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ALICIA KEYS

ON TURNING THE SHOW
INTO A "LOVE FEST" — AND
TAKING IT INTO A NEW ERA



‘WE ALL JUST NEED A LITTLE CELEBRATION’

Seventeen years ago, Alicia Keys was a Grammy newbie “hanging on for dear life” at her first ceremony. Fifteen awards later, she’s prepping for her second time hosting — and dreaming up new ways to reflect an evolving industry

BY TATIANA CIRISANO PHOTOGRAPHED BY MILLER MOBLEY

ALICIA KEYS WAS looking forward to a quiet dinner. The singer had spent the day at a photo shoot atop one of the highest peaks in Los Angeles’ Topanga Canyon Park, at the Moonfire Ranch, an oddball hippie estate that once hosted Andy Warhol and Jim Morrison. But as our car pulls up to the Italian spot she had in mind, she’s somewhat surprised to see a throng of paparazzi outside. “Wait for my bat signal!” she jokes over the phone to actress Zoe Saldana, a friend who she’s supposed to be meeting shortly. For now, she decides to stay put and hide in the car.

Keys, 38, hadn’t realized that Giorgio Baldi has a reputation as a celebrity magnet — actually, she had never heard of it at all. A proud New York native who wrote her first songs inside the tiny Hell’s Kitchen apartment she shared with her mother, Keys only recently relocated to the West Coast with her husband, producer Swizz Beatz. She’ll always love New York, she says, but she doesn’t really miss it.

“I love the buildings, the people, the rush. I love to drive like a New Yorker,” she says, reclining in the back seat wearing a Kith tee and paint-splattered cargo pants. “But as I start to explore outside of that space and see what it looks like

when you can actually see farther than a bunch of buildings...” She pauses in thought. “Today, the fog was gorgeous to me.”

Since her soulful 2001 debut, *Songs in A Minor*, released when she was just 20 years old, Keys has only had so many calm moments to reflect. She has won 15 Grammy Awards, scored four No. 1s on the Billboard Hot 100 and released six studio and two live albums. All but one of them topped the Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums chart, which ties her with Beyoncé and Janet Jackson for the fourth-most No. 1s on the tally by a female solo act. “She’s a Nina Simone — a lifetime artist making music always,” says Peter Edge, chairman/

CEO of Keys’ label, RCA Records.

But for Keys, writing and performing timeless anthems like “No One,” “If I Ain’t Got You” and “Girl on Fire” is just one element of her artistry — activism and philanthropy have always been central to her mission as well. Most recently, in June 2018, she co-founded She Is the Music, a non-profit aimed at increasing the number of women working in all facets of the music industry. In February, Keys became the first female Grammys host in 14 years, winning raves for her earthy, seemingly off-the-cuff energy — she brought out Michelle Obama, palled around with John Mayer and played an epic medley of songs she wished she had written, on two



Keys photographed Nov. 6 at Moonfire Ranch in Topanga, Calif.

Styling by Jason Bolden
Off White jacket and pants, Alo top,
Almasika earrings and necklace.

pianos simultaneously. She'll return to the gig for the 62nd annual ceremony on Jan. 26.

"She brings you in, and has you experience the Grammys through a creator's mind," says Recording Academy president/CEO Deborah Dugan. Keys insists that the Zen vibe she projects onstage isn't her everyday reality. "We all get nervous!" she exclaims, explaining that she has felt an intense pressure to please since the start of her career. "You go out in the world, and if everybody doesn't like you, you feel hurt or scared or 'something's wrong with me,'" she says. "Cross over into social media, where we literally want people to like us — this shit is a mindfuck.

"I've thought so much about the different sides of us all," she continues. "And personally, I think I've leaned on one or two sides because it's comfortable. Only recently have I started to explore the parts that are scary."

Grammy night will kick off a year of more change for Keys. Her seventh studio album, *A.L.I.C.I.A.*, will arrive in 2020, and her autobiography, *More Myself: A Journey*, comes out in the spring. Working on both was "the best therapy I ever had," she says. "I ended up being able to see the moments that things shifted. When you're living it, you're not really reflecting on it."

As we're chatting, she remembers that when she takes the Grammy stage, it'll actually be the day after her 39th birthday. She's an Aquarius through and through: free-spirited, creative, a little bit stubborn and emotionally intelligent, or, as she puts it, "I connect spirit to spirit."

Or so she thinks. "They're saying that NASA changed all the [astrological] signs! Did you read this?" she exclaims, her hazel eyes growing wide as she recalls a recent headline. "Now, whatever we think we are, we're not."

