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EXCLUSIVE

ALICIA KEYS

How exploring classic sounds pointed her to the future



FIGHTING THE 'LOUDNESS WAR'

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010
VOLUME 01, ISSUE 01
PERIODICAL \$5.95 U.S. / \$6.95 CANADIAN

PREMIERE ISSUE JAN/FEB 2010

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ELEMENTAL FORCES

ALICIA KEYS LOOKS BACK ON A DECADE OF
INSPIRATION AND EXPLORATION—AND AHEAD TO
A FUTURE INCREASINGLY FULL OF POSSIBILITY

BY CHRIS NEAL



Yu Tsai

Ap-ly enough, it all started with the keys. Last May, as she began the process of making her new album, Alicia Keys sought inspiration for her new sounds—by discovering a lot of old sounds. With the help of her longtime engineer Ann Mincieli, Keys amassed a collection of vintage keyboards and set about discovering what exciting new textures her talented fingers could coax from them. In particular she focused on keyboards from the '70s and early '80s, a period during which the synthesizer was just finding its own distinctive voice in the musical conversation. Keys and Mincieli filled the superstar singer's recording facility, The Oven Studios, with equipment that would evoke the boldly exploratory sounds of that era.

"I started to get into more oscillator-based keyboards, and what those sounded like and what sounds I could make from them," she recalls. "So it started mostly on that side. The beginning was experimenting, learning and exploring the keyboards, and that led to where the sound started to go."

The sound eventually led her to *The Element of Freedom*, Keys' fourth album and a fitting caper for a decade that saw her make a remarkable evolution from neosoul upstart to one of pop and R&B's defining voices. This journey, too, began behind a keyboard. Born Alicia Cook in Manhattan in 1981 and raised mostly by her mother, Keys began studying piano at age 7 and quickly acquainted herself with the music of Beethoven, Mozart and Chopin. She followed the muse to the Professional Performing Arts high school in Manhattan and to Columbia University before dropping out to pursue music full-time. Several years of struggle and false starts gave way to sudden success with the release of her critically acclaimed debut album, 2001's *Songs in A Minor*, which earned her five Grammys and has gone on to sell more than 12 million copies around the world.

That album marked the beginning of her ongoing collaboration with co-producer Kerry "Krucial" Brothers, with whom she would form a production company (KrucialKeys Enterprises) and, in 2005, open The Oven. "You come in and you feel like you're walking into your grandmother's house," she says of the facility, which is in fact a renovated three-story house on Long Island. "It's very comfortable. You can take your shoes off and sit on the couch and lounge a little bit." When it's time to get down to business, Keys corrals her players into a 500-plus square-foot live room, presided over from a 230-square-foot control room outfitted with a mix of vintage and high-tech gear—and that's just Studio A. The facility features two more studios, which came in handy when time pressures forced Keys to begin mixing *The Element of Freedom* before recording was completed.

By the time The Oven opened its doors, Keys was well established as one of her generation's leading lights. Her sophomore album, 2003's *The Diary of Alicia Keys*, nearly matched the phenomenal sales of its predecessor and brought its creator

another three Grammys. (Her total today stands at 12, the third highest of any female in history.) She then added author and actor to her résumé with a best-selling book (2004's *Tears for Water: Songbook of Poems and Lyrics*) and acting roles (2007's *Smokin' Aces* and *The Nanny Diaries*, 2008's *The Secret Life of Bees*). By 2006 she was so entrenched in the pop culture that none other than Bob Dylan dropped her name in his song "Thunder on the Mountain." (The rock bard even correctly namechecked her neighborhood of origin: "I was thinkin' 'bout Alicia Keys, couldn't help but crying / She was born in Hell's Kitchen, I was living down the line.") In 2007 *As I Am* became her third studio album to debut at No. 1 and expanded her musical palette deeper into R&B history with touches of Motown and Stax.

Now *The Element of Freedom* finds her again drawing upon the past in order to push her music into the future, not just with her array of classic keyboards and gear but with a new slate of preferred influences: She cites '70s and '80s pop juggernauts like Fleetwood Mac, Genesis, The Police and Tears for Fears as touchstones for the new album, and the hit "Try Sleeping With a Broken Heart" smoothly evokes '80s-era Prince.

