

EDITOR:
ELIO IANNACCI

LEADING LADY

Alicia Keys on the importance of family, Obama and marching to her own beat.

MASTERING THE ART OF THE NON-SAPPY LOVE SONG ISN'T EASY. FIGHTING CLICHÉS AND avoiding the lyrical path that is almost always taken can lead a top-earning musician into a hitless career dip. Fortunately, Alicia Keys has built a repertoire of chart-topping songs that break away from the trend-driven pop machine. Her newest disc, *Girl On Fire*, has the 31-year-old soulstress soundtracking ballads and self-assured anthems that refuse to follow the leader. "I'm proud of the fact that every song I've written has always been a reflection of me and that I've kept that up," she says via phone from her home in New York. "It is so easy to get trapped by other people's expectations and fool yourself into wanting to sound or look what is considered to be perfect. I choose not to get caught up in all that." »

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Culture INTERVIEW

Keys' latest offering situates listeners directly in the singer-songwriter's current emotional state. She's figuring out marriage (to rapper Swizz Beatz, since 2010), motherhood (her son, Egypt, is two) and the whole "thinking for three" thing.

"I've experienced more life in these past three years than I ever have," she says of her new priorities. One thing that hasn't changed is her penchant for crafting intelligent slow jams (her best from the new disc is "Not Even The King"). True, she's already written adoring choruses on her native N.Y.C. ("Empire State of Mind"), her mother ("I Owe You") and a slew of never-to-be-named exes ("Fallin'," "You Don't Know My Name" and "Un-thinkable"), but *Girl On Fire* marks the first time Keys has composed heartfelt melodies with a U.S. president in mind.

"A song called 'New Day' really represents who [Barack Obama] is and where he's going to bring the country—he had such an effect on me," says Keys. "He's definitely moving us forward, beyond a time that was less open. Part of what he offers us is the ability to dream and make those dreams be real."

To further spread the fire, Keys is planning a worldwide tour—she is in talks with Givenchy to design the costumes ("I love their feminine but tough style"). She's also gearing up to play Lena Horne in a big-screen biopic about the jazz singer turned civil rights activist. "Lena was someone who completely broke down boundaries, which is not easy, especially during her time," says Keys. "She comes from such a rags to riches story. It's not only about hope but possibilities." —*Ello Iannacci*



"I've EXPERIENCED MORE LIFE in these PAST THREE YEARS than I ever HAVE."



FROM TOP: KEYS ON THE AWARDS SHOW CIRCUIT, 2012; CARRYING SON EGYPT WITH HUSBAND SWIZZ BEATZ AND HIS SON KASEEM AT A NEW YORK KNICKS GAME, 2012

PHOTOGRAPHY: KEYS BY KEYSTONE PRESS AGENCY; KEYS AND FAMILY BY JAMES DEVANEY/GETTY