

One on One with the Grammy-Winner Singer and Actress: Alicia Keys

Written by Kam Williams

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[Alicia Keys](#) burst on the scene in April of 2001 with the release of the single Fallin' from Songs in A Minor, the critically-acclaimed debut album which launched her meteoric rise. A piano prodigy who studied both jazz and classical composition at the prestigious Professional Performance Arts School of Manhattan, the class valedictorian was admitted to Columbia University at just 16 years of age, but soon took a leave to pursue her musical career. Among the many accolades she's already collected are 15 Grammys, along with multiple American Music, Billboard, Soul Train, Teen Choice, People's Choice, NAACP Image, Rolling Stone Magazine, VH1 and BET Awards.

Hailing from Harlem, [Alicia Keys](#) was born on January 25, 1980 to Teresa Auguello, a paralegal, and Craig Cook, a flight attendant. The stunning diva is a delicious mix of Irish, Italian, Jamaican and Puerto Rican lineage, and she's been named one of People Magazine's 50 Most Beautiful People, FHM Magazine's 100 Sexiest Women in the World, Maxim Magazine's Hot 100 and VH1's 100 Sexiest Artists.

A true Renaissance woman, [Alicia Keys](#) is not only a gifted singer/songwriter/arranger/musician/actress, but also the author of a best-selling book comprised of poetry, lyrics and intimate reflections called Tears for Water

. She made her big screen debut in 2006 playing a seductive yet ruthless assassin in *Smokin' Aces*, following that well-received outing with a measured performance as Scarlett Johansson's best friend in *The Nanny Diaries*.

[Alicia Keys](#) is about to make cinematic history as half of the first duet (with Jack White) ever to perform a James Bond theme on a 007 movie soundtrack, namely, "Another Way to Die," in the upcoming Quantum of Solace. Despite her incredibly busy schedule, she makes time for philanthropic work with numerous charities, most notably, Keep a Child Alive (<http://www.keepachildalive.org/main.html>), an organization she co-founded which is dedicated to delivering life-saving medicines directly to AIDS victims in Africa. On November 13th, Alicia Keys and some very famous friends will be performing in NYC at a benefit dinner/concert. (For more details, call (718) 965-1111).

Here, she talks about her latest film *The Secret Life of Bees*, a touching tale of female

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empowerment set in the Sixties at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. She turns in what proved to be the movie's most memorable performance as June Boatwright, despite being surrounded by a stellar cast which included Academy Award-winner Jennifer Hudson, and a couple of Oscar-nominees in Queen Latifah and Sophie Okonedo.

[The following interview was conducted in 2008. Since then, Alicia Keys became the first Black artist to be the spokesperson for the Dahlia Divin's Givenchy fragrance. Throughout her career, she participated in many philanthropic work: the telethon's response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake, etc .]



KW: Thanks for the time, Alicia [Keys]. I'm really honored.

AK: Thank you, sir, I appreciate that so much.

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KW: I feel terrible, because it's so late and I understand you're in Germany and you just came offstage after performing a big concert. You must be exhausted.

AK: Yes, and you should feel awful! [Laughs out loud] No, I'm good. I'm definitely good. I had a good show, and it takes me a little while to settle down anyway.

KW: Well, I wanted to talk to you about *The Secret Life of Bees*.

AK: I loved this movie, so I want to do this.

KW: I don't want to spoil the movie for anyone who hasn't seen it, but there's a scene early in the picture where a character silently opens up a tiny, folded piece of paper which says something about the Civil Rights Movement. When I read it, I started crying right then and there, and my eyes remained watery until the very end.

AK: Wow! Well, I'm so glad that it moved you, because it moved me, too.

KW: The film had so many subtle touches like that which delivered an emotional wallop. Its effective use of space and emptiness reminded me of your music.

AK: That is a beautiful image, and thank you for comparing it to my music. I appreciate that so much. I agree that Gina [Director Gina Prince-Bythewood] did an amazing job. And everybody involved loved it from the minute they signed on. She created a very nourishing environment on the set, where we just supported each other and wanted to do an incredible job. So, I'm really, really happy about how [Gina \[Prince-Bythewood\]](#) was able to be so subtle, yet so strong.

KW: To me, it was the most important film of its type since *Eve's Bayou*. Have you seen that film?

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AK: Funny you should mention it, because I watched *Eve's Bayou* prior to beginning work on this one because I felt it would have a similar vibe. Also, I wanted to watch it for the accents, figuring it would give you a nice feel for the regional dialects, given that it was set in the Bayou. But did you know they didn't do any dialects in that film?

KW: I never noticed that.

AK: That was really funny, but it was still a great movie.

KW: What did you base your interpretation of June Boatwright on?

AK: On many things. On my own personal emotions and feelings... on my understanding of my character's complexities and really wanting to bring them forth even without explaining them. I also based her somewhat on these beautiful pictures we had from this book called *Freedom Fighters*.

There was one girl in it in a black and white photograph who just had her arms crossed. The way she was looking at the camera made me feel, "Wow! That's my June!" There was something about how hopeful and strong she was, yet closed-off emotionally, that I really wanted to take and make a part of June. I also took some inspiration from a really good friend of mine who has a kind of attitude like June has. When you first meet her, you're terrified of her. You think she's just the meanest thing, when she's really a sweetheart, and so vulnerable underneath it all. That's why she has to be a little tough, because she can't afford to give all her love away. So, I really took a lot of those firsthand experiences and put them into June, too. She was based on little pieces of a lot of different people and things.

KW: Another thing I was impressed with was that there was an arc, not only to June, but to so many characters in the film. That degree of development added to the richness of the cinematic experience.

AK: Seriously, that's true what you say. You see each person start one place and end up somewhere else. How many times do you have a film where so many characters can make such significant transitions within it? So, I agree.

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