Well before the album's release Keys could be heard dominating the radio airwaves as the featured singer on hip-hop star Jay-Z's smash "Empire State of Mind," which was adopted as an anthem for the victorious World Series attempt by the artists' shared hometown baseball team, the New York Yankees. (Keys' own, much-revamped version of the song closes *Element*.) Keys

has also recently been busy hosting her sixth annual Black Ball benefit to help families affected by AIDS. She's launching her new AK Worldwide business and philanthropic organization, which is intended to handle her nonmusical ventures (its first offering is a line of handcrafted jewelry, The Barber's Daughters). She's currently preparing for a major tour, set to begin in March.

Alicia Keys made time during a busy day in her native New York City to discuss her evolving creative process, her career to date and her ever-broadening horizons. "It's been so phenomenal," she says, "and I know that I'm still at the very beginning of where I want to go."

When you first started working on the album, what did you have in mind?

Whenever I go in to make a record, I don't ever know exactly what I'm planning to do with it. (Laughs) I go into the process to explore where I am and what it feels like and what it's going to turn into. Maybe someday I'll make a very conceptual album, where I'll know from the beginning

what I'm trying to achieve. What I always want to do when I make a new record is to expand to the next level, go to a new place and be genuine about my expression. I knew I wanted to experiment with a lot of these new, different keyboards. My engineer's a collector—she's like a junkie. She loves to get all kinds of vintage things. She



Keys at the 2009 World AIDS Day concert in New York City



'THERE HAS BEEN SO MUCH TO LEARN OVER THE YEARS—AND I FEEL LIKE I'VE LEARNED AT LIGHT SPEED.'

collects guitars and amps and things, and so I have a lot of those in my studio. I also wanted to go into old drum machines and old keyboards from the late '70s and early '80s.

What keyboards in particular turned out to be important to the record?

The [Roland] Juno was definitely a staple—both the Juno-106 and the original. Just great sounds, and you can always find a beautiful way to enhance a song with those. I introduced the Jupiter on the last record [*As I Am*] with "No One," and I experimented with those some more. I used a Moog a whole lot. I barely even used a bass player on this record. It's all Moogs and low synth sounds; it just gave the record a rumble. I got into the [Roland] G-70, which is my new favorite keyboard—it's so classic. And then some of the more traditional stuff. But I don't think I played a ton of Wurliitzer or a ton of Rhodes. It was really about those other sounds.

As you were experimenting, did you already have songs written or did they emerge from the sounds?

It's a mixture. Some of the songs are ideas or pieces of a song that I've started at home. For others I start a song and add a sound to it, and that sound morphs into the beginning of another idea. Sometimes it's just a jam session between me and my partner, Krucial, or my guitar player and bass player come by and we do that kind of thing. It's a mixture.

You typically work with a co-producer of some sort—in addition to Krucial, Jeff Bhasker, Swizz Beatz and others who make production contributions to *The Element of Freedom*. At what point do they come into the process?

It depends. Sometimes, like with this album, I spend days alone in the studio, creating. I'll just sit in there and learn the sounds and write songs by myself. Then once we get started, myself and Krucial—we've done a majority of the records together—we'll sit down and I'll start playing different vibes and songs I've been working on and we'll go through new songs that we're into by other artists, or old songs that we love. I'll put together a whole playlist of music that I'm into, a flavor of the things I've been vibing on. He'll start vibing on that. Then we get into the studio and start some new ideas from scratch. So it all ebbs and flows; it's not necessarily on a schedule.

What's the working dynamic between Krucial and yourself?

Mostly it'll start from an idea. Maybe I'll start a song on the piano at home, bring it in and say, "It's something like this..." and I'll have a very strong concept of what I want and I'll know the last line of the chorus and what the song is talking about. Then we sit and go through it and he'll be like, "I love that, what do you think about this?" And I'll be like, "No, I like it like it is." "Yeah, but what if we make the melody stronger? Something like this..." "Yeah, I like that, let's explore it." We'll add some music around it. He'll add some drums. We'll talk about where it should go and how it should feel. It's very collaborative.

What is the atmosphere like at your studio facility, The Oven?

Amazing, it's a wonderland. It's close to the way I picture they recorded at Motown, the "house" kind of feel. [*Motown's 1960s recording facility, Hitsville USA, was a converted home.*] It feels very comfortable. You can get all your best players in a room and play and start an idea—there's a lot of energy there. The studio itself is totally state of the art; everything is the best of the best. You have all this gear that we have piled up in all the rooms: drum sets, amps, basses and guitars and keyboards. There's a kitchen, offices and another studio upstairs, so both rooms can be going at the same time.

