p. 211)

What I mean is that when Louis Armstrong became popular, all trumpet players had to change their styles, not the rest of the band. But when Charlie Parker became popular with his be-bop tunes, everybody had to change his style—the drummer, the piano player, the singer, whoever. (Chapter 10, p. 216)

And black entertainers could work white clubs, but their black brothers couldn't get in to see them. Coming from the world of jazz where talent had always been the great equalizer, I became even angrier and I was pretty angry to begin with. (Chapter 10, p. 225)

The thing we jazz artists did that most pop people failed to do was build a loyal following that never deserted us...At the end of my contract with that company in the United States, Japanese promoters took over the rights to the albums, and that move opened up opportunities for me that I'd never dreamed of. (Chapter 11, p. 247)

My private life during the year just described was a nightmare. Finding a new connection on the road meant meeting a musician who was a user and having him guide John and me to a dealer. (Chapter 12, p. 248)

I was alone again. And you've never been as alone as when you're fifty years old, your type of music is temporarily out of style and you find that the relationship in which you cared deeply about someone didn't really exist. (Chapter 13, p. 289)



Topics for Discussion

Do you see the music "business" as unique or typical of most professions? Why or why not?

Compare the life of Anita O'Day with a more contemporary musical star. What are the similarities and differences?

What impact do you believe Anita O'Day's family life had on her life as an adult? Cite specific examples from the book.

What do you believe was the turning point in Anita O'Day's career? Support your response with factual information from the book.

Why, do you believe, is there such a preponderance of substance abuse among performing artists? Consider their responsibilities, their personalities, and their lifestyles as you respond.

How has the legal system changed in its enforcement and punishment of substance abusers since the time of O'Day's incarceration?

Music, like any art, reflects its time. How did jazz reflect society in America during the 1930s and 1940s? Consider the song titles, the artists, and the political, social and economic times depicted in the book.