

ALICIA

Reaches For New Sounds and Finds *The Element of Freedom*

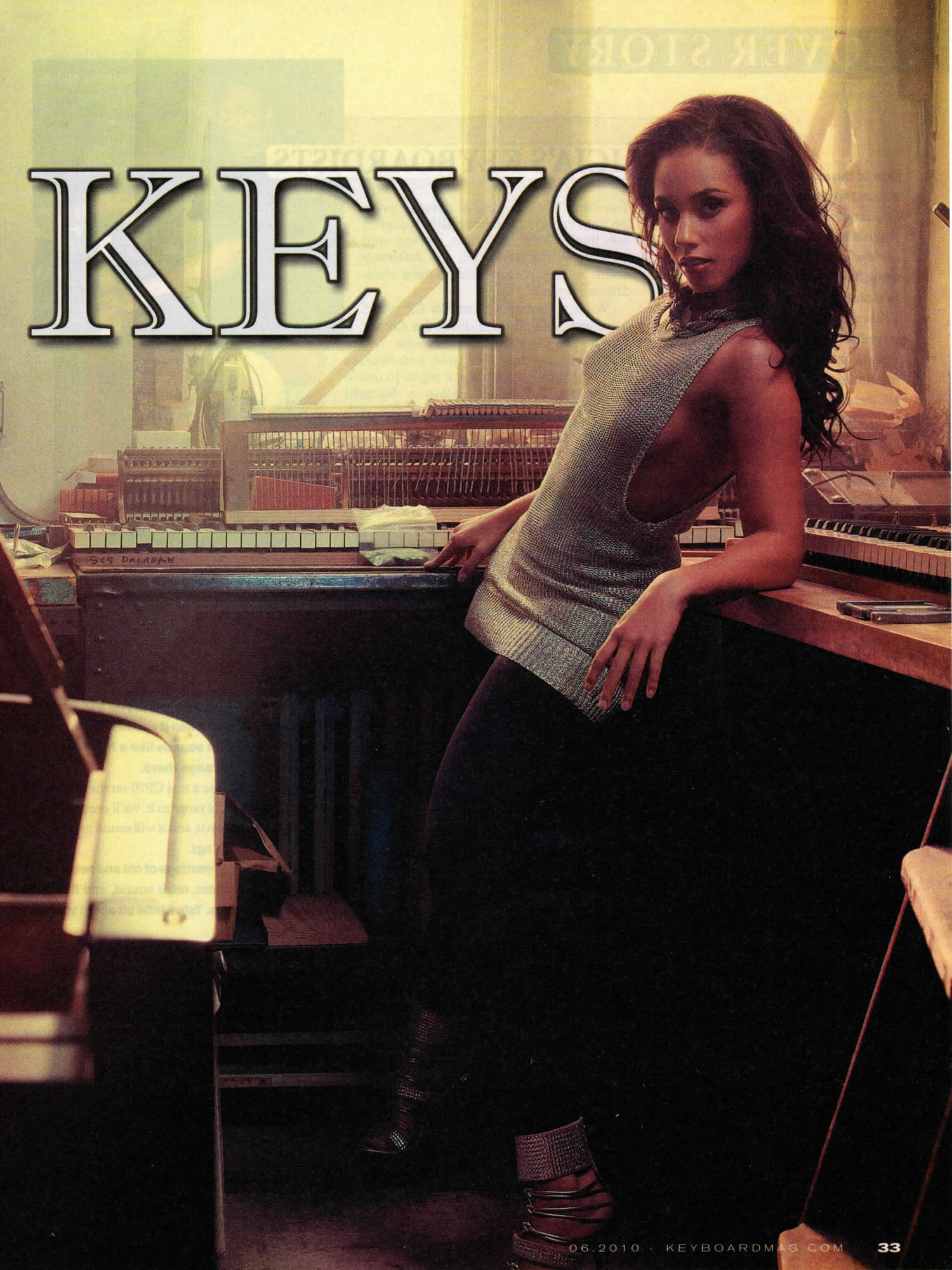
by Jon Regen

“I wanted it to go somewhere new,” reflects Alicia Keys about her hit album *The Element of Freedom*, just minutes before bringing 20,000 hungry fans at Newark, New Jersey’s, Prudential Centre to their feet. “I was listening to a lot of different music, which is what I tend to do before I start an album. It was about saying, “What am I feeling? And what feels *good* to me?”