You won five awards at your first Grammys ceremony in 2002, including song of the year for "Fallin'" and best new artist. What do you remember about that night?

I remember being embarrassed that my name was called so many times. It was strange because here is my biggest dream, and I was like, "I'm from Hell's Kitchen. I can't even speak right. What am I doing here?" And then this unbelievably magical night culminated in validation. You know that foggy, sick, head-cold feeling? That, mixed with the exhilaration. The entire year, I was



From left: Keys with her five awards, including best new artist, at the 2002 Grammys; wowing the audience as host of the 2019 ceremony, where, on two pianos, she played songs she wished she had written.

hanging on for dear life. I was the epitome of "fake it till you make it."

How did that experience influence your approach to hosting?

I know what I normally feel in that room, which is left out and a little bit uncomfortable. I wanted to create this lovefest where we could celebrate each other's greatness and just have fun. We're all trying to make our way through a very chaotic time, and we all just need a little celebration — to feel like we're with friends, like somebody actually cares.

How early did you start planning the 2019 ceremony?

It was last minute. [The academy] knew they were looking for a new host. I don't think they expected it to be an artist. I want to say it was November, so it was pretty fast to pull together. We were like, "This is either going to be really bad or really good." Fortunately, it was a beautiful thing. I was like, "I'm never doing that again." And then they're like, "But we really want you to do it again."

Where did you get the idea of playing two pianos?

I had the vision for the two pianos, but when I went in to put it together, it was not working. I had done a performance honoring JAY-Z [at the 2018 Clive Davis Pre-Grammy Gala], and I had played all my favorite songs of his, and I wanted to do a version of that. But I had two pianos, and I was only playing one. My husband was like, "What's the point?" It had to be 2 a.m., and I was like, "I'm going to go home, practice as much as I possibly

can before I pass out, and if I do the run-through tomorrow and it's not good, I'm going to pull it." I stumbled through the run-through, and [Grammys producer] Ken [Ehrlich] was like, "I think you're onto something special." Thank goodness I didn't pull it.

The 2019 awards were the first since former Recording Academy president Neil Portnow's "step up" comments toward women, and you were the first female host in over a decade. Did that create any pressure to send a certain message?

Don't you find that when you hear these stats, you're vomiting in your mouth? It's obvious shit is upside-down. There's not enough balance of power. With a woman like Deborah [Dugan] in a leadership position — that is obviously necessary. [Hosting] felt right for me, because I knew that a lot of women were nominated, and that it was really about the women for the show. A lot of my sisters and a lot of my friends were going to be a part of it, and it felt right to be in that mix and ushering in that new energy.

What is your impression of Dugan?

Deborah is really good at balancing the art and reality. She's badass and she's out of the system, which I think is really important. Right now, we're in a time that needs a full overhaul of all structures. I love that she's coming from a new, disruptive place.

Artists like Kanye West and Frank Ocean have sat out the Grammys in an effort to highlight the need for change. What made you decide to try and change things from the inside?

I get it. I do. But I think [I'm] just becoming more aware of the power that we have as individuals. I think that you've got to actually be a part of whatever shift you want.

Where are you looking for inspiration for the 2020 ceremony?

People who have created these beautiful variety-style shows, like Carol Burnett, or Sammy Davis Jr., or Dean Martin. Nobody does that anymore. They had this cool mixture of musician and artist and comedian, so it mixed all of these worlds together in this casual [way], while they're holding, like, a whiskey. I want to see how to modernize that.

Do you think that this year's ceremony will get political?

I think artists have to speak their truth. Art is about talking about what's happening in your life, in your world, in your experience, through your eyes. So I think, definitely. We're coming up on a really transitional, important year.

Why does winning a Grammy still matter so much?

You are awarded by your peers — people who have been through the same experience that you have. So to receive one is the ultimate validation from people that you admire. That's the point, and the reason why it has to maintain that level of integrity. And it has to expand now because music is not what it was 10 years ago. It's about making sure that it's representing the music that's happening at the rate that it's happening, as well. If we're not all growing and evolving, then pack it up, because what's the point? **B**

"If we're not all growing and evolving, then pack it up, because what's the point?"



Keys looks back on her career highlights at billboard.com/videos.

Solace London dress, Almasika earrings.

HAR BY NANA SPA; ASHONEN AT THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP BY CHIZUKO SATO AT ART DEPARTMENT; MANICURE BY TERESA JACKSON; AWARDS: SPRIANTZ/WIREIMAGE; PIANO: KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES.