

ALICIA KEYS

—

Teaches Songwriting
and Producing



MasterClass

Girl on Fire

Songs in the Key of Alicia

The making of a modern-day Renaissance woman



The world loves a prodigy. Blaise Pascal, Wolfgang Mozart, Bobby Fischer—we obsess over their minds and gifts with amazement and envy. We imagine the headiness that comes with making something immensely difficult look as easy as breathing. We wonder what it must be like to harbor a deep, relentless, natural talent and how remarkable it must feel to unleash that talent on the world.

To be sure, Alicia Keys (born Alicia Cook) is deeply, relentlessly, naturally talented. That much has been clear to the world since 2001, when her debut album, *Songs in A Minor*, swept the Grammy Awards.

It was obvious to those closest to her long before. When Alicia was growing up in the notorious Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York, her mother—single, fierce—supplied ample encouragement. By age seven, Alicia had found her muse in the piano, the instrument that would inspire her stage name; soon she was creating original compositions, translating emotion into lyrical syllables and onto musical staves. Her songs blend R&B, jazz, pop, soul, and classical music into a sound that's at once familiar and inimitable. The accolades that she's accumulated speak for themselves: 15 Grammys, seven hit studio al-

bums, four No. 1 singles, more than 42 million records sold worldwide.

But to describe Alicia strictly as a prodigy would do her a disservice. The term, while accurate, writes off her career as God-given talent—something anyone could've pulled off had they been born with her same musical inclination. In reality, her tireless work ethic—the decades she spent becoming a better musician, a better performer, a better human—was as crucial a component of her meteoric rise. As a young artist with a singular vision, Alicia often fought for creative control of her music. She wrestled with self-doubt and the pressures of conformity. She asked big questions, took a solo pilgrimage across Egypt, became an outspoken advocate for women's rights and gender equality, and discovered a passion for non-profit work. Along the way, she kept learning and listening, refining her sound, experimenting in the recording studio and on tour.

Alicia would be the first to tell you: It might look easy, but it wasn't easy. So she understands the importance of sharing what she's learned with a new generation. It's what compelled her to be a judge on NBC's *The Voice*, and it's what brings her here. Songwriting has led Alicia down a path of self-acceptance and self-discovery—a path she hopes you'll take, too.





VIOLIN ALICIA KEYS

FALLIN'
(SCENE OUT)

ARR. BY:
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For more on how to read sheet music for piano, head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).

For the Record

*You get a lifetime
to make your
first record, and
then about a year—
if you're lucky—
to make your
second.*

Theme & Variation

Charting two decades of artistic evolution (and a lifetime of spiritual growth) across Alicia's seven studio albums

As a precocious teenage star, Alicia wasn't afraid to present herself as an artist—one who was thinking in the long-term. Two decades later, her impressive discography reflects a lesson gleaned from the likes of Prince and Nina Simone: Never make the same album twice.

Even today, Alicia's debut LP—2001's wise-beyond-its-years *Songs in A Minor*—has the power to make any listener erupt in goosebumps. She was 20 when the lead single, "Fallin'," dropped, but she'd been toiling away at the album for years (she wrote its earliest song, "Butterflyz," at the age of 14). The record is virtuoso piano, city-kid swagger, and the soulfulness of her musical heroes—Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, and, yes, her "homie" Frédéric Chopin—remixed to a beat all her own.

You get a lifetime to make your first record, and then about a year—if you're lucky—to make your second. Alicia elegantly sidestepped a sophomore slump with 2003's *The Diary of Alicia Keys*. The album explored the sensuous textures of neo-soul and what she calls "retro-futuristic" production styles; she was pegged as a modern-day torchbearer for the 1960s and '70s, a chan-

teuse in the mold of Aretha Franklin.

Not one to be pegged, though, Alicia swerved, tapping into the influences of both piano ballads (see: her ruminative 2009 album, *The Element of Freedom*) and anthemic '80s- and '90s-inflected pop and R&B (see: "Like You'll Never See Me Again" off 2007's *As I Am*, as well as the triumphant, titular track from 2012's *Girl on Fire*).

In recent years, Alicia's music has reflected changes in her personal life and the world. The evolution heard on her impassioned 2016 release, *Here*, found her experimenting with new sounds; it's her most hip-hop-influenced album to date, with a bold, compassionate message of justice and peace. Songs like "Blended Family," "The Gospel," and "She Don't Really Care_1 Luv" eloquently place her own experiences—marriage, motherhood—within a larger social context while adapting to a new sonic palette of driving beats, sparser soundscapes, and bluesy vocals. *ALICIA*, released in September 2020, picks up that thread and runs with it. The album features some of the most political songs of her career ("Perfect Way to Die," "Good Job") while making space to collaborate with young artists like Sampha, Khalid, and Tierra Whack.

