

the evolution of alicia keys

Is she giving up the glam for good? Who is the woman behind the carefully cultivated-then-damn-near-shattered public image? EBONY'S Ericka Goodman spends an evening with the artist to talk about her new album, makeup-free face and how she really feels about those who judge (and drag) others on social media.

BY ERICKA N. GOODMAN

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CREATIVE DIRECTION AND STYLING BY MARIELLE BOBO



Public School
Anorak; Pamela
Love Earrings

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Marc Jacobs
Collection
Gown and Belt



When you can't help but feel a bit protective of Alicia Augello-Cook (the singer's birth name) when you meet her. REALLY meet her, that is. Arriving on the set of her EBONY cover shoot on a muggy day in early July, the singer, instrumentalist and philanthropist is sporting a faded Bob Marley T-shirt, worn-in jeans and high-top Melody Ehsani for Reebok sneakers. So casual and carefree is her look that the artist formally known as Alicia Keys blends in with her entourage. Her unassuming disposition is practically shocking for a woman who has sold over 35 million records to date and is sure to sell millions more. Her speech is peppered with de rigueur East Coast slang, '90s hip-hop references and self-help quips. She's your homegirl. She's the chick from the block who's done good, and that familiarity is grounding. She's a philanthropist, too, and has raised millions over the past 13 years for her Keep a Child Alive foundation, which supports children and their families as they battle HIV and AIDS. Add to that her hope of "rebooting the world" by encouraging the everyday citizen to take action and donate to the globe's greater good through the We Are Here movement she launched in September 2014.

No wonder the world has fallen for her several times over.

Keys, who has earned 15 Grammys over the course of her 15-year career, is arguably one of the most commercially and critically successful recording artists on the planet. She also is a new judge and coach on *The Voice*, NBC's singing competition show, catapulting her image into the homes of more than 10 million Americans each week. Yet she seems so regular. For instance, she's a woman who cracks her knuckles, a habit likely a direct result of tickling the ivories for the past 28 years. The wife and mother of two boys is often insecure about her appearance, even noting that she was "terrified as shit" when she and her creative team decided to release promotional im-

ages last spring of herself stripped down, bare-faced, with an apprehensive smile.

All in all, she's beautiful yet imperfect, and she hopes you respect her contradictions. The New York City native is far from being a machine or product; she's a woman whose personal identity nearly drowned in her own carefully crafted image, and she's finally decided to come up for air.

But let's take it back to her arrival onto what industry insiders call "the scene." It's June 5, 2001, and Keys is 20 years young. Her debut album, *Songs in A Minor*, has just dropped, and she and her signature cornrows are thrust into the spotlight. Plucked from the streets of her Hell's Kitchen neighborhood by legendary music executive Clive Davis, who helped launch the careers of Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston and Carlos Santana, he is making Keys his piano-playing, ballad-belting prodigy. She is his biggest obsession at moment, and his ministrations instantly change her life. Her gospel-tinged first single, "Fallin,'" is in heavy rotation and on the verge of becoming No. 1 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart.

Fast-forward 15 years to our face-to-face meeting, and Keys is busy putting the finishing touches on her sixth studio album. Her latest work, which was untitled at press time and will release this fall, has been delayed.

"It's been four years since my last project, and it wasn't like 'Oh, I'm just going to chill, then I'mma pop off.' I'm a touring artist, so after the release of *Girl on Fire* in 2012, I did the promo and toured around for that album. That was about a two-year process. When I returned from being on the road, I was all fired up. I was excited to be in the studio, and the music was flowing. It was like, *Vroom, vroom, bang, bang, bang*; like lightning! It felt like the best music I'd ever created. The sound was totally alive and outrageous, then somewhere in the middle of it all, we were like, *'Uh, oh; we're pregnant.'* My team and I were just about to put out a record, and everything got put on hold. So yes, life happened, and it's beautiful. My younger son, Genesis, [now 21 months old] is just the sweetest little chubby butt in the world. It's a blessing because he gave me the opportunity to step back and see things with fresh eyes. Now, I think I've created something timeless, music that could come out today or 30 years from now. It will remain powerful," gushes Keys as she rummages through her oversized purse looking for a ripe peach to snack on.

Listening to "Gramercy Park," a song on the new album, you get the impression that Keys is instructing us on how to receive her from here on out. The line, "[*You've*] *fallen for a person that's not even me*" resonates. Have the public and the industry heavy hitters conspired to paint a false picture of her?

