

ONREE GILL: ALICIA'S KEYS

"Some artists just want their music to sound good, but they're not all that interested in the particulars," notes Onree Gill, Alicia Keys' musical director. "They might not really care how you get from one song to the next or about the details of the arrangements. They don't have a clue about music theory or music history."



And Alicia Keys?

"She's the opposite of that," says Gill, speaking on the eve of his departure for an Asian tour with the GRAMMY-snatching singer/songwriter. "She wants to be involved in every single note. She wants to know how the music goes from point A to point B, if it's dynamic and dramatic enough. She's a musician first—she still practices hard every day. It's a great thing to work with someone who cares so much about every color, every key, every note that's being played—and why it's being played. For Alicia, every note she sings or plays has to make sense."

Gill's gig entails more than merely backing up Keys' voice and piano with his own keyboards. "As musical director,

I wear many different hats," he explains. "I work with Alicia to arrange all the music. I'm responsible for putting together the auditions. If someone gets sick, I find a replacement and help prepare them. Sometimes it's almost a father-figure role: you're responsible for getting the kids dressed, and getting them to school on time. Except I'm responsible for making sure they know their music and getting them from point A to point B."

Gill is young, but like Keys, he has a special affinity for the old-school styles that define the singer's sound. Born in North Carolina but raised in the Bronx, where he still resides, Gill's childhood was steeped in music. "Church was an important part of my education," he says. "As a little kid, I'd watch the drummer in church. I knew I wanted to do what he was doing."

That early exposure to gospel music shaped Gill's musicianship. "In the church environment, music is so important and powerful," he notes. "Gospel has a lot of improvisation—it's almost completely free creative expression. Once you know the rules and boundaries of chord

structures, there's almost nothing you can't play. That's what makes it so inspiring and intriguing. It really develops your ear, figuring out what's going on with the music and where it's heading."

Another crucial influence was Gill's father, singer/keyboardist Walter Gill. "He used to take me to the studio, where he'd work on everything from gospel to R&B to disco. I'd just sit there drinking orange juice and watching them cut records. He let me play drums on one of his records when I was nine." By the time Onree reached high school, he'd taken up bass and keyboards as well, studying with, among others, Frieda Hollander, an assistant conductor for the New York Philharmonic.

Gill, who has also worked with John Mayer, Eve, Missy Elliott, and Kelly Price, says multi-instrumental skills are a great asset for a music director: "They help me relate to the different players. I understand their instruments and know what you can get from them when writing and arranging. I can communicate better than someone who doesn't understand the instruments first-hand, because I can explain exactly what I'm looking for or even show the players."

Even when he's wailing on keyboards, Gill thinks in terms of multiple instruments. He uses two Yamaha Motif keyboards to conjure strings, brass, pianos, and clavichords. "I tend to favor those organic-sounding colors," he notes. "Of course, my favorite sound of all is the full grand piano. Yamaha has the best-sounding pianos I've ever heard on an electronic keyboard, period. I like the vintage electric piano sounds, too. The Motif strings are very warm and rich—they really open up wide as you play. The same goes for the brass sounds: you really hear the dynamics. They're touch-sensitive, so you get the swells, the overall feel of a live instrument. And the weighted keyboard of the MOTIF ES8 feels great, with wonderful action."

Gill also sings the praises of the Motif operating system. "It's so user-friendly, so easy to use. There's a wonderful setting on the Motif called 'master mode' that lets you assemble all the sounds you want in a special list that's available all the time. I can't even think of another keyboard that has a function like that. It's great for the type of shows I put together."

But Gill says his most important assets are his colleagues. "Being a music director can be a hard job but having a great supporting team makes it easy. It's about being a team player. I don't want to just make myself look great—it's the whole group's job to make the music great, and to touch people's lives as we're playing."



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