

Keys to music

AT THE AGE OF 20, ALICIA KEYS FOUND HERSELF FALLIN' HEADLONG INTO FAME AND THE ENSUING PITFALLS OF SUDDEN SUCCESS. SINCE THEN, THE TOUGH NEW YORKER HAS UNLOCKED NEW DOORS WITH HER ACTING TALENTS AND BROKEN THE BONDS OF HISTORY WITH THE FIRST 007 DUET

STORY TIFFANY BAKKER



There are a few hours until Alicia Keys is due onstage at Vancouver's ornamental Orpheum Theatre and there's fan business to attend to. Today, that means holding court with members

of the Canadian fan club, who've won an online competition to meet her. As we head towards the designated meeting place in a secluded part of the theatre, Keys turns to her assistant and pleads, "Don't let me talk too much or I'll be there forever."

She needn't have worried. When she enters the room, the 15 or so fans are completely awestruck and most of them can barely utter a word. Keys tries valiantly to make up for the awkwardness that follows, talking non-stop about how wonderful Canada is, the unfortunate state of the rainy weather, and just about anything else she can think of to try to start some conversation. (She confides she's always been a people-pleaser, but more on that later.)

A teenage fan named Peter fidgets nervously, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down and his cheeks flushing. Keys turns her attention to him and smiles kindly. "Who's your favourite artist?" she asks gently.

Peter's face turns an even deeper shade of scarlet. "Well..." he stammers, "you, of course."

"I swear I didn't ask you that so you'd say me," she pleads, with a hint of embarrassment.

Peter grins from ear to ear, the rest of the fans giggle and the ice is broken. Now, she has the opposite problem - none of them will shut up. Another fan, John, asks Keys if he can sing a verse from a song he's written for her, while a girl called Tivanna presents the singer with a CD of her own original songs she hopes she'll like - and maybe pass on to her management. Keys is encouraging and supportive and, some 30 minutes later, her assistant gives the nod and we head back to her dressing room for some pre-show dinner.

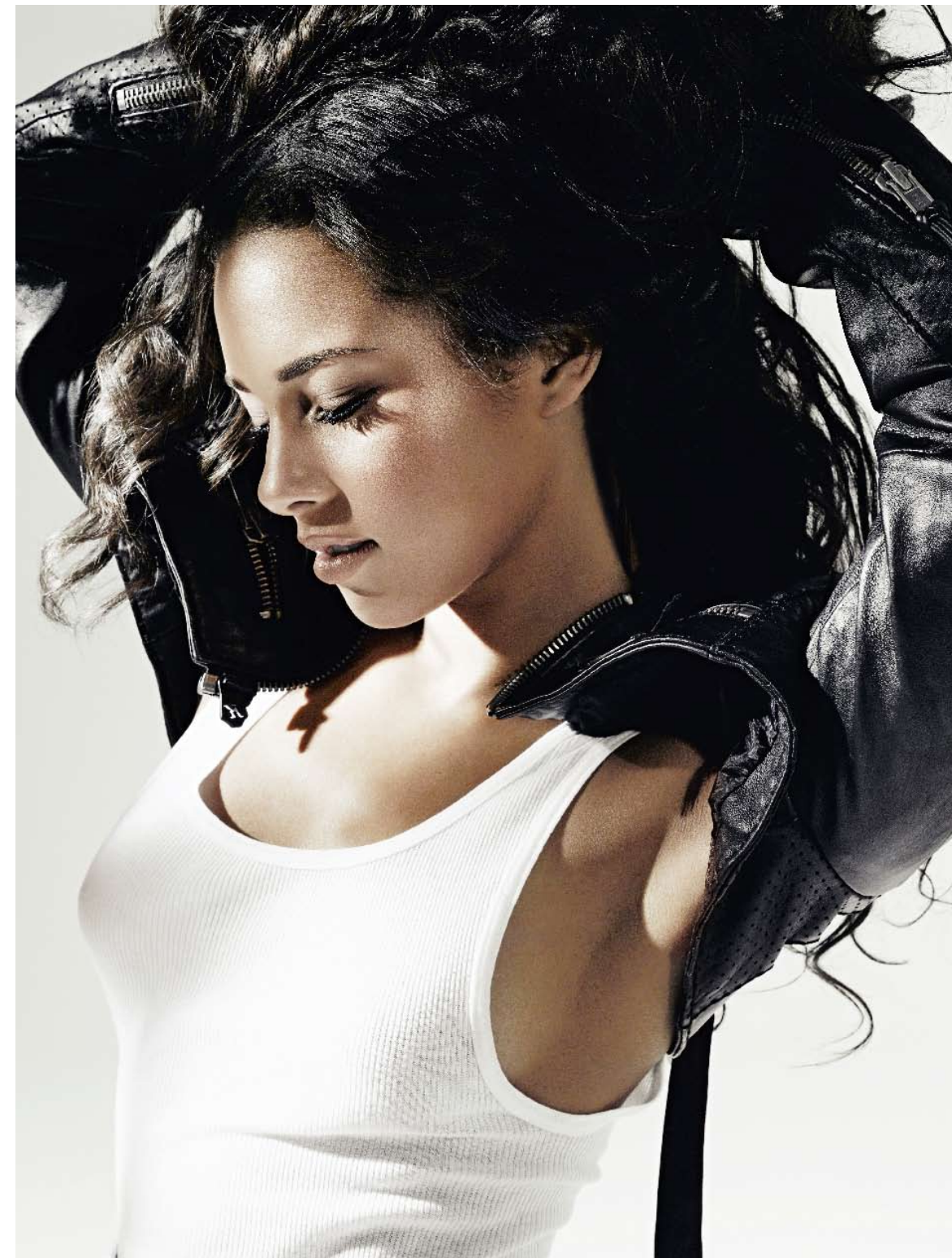
The 27-year-old lets out a sigh as she flops down on the couch in her makeshift dressing room, which is elaborately decked out with silk wall hangings, cashmere rugs and scented candles.