What feels good to Alicia Keys is almost always a barometer of what listeners gravitate to as well. In the decade since she broke out with her 12-times platinum, and five-time Grammy Award-winning debut *Songs in A Minor*, the prodigious pianist, singer, songwriter, actress, humanitarian—and now virtual instrument entrepreneur—has sold over 30,000,000 albums worldwide. Make no mistake, though—Keys is a fiercely devoted musician at her core, ready at a moment’s notice to talk shop around a piano about her latest recorded discoveries, keyboard acquisitions, and musical influences. On *The Element of Freedom*, Keys’ immediately recognizable, piano-centric, R&B-meets-pop panache is bathed in a retro glow. Supple vocals meet analog filter sweeps, and Motown-worthy melodies are updated with dirty, MPC-like drum grooves. It’s a re-imagining of the soul sound that has made her one of the most acclaimed artists of the last decade.

Continued

KEYS



One of the most amazing things about *The Element of Freedom* is what's *not* on it. Is it true that you didn't use a real piano, that all the acoustic piano sounds came from your *Alicia's Keys* virtual piano plug-in?

Believe it or not! That sound is so incredible. Basically, we miked up my piano, a Yamaha C3 Neo, in my studio. We were able to sample the exact sound of my piano that I love so much, and really get all the dynamics of the way it feels; the soft pedal, the reverberation when I hold it, the sound when I hit it extremely hard, when I hit it soft. . . . It was done in such an incredible fashion that now I don't *have* to mic my piano every time. Obviously, as you know, miking a piano, it depends on the tone you're going for, and sometimes you do a great job, but sometimes you're like, "Uh?" Sometimes it takes 30 minutes, sometimes all afternoon. So to be able to turn it on and have it be just like I want it? [Smiles.]

If you're a guitar or sax player, you can take your instrument with you every night. But I find that even if I have the same piano, the hall or the sound system changes, and I always feel a little bit behind the 8-ball. Do you feel better playing *Alicia's Keys* for that reason?

Oh, yeah. Especially on stage, because I tried a lot of different keyboards, and they were *okay*. But to have the sound that I love? I'm really glad we got to do it.

Was the impetus to create *Alicia's Keys* the fact that you wanted to take the sound of your home piano with you?

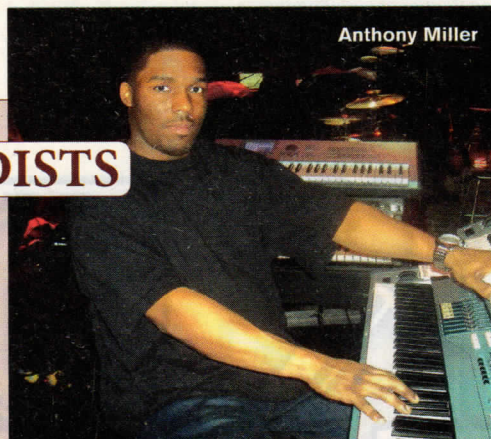
Yeah, that's where it began. Definitely. To take *my* sound with me, wherever I went. On the road, or while I'm working in the studio, because you go to different studios and that's a whole other thing. Sometimes, a given studio's piano sounds great, sometimes it doesn't. Also, for people who might not have access to an acoustic piano, they can have the sound of an acoustic piano.

ALICIA'S KEYBOARDISTS

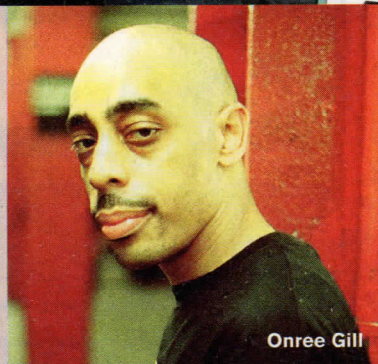
"I've been Alicia's musical director since the beginning," says **Onree Gill**. "I started with her in 2000, and have worked with her ever since." Keys, Gill, and **Anthony Miller** hold keyboard court behind three different rigs.

"Alicia's playing a **Yamaha C2** grand piano with MIDI. The C2 drives the *Alicia's Keys* virtual piano, which she loves. The engineer mikes the C2 as well, and decides each night how much of each signal to use in the house. Alicia also plays a **Suzuki Omnicord** and a separate synth rack with a **Yamaha Motif ES6** and **Minimoog Voyager**. She makes sure to have a digital piano backstage to warm up—usually a **Yamaha PF85**."

