



Ten stellar years:
Alicia Keys's 2001
debut, *Songs in
A Minor*, sold 12
million copies and
won five Grammys.
The anniversary
reissue of the album
arrives this month.

ALICIA IN LOVE

MUSIC, MOTHERHOOD AND THE MAN WHO HAS HER HEART

BY JEANNINE AMBER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY YU TSAI

Years ago, when Alicia Keys was just starting out, Oprah Winfrey gave her a piece of advice. “She whispered in my ear, ‘Keep some of you for you,’” recalls Keys. It’s wisdom the singer has taken pains to live by. Look back on the scores of interviews she has done in the decade since her debut, and you’ll find plenty about her music and absolutely nothing about her love life. There’s only one problem: When a woman falls in love, really in love, the kind of love that is all-encompassing, intoxicating and whole—well, that kind of love is hard to hide.

So here is Keys now, in a recording studio in lower Manhattan, in a booth she calls The Spaceship. The room is lit by the glow of a computer monitor screen saver that colors the walls an incandescent blue, that fades to green, then turns to purple. It’s like sitting inside a giant mood ring. Dressed in jeans, black leather boots and a black turtleneck, Keys, 30, sits forward in her seat, feet planted firmly on the ground, like a boxer. She’s talking about the release of the tenth anniversary deluxe and collector’s editions of *Songs in A Minor*, due out this month. Then she leans back, nods her head and smiles. She has just been asked about her husband, record producer Kasseem Dean, 32, who goes by the name Swizz Beatz. You can almost see Oprah’s advice battling for primacy over Keys’s bubbling joy. One minute she’s holding tight to details. “I can’t tell you how he proposed,” she demurs. “That’s our private thing.” The next, she can’t stop praising the man she calls her soul mate. “It’s such an inspiration to be around someone who is so ignited by life,” she enthuses. “He’s so smart; he’s always dreaming up possibilities.”

When she speaks about her husband, Keys is transformed from a thoughtful artist reflecting on her decade in the music industry to a woman fully alight. Alicia in love zings like a

Family affair: Swizz Beatz (left) and Alicia Keys may live in the media’s glare, but they keep their baby out of the spotlight. Below, the couple dance the night away.



Performing Arts School. She also signed her first recording contract, and after only four weeks at college, she left to concentrate on music full-time. She set up a studio in her Harlem apartment and wrote, recorded and produced much of the music herself. But when she presented the tracks to the execs at Columbia Records, she says they instructed her to go back to the studio, this time with established producers. For two years she battled with execs until finally Columbia released her from her contract. She went on to sign with music legend Clive Davis, the man who discovered Whitney Houston. *Songs in A Minor* was released in 2001, with the music as Keys envisioned it. Says the singer, who is busy adding previously unreleased tracks and a DVD documentary to the anniversary editions, “When I listen to that album now, it’s like going back to the essence of who I am as a musician.”

THE MAN IN HER LIFE

For the past decade Keys has been riding a wave of unbroken success. She has released four studio albums, all of which have gone multiplatinum, and she’s taken home 14 Grammy Awards. Her foundation, Keep a Child Alive, has raised more than \$28 million for women and children impacted by HIV/AIDS (see sidebar), and she’s turned in strong film performances, starring most recently opposite Jennifer Hudson and Queen Latifah in 2008’s *The Secret Life of Bees*. Last March it was announced that, alongside Demi Moore and Jennifer Aniston, she would make her directorial debut in Lifetime Network’s *Project Five*. Slated to air in the fall, the project features short films about the impact of breast cancer on five women. “I love taking myself out of my comfort zone,” says the singer. “It forces me to grow.”

But success, no matter how dizzying, can’t compare to the thrill of falling in love. Keys first met Dean, who was raised in The Bronx, when the two were teenagers struggling to get into the

music industry. Now a sought-after producer, Dean has worked with everyone from Beyoncé and Jay-Z to Whitney Houston to Lil’ Wayne. He also produced tracks for Keys’s fourth studio album, 2009’s *The Element of Freedom*, and he has always been a fan. “My wife’s music is on par with the greats like Marvin and Stevie,” he says. “She’s ahead of her time.”

While Keys says it’s wonderful to be with one who understands her craft, her bond with Dean transcends music. “Our relationship definitely grew from a friendship,” she says. “It’s really beautiful to be understood without a lot of excess talking. With Kasseem, I can be my true self, and he can be his true self and we shine equally. When we are in the same room, nobody falls in the shadow.”