"I enjoy meeting people and doing stuff like that - it's not a chore. They were sweet and they're the people who put me in this position in the first place."

That position is as one of the biggest female artists in the world. Her latest album, *As I Am*, sold 742,000 copies in its first week. Combined with sales of her other albums, *Songs in A Minor*, *The Diary of Alicia Keys* and *Unplugged*, the total is more than 30 million worldwide. She's won 11 Grammys and been referenced in song by Bob Dylan, Missy Elliot and Kanye West. More recently, she joined the ranks of acclaimed artists who've recorded a Bond theme song, when she and Jack White of The White Stripes collaborated on the first 007 duet, 'Another Way To Die', for the upcoming *Quantum of Solace*.

In person, Keys is quite beautiful. Dressed in tight, black Ksubi jeans, ballet flats, a white shirt and a silver-and-black Louis Vuitton scarf, she has the casual chic look that comes with money. She'll have to change into her stage gear soon, but there's a plate of prawns and vegies, as well as a substantial piece of pound cake - her favourite - to devour first. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Keys likes to eat.

We sit down to dinner and someone turns off the lights, leaving only the candles' glimmer. As I start to tuck into the food, Keys bows her head and says



"You've gotta be thankful every day. I always remind myself of that"

grace. Feeling rather uncouth, I remove the broccoli from my mouth and bow my head, despite the fact my religious convictions could be described as thin, at best. "You've gotta be thankful every day," says Keys, "I always remind myself of that."

She didn't start out with much to be thankful for. Alicia Augello Cook was born in 1981 and spent her childhood in the rough New York neighbourhood of Hell's Kitchen, which back then was overrun with drugs and prostitution. Her mother, Teresa Augello, was a struggling actor and single parent (Keys' father, Craig Cook, walked out when she was two), faced with keeping track of a willful daughter.

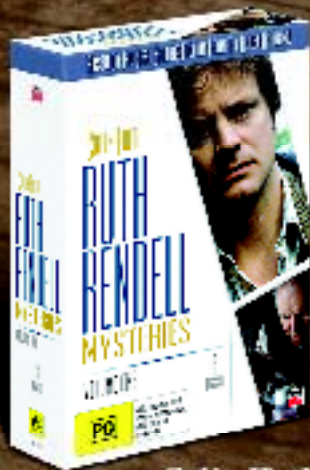
"I was a typical New York teenager," recalls Keys. "I listened to a lot of rap, hung out with friends, saw a lot of stuff I probably shouldn't have. Looking back, I understand why my mother was worried about me."

Her mother encouraged her to take up the piano at a young age, hoping it would give her a positive focus and keep her out of trouble. She proved to have quite a talent (she wrote her first complete song at 14), and soon found herself at the prestigious Professional Performing Arts School in New York. Later, she was accepted to New York's Columbia University to study music, but decided to pursue music on her own terms. The decision to turn >

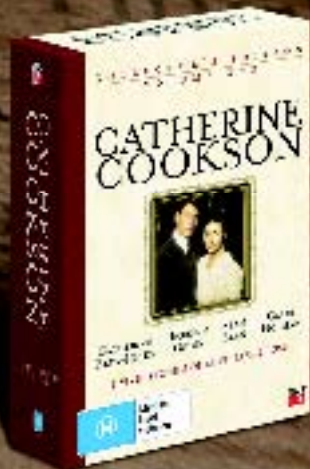
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her back on classical music was supported by her mother, who, Keys says, “understood that life, and that I had to follow my own path.

“We lived in an apartment building full of artists and musicians, so it was a supportive atmosphere. Now it’s like my success is her success.”