Anthony Miller plays a **Yamaha Motif XS7** and **XS8**, along with a **B-3** organ chopped by L.A. supertech **Ken Rich**. Gill also has a **Motif XS7** and **XS8** onstage. Says Gill, "I can bring up different sounds on different Motif faders: a piano here, some strings there. It's perfect for what I do." Gill runs some drum and sample tracks on a **Roland VS-2480** hard disk recorder. "I sequence in **Pro Tools** and **Logic**, then I transfer everything to the 2480. It's rock solid for the road."



Anthony Miller



Onree Gill

If you're using *Alicia's Keys* on the whole record, you get many different sounds out of it. There are times when it sounds like a Yamaha CP70 electric grand, and times when it sounds like a full Yamaha S6 or C7 concert grand. There's a lot of range there.

If you hear a CP70, it's because we *did* use a real CP70 on the record. But the sound of *Alicia's Keys* does have a lot of range to it. We'll even put effects on it, you know? We'll put guitar pedals on it, and it will sound totally crazy. So you have that freedom to do many things.

The Element of Freedom is an amazing marriage of old and new sounds. Sometimes an artist will go for an older, retro sound, and it sounds forced. But this record sounds seamless. Talk a little bit about your conception for the album's sound design.

At the beginning of making this record, I really wanted to explore some interesting combinations of sound and style. Take the Police—I listen to them a lot. Obviously, they have that kind of ska vibe to them, but then they definitely still have a soulful thing, but then they still have a pop sensibility in terms of where the chord changes and melodies go. So I love that.

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See exclusive video of this interview, in which Alicia performs songs from *The Element of Freedom*!



Alicia discusses *Alicia's Keys* with Native Instruments.



Visit Alicia's musical director and keyboardist Onree Gill.

COVER STORY

Alicia Keys

Second, I was really into Genesis, because I just loved the darkness of it, and the way they experimented with drum machines, but also with live drums, and how they crossed between the two. Some songs start out really dark, like "Mama," but then the choruses would just *open up*. I really wanted to understand what that was about.

Third, I listened to a lot of Fleetwood Mac. That was because one of my closest friends invited me to see them for her birthday. At first, I was like, "Sure." [Rolls her eyes.] Everybody was singing along to every word, and I was the only one who didn't know the words. I felt a little embarrassed. But it was *cool*, because it opened me up to a whole other sound, and drum style, and group. Of course I knew their big songs—everybody does. But to go deeper in, like the *Tusk* album...



that was the one that I really went back and zoned on.

So, those were the kinds of things I was listening to, and I did start concentrating a lot on the songwriting style, and that influenced the chords I would use, and the way I wanted the choruses to be. It was about just opening up the flow. I knew I wanted to experiment, and plus, I was in my studio collecting *tons* of keyboards. My engineer, Ann Mincieli, is a collection *addict*. So, she'd be like, "I saw this new..."

A little eBay action?

Yes! She gets on eBay and says, "Oh, I saw this Roland Jupiter-8 you'd think is *crazy*. You should check it out." That was really fly, because I knew I was searching for a new sound. So I was able to experiment a lot with Moogs, and different oscillator-based keyboards, and in terms of the creative flow, it was just *fun*.

And then there's a kind of Roland TR-808 drum vibe as well. It seems like there was an amazing willingness to say, "Hey, let's see what this sounds like!"

Oh my gosh—it's so much fun. I think I was just able to bring what we started with [2007 album] *As I Am* to the next level. On *As I Am*, I'd say we definitely did more with *electric* pianos—a lot of Wurly and Rhodes. We even did harpsichords and things like that, but we'd put crazy effects on them, just to take it to a new place. Now, I kind of pushed that to the next place, going into more of the vintage keyboard, drum machine style.

You seem pretty fearless when it comes to different keys. You're in D \flat on one song, then F on the next, then G. Are you deliberately starting songs in certain keys?

That's cool. Thank you. I'm not so deliberate with that—I think I kind of *find* my way into the key more. Like with "That's How Strong My Love Is," that started in a different key. And then as I'm singing it, and I'm flowing with it, I go, "Hmm, hmm." [Sings and raises her pitch.] So I took it up a half-step, and I'm like "What does [another] half-step feel like?"

