



# nKey NOTES

STRONG-MINDED AND INDEPENDENT, ALICIA KEYS ALSO HARNESSES THE POWER OF CONNECTIONS – INCLUDING SOME POWERFUL NAMES AND CAUSES IN SOUTH FLORIDA.

BY ELIZABETH RAHE

Since she first stormed the music charts a decade ago with *Songs in A Minor*, Alicia Keys has always gone her own way – but she has never gone it alone. The 14-time Grammy winner who blends jazz, soul and hop-hop in her soaring contralto stylings, can thank a series of relationships and connections that have nurtured her, supported her, collaborated with her.

Indeed, a connection with NBA great Alonzo Mourning – through a mutual friendship with Queen Latifah – is bringing Keys to Hard Rock Live July 23 to headline Zo's Summer Groove concert. Mourning and his wife, Tracy, have attended her charity ball to raise money for AIDS orphans in Africa. Keys is performing at Zo's gala to raise money for at-risk children in South Florida.

The soulful singer should be a big draw for the event, which is offering 4,000 concert-only seats in addition to gala tickets. Keys, 30, recently released an expanded 10th anniversary edition of *Songs in A Minor*, the album that originally earned her five Grammys, including Best New Artist. Over the past decade the singer/songwriter and classically trained pianist produced four more albums, racking up sales of more than 30 million. She has received scores of awards and honors, including *Billboard's* nod as top R&B artist of the 2000-2009 decade.

Keys has collaborated with a string of diverse artists, including Jay-Z, Whitney Houston, Jennifer Hudson, Christina Aguilera, The White Stripes' Jack White and Spanish recording artist Alejandro Sanz. Along the way she has picked up credits as a producer, actor (*Smokin' Aces*, *The Nanny Diaries*, *The Secret Life of Bees*), author (*Tears for Water: Songbook of Poems & Lyrics*), philanthropist and, most recently, wife and mother.

Undoubtedly, her most important connections today are with the two loves in her life: her husband of one year, music producer and painter Swizz Beatz (aka Kasseem Daoud Dean), and their 9-month-old son, Egypt Daoud Dean.

"The past year has been incredible; just so many blessings, being able to be a mommy, being able to be a wife and just really finding my center and my place of comfort," she recently told *MTV News*. "It's the most fun I've ever had, period. I feel like I'm definitely more creative."

She shared some of that creativity with fans in December, when she released a song and video in Egypt's honor to nearly 4 million Twitter followers. A collaboration with Beatz and songstress Eve, *Speechless* expresses her awe in her newborn son with her trademark simplicity: *When I wake up in the morning baby / Can't believe my eyes / Is this little part of destiny, you're now in my life.*

On her website, Keys blogged about how motherhood brought to mind her first important relationship, with her mother, Terri Augello. "I look at her through different eyes. I think of all she did for me, gave to me, gave up FOR me. I think of how much she loves me."

Augello, an Italian-American paralegal and part-time actress, raised Alicia Augello Cook in New York City as a single parent, often working multiple jobs to make ends meet. Her father, Craig Cook, who is African-American, was not much involved in her life. Although money was tight, Augello enrolled her daughter in piano lessons at age 7, and by 12 she was writing songs on an old upright piano that served as a room divider in their small Hell's Kitchen apartment.

At the Harlem Police Athletic League Center 14-year-old Alicia met Jeff Robinson, who became her

manager, arranging performances throughout the area and, later, showcases with record labels. She honed her art at the Professional Performing Arts School, graduating as valedictorian in three years and going on to Columbia University on scholarship.

Not for long, however. She soon changed her name from Cook to Keys and exchanged college at Columbia for a contract with Columbia Records. An exec offered her the \$26,000 piano she had just auditioned on if she would sign. "All I had at home was my broken-down room divider. He might as well have been offering me diamonds," she once told Oprah in *O* magazine.

Columbia seemed to be looking for a pop princess – short skirts, slimmer waist, flowing hair, conventional sound – while the denim-clad, cornrowed Keys wanted to break free, she has said, in the spirit of Marvin Gaye, Prince, Roberta Flack. "I just wanted to be who I was, which was like so many other girls I knew," Keys told *W* magazine. "We grew up in the city, had a hard edge and obstacles to overcome, but we were still young and beautiful. I didn't want to be all dressed up, all made up – I wanted to be myself, which hadn't been done before... I was a young girl with very strong ideas but no experience."