Keys says Dean has inspired her to rethink the way she gets things done, plowing ahead with the relentless work ethic she learned as a child. “I’m a doer,” she says. “So if I have a tour to put together, I’m going to work 12 hours a day until that tour is perfect. But he is so fluid; he’s showed me how to not be so structured, to allow room for some magic. With him my spirit is lighter, my heart is lighter, my energy is lighter. Everything is lighter!”

Initially her feelings took her by surprise. The two were working together in the studio in the fall of 2008 when Keys says she began to get an inkling that there was something special about Dean, who had recently separated from his wife. “I’d known him forever,” she says. “And one day I looked at him and it was like, *whoa!*” A few months later Keys and Rose were at a nightclub in New York when Keys suddenly leaned over to her friend and whispered, “I think he’s The One.” “I was like, ‘What? I can’t hear you!’” remembers Rose with a laugh. “We didn’t go for lunch for this important conversation. No. I had to read her lips! But I’ve never seen her so happy.”

Dean is equally smitten. “My wife is understanding and caring and a great mom, a great leader, a great teacher and a great student,” he says. “She is my partner and soul mate.” ▸

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live wire. Like a girl on fire. Like she’s been plugged in and turned on. “Falling in love is such a force,” she says. “But this is a whole other level of magic.”

ALWAYS A STAR

When we first met Keys in 2001, she was like no one we’d seen before. Trained in classical piano, she rocked homegirl braids and tomboy boots and sang about love, longing and self-respect in a voice dripping with soul. In a landscape filled with half-naked vixens, Keys arrived like a summer storm, exhilarating and unexpected.

“Even when she was very young you could see she had something really special,” says Peter Edge, president of A&R at RCA/J Records. Edge was introduced to Keys by her manager when the singer was 14. “Alicia had a kind of toughness that comes from growing up in New York,” he recalls. “While other kids were playing in suburban backyards, Alicia was already running around Manhattan and making music.”

Raised in New York’s Hell’s Kitchen by her mother, Terri Augello, an actress and a paralegal, Keys came of age in a neighborhood filled with strip clubs and porn shops. Augello, who split with Keys’s father, Craig Cook, when their daughter was still a toddler, did

everything she could to keep her only child busy. Keys took ballet at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and swimming at a local pool. She did gymnastics and basketball and, starting when she was 7, piano lessons. At the piano, Keys found her muse. When she was 9 she began writing her own songs. By 14 she had penned “Butterflyz” and “The Life,” both of which would make it onto *Songs in A Minor*. “Alicia always had so much soul in her voice,” remembers Erika Rose, Keys’s childhood friend and president of AK Worldwide, which oversees Keys’s music, film and philanthropic efforts. “She performed En Vogue’s ‘Hold On’ at a family reunion when we were 13. Everybody was like, ‘Holy crap, she can *saaang!*’”

But even with all that talent, Keys sometimes didn’t like to practice. “I loved piano, but one day I told my mother I didn’t want to play anymore,” the singer says. “It was summer and everyone else was outside. My mother said, ‘I understand you might want a break, but when we agree to do something you don’t suddenly decide you don’t want to do it. You’re going to have to see this through.’ That was a big lesson for me. When you say you’re going to do something, be a person of your word.”

Big things started happening for Keys when she was 16. She was accepted into Columbia University on academic scholarship, having graduated valedictorian from New York’s Professional

SISTER, FRIEND | Saving Lives Around the World



A woman on a mission: Keys embraces a group of children while doing outreach for KCA.

Alicia Keys has made a name for herself as a princess of soul. But to women and children around the world, she is known as the woman who saved their lives.

On a 2001 visit to South Africa, Keys was struck by the suffering she witnessed among women and children impacted by HIV/AIDS. “I went to a clinic where HIV-positive women were begging me not to let their babies die,” she recalls. “I couldn’t turn my back on them.”

Keys joined forces with activist Leigh Blake to found Keep a Child Alive, an organization devoted to combating the effects of the virus in Africa and India. Since 2003, KCA has raised more than \$28 million

and helped more than 250,000 adults and children by providing lifesaving antiretroviral drugs, supporting children orphaned by HIV/AIDS and building a community-based health care center.

“We often think issues are so huge that there is nothing we can do,” says Keys, who raises money every year with star-studded Black Ball concerts. “We need to erase that thought. Every contribution helps save lives.” Adds Blake: “We live to ameliorate the pain. To the people she’s helped, Alicia is sister, daughter, angel and friend.” —J.A. **To donate \$5 to KCA, text ALIVE to 90999. For info and to donate more, visit keepachildalive.org.**

THIS PAGE: FROM TOP: INPHOTO.COM; JOHNNY NUNEZ/WIREIMAGE; OPPOSITE PAGE: PAULINE VON MOLTKE PAO.

