

ALICIA KEYS

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ABOUT GIRL ON FIRE

With the arrival of her fifth studio album, *GIRL ON FIRE*, (available November 27th), Alicia Keys emerges stronger and wiser— taking the reins of her career in a way she never has before. In this album, you hear an artist breaking free and exploring new worlds. Vibrant and soulful, energetic and intimate, *GIRL ON FIRE* is built to move you, physically and emotionally.

“This album is about new beginnings, new perspectives and fresh starts,” says Keys. “There is something really empowering about finding your own inner strength— stripping away all the energy that no longer works for you and taking full control of how you want to live.”

Eleven years ago, the tough girl from Hell’s Kitchen with the golden voice and mad piano skills arrived. After years of struggling to get an album released, Keys got the chance to perform “Fallin’” from her debut album, *SONGS IN A MINOR*, on *The Oprah Winfrey Show...* and a star was born. She spent the next ten years running on a treadmill of success: Platinum records. Sold-out concerts. World tours. 14 Grammy awards. Movie deals. Best-selling books. Philanthropic missions. Fans kept singing along, hit after hit: “No One,” “If I Ain’t Got You,” “Empire State of Mind,” among many others.

Life eventually caught up to Keys for all its heartbreak and beauty: she lost an inspiration with her grandmother’s passing; she parted ways with her longtime manager, Jeff Robinson; she married artist and producer, Swizz Beatz, and together had a beautiful baby boy, Egypt. From these experiences, emerged a new confidence in Alicia. She found balance in life, perhaps for the very first time.

For about a year and a half, and nearly 150 songs later, Keys freely opened herself to the sounds of this album. In the past, making records for Keys was a very closed experience— a world only a chosen few were let into. But for *GIRL ON FIRE*, the recording studio door was kicked open. She welcomed many new collaborators, and even ventured out of New York— a city synonymous with her sound. She traveled to London and Jamaica to find many of the rich rhythms that would eventually make up *GIRL ON FIRE*. Her collaborators would include her longtime partner Krucial, Grammy-winning artists Bruno Mars, Babyface, Maxwell, and John Legend, acclaimed guitarist

Gary Clark Jr., indie electronic musician, Jamie “xx” Smith, innovative songwriter, Frank Ocean, and a promising young writer out of the UK, Emeli Sandé, among many others.

“It’s been a process of finding my own freedom and creating my own destiny,” said Keys. “There comes a time in our life where we have to choose how we want to live. I got to a point in my life where I was able to remove anything that didn’t belong. It gave me courage and more space to try new things. That feeling opened up my process, my songwriting, and me in a big way.”

Early on in the recording process, Keys was interviewed on how she balances the demands of stardom with her new life as a mother. As the interviewer dubbed the singer/songwriter a “girl on fire,” the phrase ignited something inside Keys. She thought, “That’s it. That describes everything I’m feeling. Now I need to figure out what a ‘girl on fire’ sounds like.”

So one day in the studio, Alicia, along with writer/producer Jeff Bhasker (Jay-Z, Beyoncé, Bruno Mars) whom she collaborated with on 2009’s *The Element of Freedom*, and producer Salaam Remi (The Fugees, Nas, Amy Winehouse), started playing with a gumbo of sounds, drums and keyboards thrown in by each to create the tapestry.

Recalls Keys: “The three of us were sitting in the room and working on some other ideas, when I mentioned I wanted to write a song called ‘Girl on Fire.’ We started playing with that idea— all of a sudden the melodies and lyrics just flowed, and then there was this crazy beat. Eventually the chorus came out of it. The song has a rock tinge to it. It has old school piano and just ramps up with these hard-ass hip hop drums. We were trying for a big and aggressive sound... And it hit me, ‘That’s what a girl on fire sounds like!’ The sound built from there and everything started to flow organically. It doesn’t always happen that way, but it did that night.”

At the end of the session, Keys found the guiding direction for the album. With her past releases, the album title came at the very end of the process, but, with this album, “Girl on Fire” set the tone.

“This was shocking for me because I never know what I want to name an album,” said Keys. “People are usually pushing me the day before it goes to press to make a final decision. But this time I just knew that it was right. It represented my journey up to this point, and so I kept working from there.”

The single “Girl on Fire” was released on September 4th in two separate versions: the “Inferno” version featuring Nicki Minaj, and a stripped-down “Blue Light” version.

The album GIRL ON FIRE is where the personal meets the aspirational. Discovered through The desire to craft a powerful song first, GIRL ON FIRE features a vibrant

tapestry of sounds including piano, drums, electric guitar, reggae and future soul, as illustrated by the powerful song “New Day.” The anthemic song declares: “The world is getting ready. Everybody ready... for a new day.” Produced by Swizz Beatz and Dr. Dre, “New Day” was recorded in Jamaica, and leaked in the summer of 2012 to great acclaim.