We created, mixed and mastered the record all at The Oven. We have exactly identical rooms, the A room and B room. Toward the end of the album we'd be working in Studio A, and Studio B would be where the mix is happening. We'd go up and check out the mix, make sure it's good, then go down to Studio A and finish what we were doing, then leave for the night. In the morning, Dave Kutch, who mastered the record, would go in and master what we did that night. It's true factory style; it's crazy.

What does your engineer, Ann Mincieli, bring to the process?

Ann is phenomenal. She's extremely organized; she helps on the coordinating side far better than anyone because she understands what's needed. She understands what the musicians and artists we're bringing in need. She's efficient. She loves music. She's an aficionado. She's studied music herself; she's very dedicated to learning and constantly evolving. She studies past techniques of The Beatles and others, and goes into what equipment they used, what boards they were on, what outboard gear they used, what effects they used. She also loves to collect. She'll say, "I just found this amazing keyboard that Lionel Richie used, check it out." She's constantly exposing me to new possibilities. She's an incredible part of the whole process.

While you're working, how much are you thinking ahead to what's going to be a hit or what's going to sound good on the radio?

I don't think about that at all. That's extremely detrimental. I'm only thinking about making great songs. How can I express in music this thought I have as clearly as possible, so that it's memorable and people will feel it and love it. It's about creating the best music, I'm not thinking about those other things.

You seem to be spending less time behind the piano lately when you perform. Is that by design?

I do what the song calls for. I do what feels right. I don't feel like I need to be stuck anywhere in particular just because I need to be there. I feel very comfortable in my skin and I feel very comfortable performing, so I do what the song calls for, what feels natural for it.

Is it a vulnerable feeling, not to have the piano in front of you?

Not at all.



EXTRA ELEMENTS

Alicia Keys recorded 28 songs for her new album, *The Element of Freedom*, but only 14 appear on the finished product. So where are the rest? A further seven tracks can be found on the numerous variations of the album sent to different retail outlets, including such intriguing material as the ethereal "Dreaming" (available on the B-side of the "Doesn't Mean Anything" international single) and a cover of the 1975 Michael Jackson hit "We're Almost There" (on the "Empire Edition" of *Element*, available at aliciakeys.com). Other tracks can be found at iTunes and on a Japanese deluxe edition.

You produced Whitney Houston's hit "Million Dollar Bill" last year. When you produce another artist, what's your approach?

My philosophy as a producer is to get the most stunning, unbelievable performance out of the artist I can possibly get—and also to make them totally comfortable. As an artist myself, I feel like the only way creative songs come together is when you're comfortable. You can't be uncomfortable and do great work. I'm very mindful about their needs and what they're going through. We'll talk for a while, laugh a lot. I set up an environment where they feel relaxed, and I start to learn about them. Every artist is different. Some want to do things numerous times until they get it right, and some tend to like to do two or three times and capture the best. I've got to learn their style. But my main goal is to make the song sound incredible and make the artist sound unbelievable.

'I'VE DEFINITELY EVOLVED OVER THE LAST DECADE, BUT I AM VERY MUCH THE SAME PERSON.'

RIGHT-HAND WOMAN

Alicia Keys' longtime recording engineer, Ann Mincieli, offers an inside view

New York native Ann Mincieli has been Alicia Keys' secret weapon in the recording studio for more than a decade. The two first met when Mincieli was an assistant engineer at the studio where Keys was working on her debut album, *Songs in A Minor*. A few years later, Mincieli was tasked with designing and running Keys' Long Island recording facility, The Oven Studios, where she served as chief engineer on the singer's hit 2007 album *As I Am*. On *The Element of Freedom*, Mincieli is listed as "album coordinator"—a credit that reflects the many critical roles she now plays in Keys' organization. "She's extremely intelligent and very creative, and also organized and focused," Keys observes. "She's the best of both worlds."