Producer/songwriter Kerry "Krucial" Brothers, who would become her collaborator on four studio albums, convinced her to buy equipment so she could record and arrange her own songs – a move that led her to become one of the few female producers in the business. The music began to flow, keenly expressing her inner turmoil in lyrics of love and heartbreak, but it was not the pop sound Columbia was looking for.

"After they completely trampled on me, and just stepped on me and rubbed their dirty feet on me, like 'You suck,' I said, 'Well, fine then. Then we're not on the same page and I don't suck. You suck. And I'm gonna go somewhere where somebody likes me,'" she said in a 2004 *60 Minutes* interview.

The split paved the way for her next powerful association, with music mogul Clive Davis. In June 2001 Davis' newly formed J Records published *Songs in A Minor*, but not before a marketing blitz that included private club showcases and a performance at Davis' Grammy party, which resulted in a *Tonight Show* booking, according to an *Entertainment Weekly* article at the time. Then the video for her single *Fallin'* went to BET, MTV and VH1, and Keys performed for media and retail representatives in a half-dozen cities. "When the album was released June 26, both the industry and the public had been ingeniously primed," *EW* reported. "In its first week, the record, with its blend of mild hip-hop and balladry, sold 236,000 copies, enough to enter at No. 1."

Also adding to the hype was Keys' appearance on *Oprah* the day before the release, which led to another powerful relationship. Their connection was evident during Oprah's Farewell Spectacular in May, when Keys sang *Superwoman* and accompanied Maya Angelou as she read a poem to Oprah.

"One of the most important things she has shown me is how to be as a human being," Keys recently told *Access Hollywood*. "You meet a lot of people, and they don't look you in your eye – they aren't necessarily connecting with

AP PHOTO/MATT SAYLES

"Every moment is beautiful; delicious even! Every moment I'm learning and living in a way I never have before."

— Keys' blog post after her son's birth

Alicia Keys performs at the BET Awards

“You meet a lot of people, and they don’t look you in your eye – they aren’t necessarily connecting with you as a person. I really appreciate the way [Oprah] connects to every person she meets – as human to human. I really take that from her, and that’s what I want to do as well.”

— From *Access Hollywood*

AP PHOTO/STEPHEN CHERNIN



Alicia Keys performs during a World AIDS Day charity concert



December – signing off Twitter until donations reached \$1 million. A couple dozen of her friends, including Jennifer Hudson, Pink and Elijah Wood, posed in “Buy Life” T-shirts emblazoned with a bar code that people can scan to donate directly.

The 2008 documentary *Alicia in Africa: Journey to the Motherland* (www.aliciainafrica.com) chronicles Keys’ trip to Kenya, South Africa and Uganda to visit clinics and programs supported by Keep a Child Alive. “I really believe AIDS is a mirror,” she says at the close of the film. “It looks at us and it asks us who are we and what do we care about? Do we care about a whole generation of people being wiped out, orphaning millions of children? Or do we care about what, celebrity drama? If AIDS got half, half of the attention the media gives to celebrity dramas, this issue would be well on its way to being solved.”

In Leigh Blake’s estimation, Keys’ connection to Keep a Child Alive has been a saving grace for her in the whirlwind of celebrity. “Fame can change people and have dreadful consequences,” she said in *The Independent*. “But I think Keep a Child Alive has helped her realize there is something much more important than the swirling circle of fame that she dips in and out of. She used her celebrity to save lives, and it’s kept her grounded.”

Since 2004 Keys has raised more than \$10 million for the charity at the star-studded Black Ball, held in New York and London. That’s the event that drew Alonzo and Tracy Mourning, and now Keys is returning the favor. The former Heat basketball star says she is the perfect artist to headline Zo’s Summer Groove. “It’s her heart and her focus...there’s a symmetry in what we do and what she does.”

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In 2004, Oprah’s Angel Network donated \$250,000 to Keep a Child Alive (www.keepachildalive.org), the foundation Keys co-founded in 2003 to provide antiretroviral drugs, nutrition and support for children and their families suffering with HIV/AIDS in Africa and India. Her partner in this endeavor, Leigh Blake, is another link in her chain of influence.

While on a tour stop in South Africa, Keys saw first-hand the human cost of the AIDS pandemic. The young artist was deeply touched by the women who pleaded for her help in getting antiretroviral drugs for their children, Blake recently told London’s *The Independent*. “Later, when we were out in the middle of Zululand, she asked, ‘What do you want to do about this, Leigh?’ I said, ‘I want to get antiretroviral drugs to the poor,’ and she replied, ‘If you can figure out a way to do that I’ll be with you all the way.’ It has connected us ever since.”