Keys had clearly broken new ground as Billboard described the rhythms of “New Day” as “some of the hardest hitting beats” of her career. These drum beats later surface in various forms throughout the album— from distorted electronic sounds that rev up to heavenly atmospheric reverberations in “When It’s Over” (created with London-based drummer and musician, Jamie “xx” Smith of the band The xx) to the mysterious soft reggae rhythms found in “Limitedless.”

As she began creating other songs for the album, Keys envisioned herself like a screenwriter and started looking at each song as a different story with clearly drawn characters.

“The tiniest thing about someone’s life can prove inspiring,” said Keys. “I’d go home, or back to the hotel or wherever I was, and I’d start writing ideas based off the stories I was hearing from people around me. I just wanted to write relatable songs that not only I felt and understood but that could stand on their own, the same way a great story does in a movie.”

To bring some of these stories to life, Keys collaborated with the talented UK writer, Emeli Sandé, on three songs for the album.

The first is the autobiographical “Brand New Me.”

“The crazy thing about that song is how it catches people off guard,” says Keys. “The song is about finding a new you and letting go of anyone that doesn’t know you anymore. It’s about someone in your life that for whatever reason you’ve outgrown. It’s a conversation between you and that person where you say, ‘You might not have seen me in a while, you might not recognize this brand new me.’”

Keys has an uncanny ability to hold a mirror up to the most intimate part of relationships. Over the past decade, such personal detail has trademarked Keys’ songwriting. That intimacy remains on the new album, but now, it is matched by a newfound self-discovery.

“Love is absolutely a theme on this album,” says Keys. “That’s the bottom line of it. It’s about loving all of you. Love of yourself makes you unstoppable by fear.”

And so she sings the last lines of “Brand New Me.” “I’ll never be perfect but at least now I’m brave. And now my heart is open and I can finally breathe. Don’t be mad, it’s just a brand new kind of me.”

The chemistry between Keys and Sandé was one that instantly complemented each other during the songs they wrote together on GIRL ON FIRE. One of Keys’ favorite songs she and Sandé wrote for the album is titled “Not Even the King.” The song, which happens to be her son’s favorite song too, is simple like a lullaby underscored by a powerful message.

“It came from this idea I had to write a song called, “Even the Richest Man Alive,” which was about this guy who had everything in the world,” said Keys. “Every time I’d run into him he was dating a new girl and talking about marrying her, but it never worked out. Love was the one thing he couldn’t buy. And so this idea and story morphed into “Not Even the King” and what it must feel like to have everything and nothing at the same time.”

While open to exploring new creative territory, Keys didn’t want to get too lost in the production of the album— as she says, my work is about “finding truth and honesty in the right moments.”

In one of the most honest and intimate moments of her career, the song “101,” was born out of a deep conversation she had with Sandé about love and relationships.

The two women candidly conversed, as Keys recalled: “What if someone you knew did something 100 times before, but you were still willing to be the 101st time? What if this time changes everything? To me that idea embodies the hope we have in love— you can’t fall in love, if you’re too afraid to try. I don’t think there’s one person in the whole world that can’t relate to that feeling of hope that this time might be different from all the others.”

The theme of eliminating fear echoes throughout the album, as heard in the eclectic ambient sounds of “Listen To Your Heart,” co-written with John Legend. The songs’ opening verse whispers, “He says have no fear. Open up. Let me in.”

Keys admits, “A lot of us grow up afraid. I had been thinking about that often since becoming a mother. We’re in a world where fear is present everywhere we go. We meet people, we trust them, we love them—suddenly their fears and worries become ours. And many people use their own fear as a way to control others. I realized if I could eliminate fear, I’d do things very differently. And that’s the head space I want to live in going forward.”

Move forward Keys did. With a diverse line-up of collaborators she was able to tap into a fascinating array of sounds. Bruno Mars co-wrote the 60's era Motown homage, "Tears Always Win," which, on the surface, feels innocent as Keys lyrically paints a picture of "covers keeping you warm at night, but they can't take your place cause they're never gonna hold me tight," only to delve deep into heartbreak with "Tell me when the hell this loneliness is gonna be over."

The loneliness subsides when Keys duets with Maxwell on the smoldering and seductive, "Fire We Make," featuring Gary Clark Jr. on guitar. But in the stripped down acoustic ballad, "That's When I Knew," co-written with Babyface, the guitar softens as the song explores that precise moment when one's heart lets love in. Later that theme of love grows complicated with the quiet R&B vibes found in "One Thing" co-written by Frank Ocean.

"It's been a totally freeing process," says Keys. "This process brought out the best in all of us, because I was blessed to bring together these great writers and musicians. The first thing I told everyone is that 'we're not going to judge ourselves or our work. We're just going to let go and have a great time.' When you get rid of all that pressure, it's amazing what comes out."

By working in a new way, Keys started to feel more confident, full of determination, and like no one could hold her back. She decided she had to keep pushing herself further than she'd ever been.

"Experience and time make you calmer," says Keys. "Yet, I am hungrier now more than ever. There's a quiet storm brewing that I've never felt before. It's explosive."