Keys confides that not many could compete with the beautiful way Dean proposed. "But that's okay because it's not a competition," she says earnestly. Then she adds with a laugh, "But if it was a competition he would win." Dean bought her a supersize engagement ring, which she doesn't always wear. "It's kind of like flossing, like *pow!*" she says, explaining its absence this afternoon. She looks down at her wedding band, an elegant circle of diamonds, and smiles.

THE BITTER AND THE SWEET

The couple were married on the French island of Corsica last July in a small ceremony with 60 family members and closest friends. Keys, about six months pregnant and dressed in a Vera Wang one-shoulder gown, walked the aisle with her mother and father. Her son, Egypt, who has Dean's pensive eyes, was born on October 14. The child was named in honor of the place where Keys once sought refuge when the pressure of fame became too much. "I had been working and touring and coming back and recording and making a movie and this and that, and then my grandmother got very sick and it was just like *boom!*" says Keys, referring to the period after the release of her second album, *The Diary of Alicia Keys*. "I got to a place where I was so uncontrollably tired I couldn't find my way back."

So she boarded a plane by herself and flew halfway around the world. In Egypt, she toured the pyramids and, inspired by the boundless possibilities of human creativity, came back to herself. It was, she says, a spiritual reawakening. And so when Dean suggested the name for their child, "The feeling of power and solidness came back to me," she says. "I knew that was it."

But Keys's happiness was not without complications. Dean had been married before, to R&B singer Mashonda Tifrere, 33, known for her single "No Panties" and her role on VH1's reality soap *Love*

didn't start seeing each other until after they had been separated for months." Keys points out that up until now we've heard only one side of this three-sided story. "I was very aware of all the false things that were being said about me," she says, measuring each word. "And it definitely hurt. But I was sure that if I engaged, it would become a back-and-forth like some sort of sick entertainment, which goes against everything I believe in and only would have made things worse. Of course, people will believe what they want to believe. But I know the truth will shine through."

Keys's refusal to jump into the fray is not at all surprising, says her best friend, Rose. "Alicia doesn't get involved in tit for tat," she says. "In fact, sometimes it's kind of annoying. Like in those moments when I want to engage in a little girl chat, say about someone's outfit, Alicia will never join in. I'm like, 'Can you just have fun with me for two seconds and talk about how ridiculous she looks?' She doesn't participate. That's just who she is."

Recently, there have been signs that the turmoil is subsiding. Last March Tifrere penned another open letter in which she gave thanks for her "beautiful blended family" and acknowledged Keys as a "partner" in raising her son. Keys seems to welcome the turnaround. "Things are really good now," she says. "Kasseem is very present in his children's lives. I wouldn't be able to love him otherwise. We're doing what's best for the children. That's always been the most important thing. I look forward to helping them shine. They are all so phenomenal and I love them so much."

MUSIC AND MOTHERHOOD

Behind Keys, the computer screen saver shifts again, coloring the walls of the recording studio twilight blue. While Keys likes the spaceship ambience of this studio, there's another recording house a few blocks away she prefers. "It's darker and sexier," she says, "more vibe-y." Before the baby Keys would

create much of her music in studios, sometimes well into the night. But 3:00 A.M. recording sessions don't work well with 7:00 A.M. baby feedings. So now she writes at home, a woman and her piano, her son in his little chair by her feet. For Keys, the change has been good. "Sometimes at the studio you can get lost in the production, but if the song is amazing, it's amazing with nothing," she says.

Ideas are coming to her differently now that she's a mother. "In the past, I've written mostly from my own perspective," she says. "But I just wrote a song for my next album that was inspired by a conversation I had with a man who was expressing how indebted he feels to God. He said, 'I owe God.'" Now, what an interesting thought. And as much as I believe in God, for me that translated into how much I owe my mother for who I am. So I went home and I wrote 'I Owe You.' It's dedicated to her."

Love and motherhood can transform women. Hearts swell, and we become a fuller, more complete version of ourselves, capable of things we never envisioned. "I was very closed for a long time," Keys reflects. "But I feel so open now. To feel open like this means you've found the center in yourself. You're not hiding; you're not worried about anything. Everything's going to be just fine." □

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"I WAS VERY AWARE OF THE FALSE THINGS BEING SAID ABOUT ME," KEYS ADMITS. "AND IT DEFINITELY HURT. BUT I KNOW THE TRUTH."