The singer says she gave herself the name Keys because it represented the instrument she loved and, more cryptically, the opening of different doors, through which she’s always tried to walk. It was that name that caught the world’s attention in 2001, with the album *Songs in A Minor*, which went on to win five Grammys, including Song of the Year for the hit ‘Fallin’. In hindsight, she says she doesn’t know how she handled the success and subsequent attention.

“People talk about this all the time and it sounds like they’re moaning,” she says, “but it’s something you can never prepare yourself for. It’s indescribable.”

To offset her sky-rocketing music career, she has built up some impressive acting muscle – something

the people around her, she nods warily.

“I don’t want to say that, but yes. You notice changes in people, in the way they relate to you. That’s why I called the album *As I Am*. I wanted it to be stripped down and to say, ‘This is who I am.’ You can’t please people all the time and if they don’t like it, well, so be it.”

During that period, the singer also watched her much-loved grandmother, on her paternal side, suffer cancer. Her death brought father and daughter into contact again. Their relationship, Keys says ambiguously, is “an ongoing process”.

The singer has managed to keep her private life just that and insists it’s possible to have a normal existence even with such fame. Indeed, there have been no scurrilous photos of her falling out of nightclubs or any hint of trouble in the tabloids. The only sensationalist rumour is the long-held assumption she’s gay, which she’s always denied. “I think that happened because, when I started out, I had braids and wore football shirts. I came across as a lot tougher than I was.”

“I’m a workaholic and people-pleaser, and years of that had worn me down”

she’d first flexed at the age of four, when she played one of Rudy Huxtable’s friends on *The Cosby Show*. After various other TV appearances, she landed the part of a lesbian assassin in the 2006 movie *Smokin’ Aces*. That was followed the next year by *The Nanny Diaries*, with Scarlett Johansson, and next up, she’ll be seen alongside Queen Latifah and Jennifer Hudson in *The Secret Life of Bees*. There’s also talk she’ll play the lead in the story of mixed-race piano prodigy Philippa Schuyler, and she’s been approached to do a Broadway show (but says the long-term commitment puts her off a little). Keys loves acting and, unlike a lot of musicians-turned-actors, she’s good at it.

“I truly love it because I can be someone else. I like the fact this isn’t something that revolves around me,” she says. “In my career, I have to take charge of everything – artistically, the business side of things, all of it. It’s nice to let someone else take the reins.”

Letting someone else take charge was something the singer realised she needed to do when things began to unravel after her tour for *The Diary of Alicia Keys*. She says she felt depressed and overwhelmed by her life, but threw herself even further into work, not realising that was actually the problem.

“I figured out I’m a workaholic and a people-pleaser, and years of that had sort of worn me down,” she says. “Even before I was ‘famous’, I always tried to be the person who made everybody happy. When you do that, you end up pleasing no one.”

Did she come close to having a breakdown? “Yeah, I probably did,” she says. “I’d worked non-stop for years and never said no to anyone, personally or professionally. I’d become anxious and insecure, and angry at everyone all the time. I’d never been that sort of person before. I had to say, ‘You know, no, I can’t do certain things,’ and realise that was OK and no one was going to hate me.”

She says family and friends added to the stress when they started expecting her to take charge of their situations. When asked if her success changed

She’s been linked to long-time collaborator Kerry ‘Krucial’ Brothers and, more recently, hip-hop producer Swizz Beatz. Keys admits she’s not single, but is never gender-specific when she talks of her significant other.

“I’d say I’m happiest when I have nothing to do, no plans, nothing in the schedule,” she says. “And when I’m in the arms of my loved one and it’s raining outside. Sounds corny, but that’s it.”

She looks at her watch – the face of which almost covers her entire wrist – and realises it’s time to start getting ready. As she assembles her stage clothes, she tells me that her best friend, Erica, was meant to join her in Canada but, on arrival at the airport in the US, realised she’d left her passport at home. “That’s pretty typical of her,” laughs Keys, rolling her eyes. “I’m used to it!”

The singer says if anyone can make her blush, it’s Erica. “She’s always completely inappropriate,” she laughs. “She’ll come out with the rudest things and I’ll be so embarrassed, but she gets away with it because she’s so funny and charming.”

Onstage, though, Keys is the charming one. Gone are the jeans and shirt, replaced by a chic-looking silk ruffled top and tight, black pants. Whether she’s playing the flirty, engaging popstar who encourages the audience to sing along, or the focused artist in her more natural habitat in front of the piano, Keys shines and the Canadians lap it up. Australians will have the opportunity to see her in action this summer, and the New Yorker can’t wait.

“It’ll be hot and I’m gonna get some sun. You know, I like Canada, but it’s so damned cold. I like heat. I like being hot,” she says, with a twinkle in her eye. “Bring on the sun.” **SM**

Alicia Keys heads to Sydney’s Acer Arena on December 12 and Melbourne’s Rod Laver Arena on December 17. For tickets, visit www.ticketek.com.au. As I Am – The Super Edition (SonyBMG), featuring three new tracks and a live concert DVD, is out November 15.