"The intention of that song was to challenge myself; peel back on life a bit. No one wants to look back and realize she

"I've finally arrived at a place where i can just be silly, be free and wild. just be the person i am."

spent her entire life trying to please others so much so that she doesn't even know who she is. It's just ill that we often get caught in the mindset of pleasing others. At some point, you just can't," she explains.

Keys is definitely an authority on the price of people pleasing thanks to her relationship with the press—and Black Twitter. From 2001 to 2009, the singer was seen as an American sweetheart of sorts. She was beloved by the media and portrayed as squeaky-clean amid contemporaries who (often) twerked their way to fame. But then the same press that once praised her began to vilify Keys, touting her as a man-stealing vixen, after she married superproducer Swizz Beatz (né Kasseem Dean) in 2010—the same year his divorce from singer and author Mashonda was finalized. The time frame sent the gossip rags and blogs into a tongue-lashing, teeth-sucking frenzy with Keys as the target, which, in the social stratosphere, continues to this day. Even more problematic was the fact that no one seemed to rake Swizz over the coals in the media; he was just accepted as a man moving on with his life.

The typically private star publicly addressed the backlash in our sister publication, JET magazine (Nov. 19, 2012). She defended herself, explaining, "[They] were apart for some time before we got together ... that doesn't matter to those who take pleasure in trying to knock others down. ... There's no need to fight what's not true."

But today, with her seemingly happy blended family (her husband has three children from previous relationships) six years after the nuptials, the continuing scrutiny begs this question: Why do we even care?

The consummate professional says time has taught her to let harsh words slide off her back. Judgment, concedes Keys, is a guaranteed tax added onto the price of stardom. She appears to take it all in stride, hence her philosophy: "If you lined up five people . . . and asked one individual to tell you what he or she thought of those people, that person would have a snap judgment for each of them and assume something of each one before they even opened their mouths. And that's just wild; you [wouldn't] even know what makes them tick. It's frustrating."

What Keys is most focused on now is her personal evolution. That means freeing herself from that finger-wagging, 140-character dragging reality. This is driven home for her even during our photo shoot at Milk Studios, nestled deep in New York's Meatpacking District. "Sometimes I read negative comments [on social media], and I'm immediately pissed that I did. They are so useless. They serve nothing! Mostly, I don't read them because I'm not letting anyone take me out my game, least of all someone hiding behind a fake name," she notes.

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Recalling a cinch-waisted, prim Roberto Cavalli dress she rocked for a shot, she reflects, "The first look represented the freest part of myself. I've finally arrived at a place where I can just be silly, be free and wild. Just be the person I am. The tight, almost Victorian look, where I could barely move my arms, made me feel like a doll. I was shoved into that dress, and it was kind of limiting. It represents

the part of me that is sort of boxed in. Like a perfect little doll—just stay there, don't bother nobody."

That doesn't mean, though, that Keys is giving up the part of herself that aims to embrace others, even this writer. Later that evening, we hopped into a hired car and raced down to the Westside Theatre in Midtown to join the star's mother, Terria Joseph, and other family and friends.

We're going to see one of the final performances of *Turn Me Loose*. When we arrive at the theater, however, there is a kerfuffle about the number of tickets Keys needs for the show, in which Joe Morton transforms into the acerbic activist Dick Gregory struggling with The Man in 1963. Because she is adding an extra seat (mine), she apologizes, whispering, "I think my count was off" while affectionately tapping my arm.

After the show, we hug her loved ones goodbye, and Keys' mother, an Italian-American wearing a graphic tee that reads "love," "peace" and "joy," jokingly adds, "If you really want to know Alicia, you should ask me—but you'll never be able to shut me up." This is Ms. Joseph's baby, whom she raised as a single mother, "just down the street."

Keys offers to have the driver drop me off at home so we can continue talking, and she seems excited to cruise through my neighborhood, Harlem. Indeed, the trip turns into a full-circle moment for the star; this is her old stomping ground. It is then that the layers begin to peel off and she really opens up. Perhaps inspired by the racially tinged play we had just seen, she shifts our conversation to the state of Blackness and raising two African-American boys in this country.

"We are at a tipping point for major change. These senseless killings are outrageous and unacceptable. It's like a slap in the face. It's a constant reminder that our lives—our Black lives—are literally meaningless," she emphasizes, right before the driver interrupts our chat to ask for directions.