And then I'm like, "Hmm." So

COVER STORY



ALICIA'S KEYS

The Element of Freedom features Keys' personal acoustic grand, the Yamaha C3 Neo—but in sampled form for her new signature virtual piano plug-in, *Alicia's Keys*. "All the acoustic piano sounds on the album are from *Alicia's Keys*," she says. "The sound is just incredible." Featuring nearly 3,000 samples in 12 velocity layers, *Alicia's Keys* captures the sinewy piano sound that helped rocket Keys to worldwide acclaim. **See our full review on page 60.**

a lot of times, the playing is about how it feels when I'm singing.

So it may not end up where it started.

Usually it won't end up where it started. Then, by the time I'm on the road, and I'm doing 30-something songs a night—then I'm like, "Why did I write that song so high?" Because [laughs], I beat myself up all the time, like, "What were you thinking? All the way up there? Come down!"

Are there some piano players that were instrumental to you when you were learning to play and coming up with your own concept?

Well, Nina Simone has always been a huge influence on me, because I think she's probably one of the baddest piano players that ever existed, period. Period, end of story! She could play probably every *dude* under the table, in a heartbeat. And I think she's just special. She has this mixture about her, between studying classical, and jazz, and also the intensity that she has about her—her life, and the very intense era she lived in, which makes her writing style very deep. So I love her a lot.

I listen to Herbie Hancock. He's incredible, and a very special guy too. He's been in the business for so long, and he just *loves* it. He loves it

COVER STORY

purely, and it's such a beautiful thing to see someone love it like that. He was also generous enough to play my plug-in and test it out. He had some great comments, and he loved it, too!

Growing up, I really admired Brian McKnight's

piano playing, too. Because I think that he just has something in him as well, and I love the way his melodies and piano playing were so beautiful.

Donny Hathaway. Like, *major, zone, stone-cold, rude, killer!*

Of course, there's Stevie Wonder, because we can't *even* leave him out. It doesn't even make *sense*—the chords he plays! *Nobody* plays chords like he plays them, so you probably might as well just not try! **K**



Alicia Keys' engineer Ann Mincieli with (left to right) Oberheim OB-8 synth atop Yamaha CP70 electric grand piano, rare Hofner bass, and Fender Rhodes Piano Bass atop the rare ARP Electric Piano. Her left hand rests on a Gibson EH-150, one of the first guitar amps ever made.

THE ELEMENT OF GEAR

Ann Mincieli on recording Alicia Keys' new album

The concept of every Alicia Keys album is to marry new sounds with old ones. Alicia always wants to be retro-futuristic—she has an amazing collection of gear, and lets me scour the earth looking for new toys.

Between *As I Am* and *The Element of Freedom*, we designed her signature *Alicia's Keys* piano plug-in. [See page 60 for our full review. —Ed.] We also built an incredible arsenal of drum samples. I hired drummers, bought and rented drum kits, and spent days sampling and mapping in NI Battery. I also roamed the world trading producers' sounds. Almost every drum sample on *The Element of Freedom* came from libraries we built and collected. Alicia has bought some very exotic drum kits throughout the years; this time, we bought a 1970 Ludwig red sparkle drum kit, a 1960 Rogers exotic kick drum, four toms, (including a 16" x 16" floor tom with beater), and 6" x 8" bongos.

We also purchased nine rare drum machines, which we sampled via Pro Tools and 2" tape. These included a Linn LM-1 (serial #25, made by Roger Linn himself), Roland TR-808, TR-909, CR-78, and CR-8000, a LinnDrum 2, and an Oberheim DMX. You hear

a lot of these on the album, which includes programmed drums over live ones. Alicia is an incredible producer who can program drums better than anyone!

The Element of Freedom has a lot of synths: Prophets, Moogs, Roland Junos, the Yamaha CP70 electric grand, and many others. We also used a lot of vintage guitars and amps—everything from Carol Kaye's Versatone bass amp, to one of the first 1950s Hofner violin basses. Alicia owns two from '56 and '57—Paul McCartney doesn't even have those!

Alicia owns her own facility, Oven Studios, and it's like a candy store of gear! I have about 80 of the most vintage guitar pedals, 40 of the rarest guitars, and a huge collection of guitar amps. We use the amps and pedals on everything from guitar to keyboards to vocals.

I'm already preparing for Alicia's next album. I found an old Rheem keyboard from 1967 that has a double-octave bass. I'm also making new drum samples, and reworking her whole virtual synth rig. For the next album, I'm going to take all of the gear we used on this one and hide it away to push her to try new things!