

Alicia Keys needs little introduction. The young singer/pianist's first two albums—her 2001 debut, *Songs in A Minor*, and 2003's *The Diary of Alicia Keys*—have together sold more than ten million copies, and her soulful pop R&B has won her nine GRAMMY® Awards so far.



Having just returned home from a year and a half on the road, Alicia is currently preparing to record a new "unplugged" album at MTV's studios to be released on MBKEntertainment/J Records. "It's very exciting to go from one medium to the other," she says. "This version of my live show was very thematic, very conceptual. And the unplugged project will be going back to my essence, just me and the piano in an acoustic set."

piano inspirations alicia key's

ALICIA USES A VARIETY OF YAMAHA PIANOS AND OTHER keyboards, including the white 6'1" DC3 Disklavier Conservatory Grand she played on her recent tour, the C3NEO 6'1" Conservatory Collection Grand in her personal studio, and the very special purple piano she keeps at home.

You began writing songs when you were very young. What initially prompted you to write?

I started writing songs at about 11, but I guess they really started making sense at about 12 or 13. I remember this one time when I was around 11—it was right after my grandfather passed away and I was having a lot of trouble dealing with his being gone. I went with my mother to see the movie *Philadelphia*, and there was this scene where Tom Hanks was listening to this beautiful opera. And the way they shot that climactic scene totally engulfed me. I was so moved. I went home that night, sat down at my piano and wrote a song dedicated to my grandfather. It was the first time I got out all these feelings I was trying to pretend I wasn't feeling. And it was all provoked by the emotion of that movie.

What kinds of feelings or experiences still send you running to the piano?

So many things can inspire me. That first instance of writing a song really came from a moment of being touched. When I got a little older and began writing more, I started trying to piggyback my songs off

other songs I loved. But they didn't come out good at all.

I was trying to make them sound like somebody else's song so they would be good; and, therefore, they were bad!

I learned that when something really affects you, that's when you write a good song. Not because you're trying to make it be a hit, but because it's really burning you, affecting you in a good way or a bad way. So that's where I am now. Sometimes memories make me want to write, or a simple conversation with a close friend might spark my creative flow. Sometimes a television show reminds me of something, or there's an experience I'm going through in real life. Sometimes an amazing song that I just discovered inspires me to go to the piano and do something in my own style, just from feeling the expression of another person's heart and spirit. It's just life and living.

Does the piano itself influence the way you write? Would the structure or emotions of your songs be different if you were, say, primarily a guitarist?

It definitely has an influence. The tone of the piano has a lot to do with how the music comes out. I think that's why people think I'm so, so serious! [Laughs.] The piano is a very serious instrument, which I like—the sound, the tone, the quality of it. It has a heavy,

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Alicia Keys performs on the opening night of her "Diary Tour" February 23, 2005 at the Township Auditorium in Columbia, South Carolina.

Photo: Frank Micelotta/Getty Images



Jamie Foxx and Alicia Keys perform on stage during the 47th Annual Grammy Awards at Staples Center, February 13, 2005 in Los Angeles, California.

strong, passionate sound, depending on what you play and how you play it. If I wrote on a guitar more, perhaps my feelings and my songs would come out differently. But I love my piano, and I love the way it makes me write. One of my favorite songwriters is Carole King, the way that she is so honest and truthful, the way that it feels when you hear her songs on the piano—it's classic! That's what I love about the piano—it's always going to be classic.

You're very involved in arranging and producing your music. What are some of the most valuable things you've learned about working in the studio?

I love creating the sound of a song, like deciding

whether to keep the initial piano chords or exchange them for another instrument. One of the things I learned early on was layering—the way that you can have three different instruments play the same line to give the sound a lushness it wouldn't have if you used just one sound. Also using crescendos and decrescendos, dynamics that make you feel a song rise and break down. It connects you to the music and makes the music feel like what the words are saying.

I also like to combine the programming aspects of the studio with the live aspects of music—I find that it really complements my style and brings together the



different influences of my life. On my first album, with my partner Kerry "Krucial" Brothers, we recorded every vocal, every chorus and harmony, everything straight through, with no digital cutting or pasting whatsoever. That gave the music a very honest and natural feeling that I still hold on to, even now that we're using Pro Tools. Instead of saying "let's copy and paste this chorus," I'll say, "let me just sing the chorus again, 'cause it's going to take longer to paste it than it'll take me to sing it!"

Which do you enjoy more: studio work or live performance?

I enjoy them equally—they're two different energies. The studio is very personal and private. It's my own time to hear my own thoughts. Or if I'm collaborating, it's an intimate moment between me and whoever I'm collaborating with. Whereas I love performing, but when I'm playing live I'm always giving, always pouring out. It's about sharing with the listeners. Both of them bring me a lot of joy—they're just two different sides. I usually find that after I've written an album, I'm ready to share it and spread it—and after I've done a big tour, I'm ready to go back into that solitude! It works out perfectly.

Why do you prefer Yamaha pianos?

I definitely love the touch of Yamahas. Obviously they vary, like all pianos do, but I really like the way Yamaha pianos sound—they have a richness and a fullness. Because I was classically trained, I need a feeling of weight. Yamahas have a nice balance between that strong, heavy weight and the fluidity of being able to play smoothly. So I really like the touch, and I love the sound of Yamahas.

On the road, I love using baby grands and grand pianos, but it's very hard to mic a piano live. Using the Disklavier lets us combine the acoustic sound with the MIDI sound, which gives me the safety of a constant sound source. In case something falls apart or cuts out, God forbid, the MIDI piano sound is right there as a backup.

Yamaha also made you a custom purple piano for your "Karma" video last year.

Yes, it was great! I wanted to do something crazy for the video, something that would shock the senses. I was going to go for blue, but then I decided on purple. It was a lot of fun. Though we shot that portion of the video in the Dominican Republic, and the piano could not get cleared for entry. They just would not let that piano in! And we were like, "Wait, that's the most important part of the video!" So finally they got it through, and when I saw it, I just loved it. It's in my house right now. I love that piano!

What's in the future for you? Are there other aspects of music you'd like to explore?

The future is so bright and big, and the more I live, the more I learn about the different things that I want to get involved in and get better at. I want to continue to play and improve my musicianship. I want to keep creating with my partner Krucial—we have a company called Krucial Keys, and the goal of the company, between my music and music with other artists, is simply to put together incredible songs—music that will stand the test of time. I definitely want to go down in history as one of those people who contributed to the way music will be remembered.

I also want to get into scoring movies. And acting—I've been acting since I was a young girl, but the music called me first. But now I'm going to be spreading my wings in many different ways with writing and producing, with movies and television.

I want to continue to grow as a humanitarian as well. I have two charities. One is Keep a Child Alive, www.keepachildalive.org, which helps provide AIDS medication to children in Africa. The other is FTGU, which stands for Frum Tha Ground Up, www.ftgu.org. That one is about motivating the youth of America, kids from 13 to 18,

Photo: Scott Gries/Getty Images

Alicia Keys performs at "Save The Music: A Concert To Benefit The VH1 Save The Music Foundation" at the Beacon Theater April 11, 2005 in New York City.