"As a people, we haven't been taught economic independence, we haven't been taught to support our own businesses, we haven't been taught how to force people's hands who have so much power. We don't recognize how much power *WE* have. And it's hard to not think this is all unintentional. How can we collectively move forward without admitting to the hundreds of years of pain, wounds, ill



« Salvatore
Ferragamo Cape;
Her Own Headwrap



treatment and discrimination? We've got to start there."

As she excitedly examines the role of race and class, the driver figures out where we went astray. We jump on the West Side Highway, a road that runs and up and down the city, and continue on to Harlem's famed Lenox Avenue. The revelations keep coming: "My 5-year-old son, Egypt, is old enough to have some understanding of what's going on. He learned about the death of Jordan Davis," Keys says, referencing the Black teen shot and killed by Michael Dunn, a White man, at a Jacksonville, Fla., gas station in 2012 for the so-called "offense" of playing loud music in a friend's car. "Egypt was with me at the taping of VH-1's *Dear Mama* special in May. Jordan's mom and gun-reform activist Lucia McBath was being honored and she discussed her son's death. So Egypt asked me, 'Mommy, her son died?' And I knew I had to have to a serious conversation with him. I said, 'Yes, baby. Someone killed her son. That's why we don't play with guns. It's not a joke, it's not a video game and it's all very real. He replied, 'Mommy, if it was me, I would have jumped out of that car.'"

Keys pauses, recounting her son's innocence about the incident. "I had to tell him, 'Baby, you can't beat a bullet.' It's really crazy because our kids see superheroes defeat all of the bullets, but that's not real. Once he understood, he said to me, 'Mommy, I want to pray for Jordan Davis.' And I was like, 'Yes, baby. Let's do that.' I like that he's starting to under-

stand things. I would love to attend a kid-friendly protest with him; it's good to organize protests for kids against police brutality. They have to be involved because we're all human beings, and it's everyone's problem, not just Black people. I feel that everybody—all backgrounds, all colors, all races—should feel like, 'Whoa, this isn't right,' and I'm glad my son sort of understands that."

We pull up to my building, and the driver parks in front so we can have a bit more privacy as our chat winds down. Keys was ready to clear the air about the #nomakeup movement, which she swears she had no intention of making a thing. "Hell yeah, I was scared when I did that shoot without wearing makeup. The way it happened was, I was just leaving the gym. I had my baseball cap on and my doo rag around my head, and I was all set to go into hair and makeup. But the photographer was like, 'No, I need to shoot you right now. Just like this.' Of course, I'm like, 'Huh?' It ended up being the most interesting and crazy thing to me because I did for myself; creating a movement wasn't the goal. Society, and just social media in general, just love catchphrases, they love to smush an idea down. #nomakeupchallenge was about stripping down for yourself. I love my makeup. There are going to be days when I put lipstick on, put eyeliner on, and I don't want to hear shit! I don't want to hear nobody's mouth. I was simply expressing my personal journey."

But the elephant in the SUV is that many in mainstream America would say Keys is traditionally beautiful, with light skin, curly hair and "keen" features.

How hard was it for her show her bare face? Very, according to the singer. "This business sort of programs women: You have to be a certain size to be [considered] beautiful. If you have a certain shape or if you're darker, what does that mean? Or if your hair is not totally straight down your back, what does that mean? And on top of that, magazines just airbrush you to look the part. Believe me, there were times when people said I didn't look my best, and it made me a little insecure. Now, I think beauty is in accepting yourself," she adds with a laugh.

Before we say our goodbyes, she leans over, eager to impart one more thing: "For a while, I got caught behind this daily veil of feeling like I had to be perfect. I had to be perfect when I spoke to people in interviews so no one could criticize the way that I spoke. I had to watch exactly how political I got or watch how outspoken I got. God forbid, someone would be offended. Then suddenly, I felt like I was a mute. I was like, 'Brick by brick, I sort of did this to myself'; I had put myself in a box, and that box wasn't healthy. I think now I'm just ready to be free."

Check out behind-the-scenes photos and get Alicia Keys' answers to some intriguing questions at EBONY.com.



Sacai Dress (worn
over pants); Tome
Pants; Maro Jacobs
Collection Platform
Boots; Diaboli Kill
Bracelet and Ring;
Bond Hardware
Rings