For her part, Keys said she is in awe of Blake’s dedication and tenacity. “We are yin and yang. I’m the smiler who smooths things over with people; she’s the pitbull and she loves to be unleashed... I feel so proud of what we’ve achieved together. No one else has given me what Leigh has: a sense of honor and accomplishment, of being a part of something that’s more than my own life.”

Keys often capitalizes on her A-list connections to raise money for the charity. Lady Gaga, Justin Timberlake, Usher, Kim Kardashian and other celebrities joined her in a “Digital Death” last

## Alonzo Mourning Charities brightens kids’ futures one relationship at a time

**Alonzo** Mourning often says that life is about relationships. “None of us would be here without someone else’s contribution. I’m a living, walking example of that,” says the former Miami Heat star and now Vice President of Player Programs. “Without people giving to me, I wouldn’t be in the position I am in today,” he says, listing coaches, teachers, family and the kidney donor who saved his life in 2003.

Now Zo and wife, Tracy, give back through Alonzo Mourning Charities and its programs for at-risk youth, using their connections to make a difference. “I want to see that life is better for young people,” he says. “Many of them have the ability; so many of them don’t have the resources. We want to provide those resources for them by encouraging other people to support our efforts, to support our mission.”

Support for that mission comes from Zo’s Summer Groove, a three-day event (July 22-24) that includes a golf tournament, comedy show and gala dinner and concert featuring Alicia Keys. (Concert-only tickets are available.) Now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year, the Groove has raised more than \$10 million for Alonzo Mourning Charities programs, Mourning says, including the Overtown Youth Center, which provides children in grades 2-12 with educational and recreational activities designed to build character and foster success in life. It also supports the Honey Shine Mentoring program, founded by Tracy Mourning, which helps guide girls toward a healthy and productive future.

The future looks bright for Schreal Bates, 17, of Miami, who has been coming to the Overtown Youth Center since it opened in 2003. “Before I started coming here, I was terrible. I learned there were people who were there for me and who taught me to do what was right,” she says. A recent college tour opened her eyes to the possibilities for her education. “I wouldn’t have thought about college before,” says Bates, who hopes to study sports medicine after graduation next year. Although she says she will miss coming to the center, the staff will follow her to age 25 to provide continuing support.

It’s that culture of family relationships that makes the program successful, Mourning says. “We take full responsibility for the outcome of these kids. We are attached to their lives. If they fail, then we fail.”

The program is free to participants, who are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis. It is currently at capacity, 280 kids, with a waiting list. Mourning would like to expand, but that takes more funding.

“It’s important for us to get the community aware and involved,” he says. “You can trust that the money will go right straight to the actual cause, which is helping people graduate from high school and getting them off to college or Job Corps or the armed forces... That’s the return on your investment.”

—Elizabeth Rahe

Photo courtesy of Alonzo Mourning Charities



### ZO'S SUMMER GROOVE EVENTS

Alonzo Mourning marks the 15th anniversary of Zo's Summer Groove with a three-day celebration. For more events, visit [www.zsg.com](http://www.zsg.com) or call 305-476-0095.

**ZSG Golf Classic** - 7:30 a.m. July 22, Fairmont Turnberry Isle, Aventura; foursome for \$4,000, single for \$1,000, with celebrity teams available; [www.zsg.com](http://www.zsg.com).

**ZSG Comedy Show** - Actor/comedian D.L. Hughley hosts a lineup of comics, 7 p.m. July 22, Hard Rock Live, Hollywood; \$45 - \$100, [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com), 800-745-3000.

**ZSG Benefit Dinner and Gala** - Cocktail reception and dinner with celebrity guests, silent and live auction and concert featuring Alicia Keys and Robin Thicke, July 23, gala dinner 7:30 p.m., concert 8:30 p.m. Anniversary Row table \$10,000, dinner table \$5,000, individual dinner tickets \$500. For dinner and gala tickets, visit [www.zsg.com](http://www.zsg.com). Concert tickets \$45-\$65 [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com), 800-745-3000.

**LIV at Fontainebleau Resort Closing Party** - Alonzo, athletes and celebrities cap the weekend in style, 11 p.m. July 24, Fontainebleau Resort, Miami Beach. Open to the public based on table purchase; contact LIV for more information at 305-674-4680.