**How did your approach to recording *The Element of Freedom* differ from *As I Am*?**

Every album has its own theme and concept, and Alicia is a person who really loves gear and technology—she really likes to dive in and start using things right away. Her goal is to raise the bar with every new album, so we're constantly working with things we've never worked with before and experimenting with new ideas. This time around, she wanted to surround her music with a '70s and '80s kind of coloration, so I went on eBay and started buying up used gear in order to put together a huge sample library of vintage keyboard and drum machine sounds for her to work with. Having said that, my approach as engineer was really much the same: I'm there to do whatever it takes to achieve and implement Alicia's vision. With every new album, we like to stretch the technology further, but this time around we also revisited where everything came from. To that end, we not only collected a bunch of old synths and drum machines, but also old guitars, amps, pedals and microphones. At the same time, we were relying more on today's technology by using more plug-ins. I guess you could say what we were creating was a retro-futuristic vibe. (*laughs*)

Were you tempted to record the album on analog tape in order to further the retro sound?

Not really. Maybe that's because a lot of Alicia's last album was recorded on tape, so it was kind of, "been there, done that." Mind you, most of the drum samples were created by recording drum machine sounds on tape.

Why did the recording team expand considerably for this project?

Mainly because the label pushed our deadline up, plus we needed more bonus tracks than usual because we had to create different versions for different outlets like Starbucks, iTunes and Target. In the end, we had to bring in Tony Maserati and Manny Marroquin to help with the mixing so that we could keep recording without stopping to mix. That gave us the extra time we needed—it was basically a matter of adding hands to meet a tight deadline.

Why do you think you and Alicia work so well together?

I've found that most artists look to give engineers and up-and-coming people a shot. When they realize that you're as serious and passionate about what you do as they are about what they do, they recognize it. It probably also helps that I'm as much of an insomniac and workaholic as Alicia is: We're the only two members of the team that can outdo each other at the end of the day. (*laughs*) When everybody else is dead and can't get up, there we are, working away.

—Howard Massey

What's the idea behind AK Worldwide?

AK Worldwide is the home base for everything I do. It's the place where I'm able to constantly bring to life the many ideas that I have or the creative ways I want to develop in my entrepreneurial spirit and bring to the world. It lets me keep everything organized and create the environment and the representation that reflects who I am. I always say we're in the business of inspiration. I feel like that's the most important thing I can do with the things I'm getting into. We're doing so many things. One of the first projects is a beautiful jewelry line, which I love because it's about art—wonderful artisans create and engrave these pieces, which are so unique and individual. The part about them that really resonates with me is that there are words on them—prose, lyrics, prayers, words that are powerful—so that when you wear these pieces you feel inspired by the words on them. They resonate with the person, because it's the person that chose those words. That definitely talks to the songwriter in me.

Does that feel like a new creative outlet?

Yes. It's really exciting to be able to express so many creative elements. Being creative in that realm stretches my brain and makes me even more creative in the musical realm, because it makes you think differently, more broadly.

Are you OK with having to think as a businesswoman?

I am very comfortable with that. Ever since I was very young I've always been front and center in my business, and I'm just taking that to the next level now. It's how I do my business and how I create an environment around me that's going to be fulfilling. Nobody else can do it. It's definitely my thing. I have an amazing support system, don't get me wrong, but it has to be the way that I see it and the way that I want it executed. I'm really comfortable doing that, and I'm getting more knowledgeable about making that the way that it should be.

What comes to mind when you look back at your career so far?

It blows my mind, just the fact that it's been nine years. It's been an incredible process. It's been so rewarding, and so fulfilling. There's so much to learn, and I feel like I've learned at light speed. To be able to connect with people through music and have an outlet to reach people with has been a huge blessing.

Do you feel like the same person you were in 2001, when the first album came out?

Fundamentally we're always the same person. We are who we are. I am that person and will always be, in regards to my heart and the basics of my composition. But I feel like I've grown so much, just because with experience you grow, become more knowledgeable and understand what works for you and what doesn't. I've evolved, but I am very much the same person.

Looking ahead, what are your hopes?

I want to continue to bring incredible music to the world. I want to be known as a person who created timeless music. I would love for my music to far, far outlive me in every way. I'm also in the process of developing ideas for Broadway. I'm doing some development and production for television and film, which I'd like to continue to get into. I'd like to exercise my entrepreneurial spirit and move into other business ventures and continue to be a part of creating a positive business, one that can enhance the world. I'd like to be someone who contributes to our global society. I want to continue to expand every day. M