What is the Suzuki Method?

Developed in the mid-20th century by the Japanese violinist Shinichi Suzuki, the Suzuki Method is an educational system that teaches children how to play music with the same ease that they learn to speak their native language. Practitioners start early—Alicia was around six years old when she began—

and develop rigorous habits through repeated practice and sequential introduction to classical compositions. Suzuki's philosophy also focuses on music's ability to inspire the spirit. "If a child hears fine music from the day of his birth and learns to play it himself," he once wrote, "he develops

sensitivity, discipline, and endurance. He gets a beautiful heart."

Learn the fundamentals of music—from scales and chord progressions to the difference between melody and harmony—at [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).

The Essential Alicia Playlist

Soaring ballads and hip-hop flare, soulful grooves and social commentary—it's all here



● **“FALLIN’”**

Now her signature song, “Fallin’” introduced the world to Alicia. The seminal arrangement showcases her vocal range, lyrical maturity, and early neo-gospel-infused sound.

● **“A WOMAN’S WORTH”**

The tango-style earworm and second single of Alicia’s career broke into single digits on the Hot 100 thanks in no small part to an award-winning music video.

● **“IF I AIN’T GOT YOU”**

Winner of one Grammy Award and nominated for a second, the song

reconsiders materialism in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the death of R&B luminary Aaliyah.

● **“YOU DON’T KNOW MY NAME”**

Another top-ten hit, another Grammy winner. This lovelorn treat, produced by Kanye West and featuring a pre-fame John Legend on background vocals, ensured Alicia’s second album got the music world buzzing.

● **“DIARY”**

Featuring original instrumentals by ’90s neo-soul act Tony! Toni! Toné!, “Diary” was certified gold, garnered a Grammy nom, and cracked a

handful of top 10 charts, further solidifying Alicia’s star power and technical prowess.

● **“LIKE YOU’LL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN”**

A soothing piano riff helped this sumptuous track skyrocket up the R&B charts, where it bumped another of Alicia’s songs, “No One,” out of the No. 1 spot.

● **“NO ONE”**

“No One” topped Billboard’s Hot 100 for five weeks straight and the Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart for 10 weeks. It was the most-heard

Legend

● SONGS IN A MINOR (2001)

● THE DIARY OF ALICIA KEYS (2003)

● AS I AM (2007)

radio song of 2007. Within a year, it ranked among the bestselling singles of all time, earning a pair of Grammy Awards.

• **“SUPERWOMAN”**

The super-catchy, organ-driven ode to female empowerment became the theme song for the WNBA’s 2008 season.

• **“UN-THINKABLE (I’M READY)”**

The longest-running No. 1 single of 2010—it sat atop Billboard’s R&B chart for a solid three months—was propelled by a hit music video that explored interracial relationships and was recognized at the NAACP Awards.

• **“TRY SLEEPING WITH A BROKEN HEART”**

The song peaked at No. 2 on Billboard’s Hot R&B/Hip-Hop chart—Alicia’s 13th top 10 hit of the decade—but also marked a particular moment in her career: Once enamored of Prince’s synthy power ballads, Alicia was composing all-time classics of her own.

• **“EMPIRE STATE OF MIND (PART 2) BROKEN DOWN”**

This sequel-slash-companion to Jay-Z’s “Empire State of Mind” stripped

When we had our first kiss
It happened on a Thursday
Ooh it set my soul on fire

away the hip-hop swagger and doubled down on Alicia’s warm, intimate piano playing. It was a hit overseas, charting at No. 4 in the U.K.

• **“GIRL ON FIRE”**

Building on “Try Sleeping With a Broken Heart,” the smash hit served as the centerpiece for a three-song suite (alongside a stripped-down version, plus a remix with Nicki Minaj) that showcased Alicia’s mastery of musical arrangements.

• **“HOLY WAR”**

A gem of minimalist composition, “Holy War” picked up where Alicia’s remarkable poetic recital at the MTV Video Music Awards left off, weaving a lyrical tapestry that echoed one of her musical heroes, Marvin Gaye.

• **“BLENDED FAMILY (WHAT YOU DO FOR LOVE)”**

Exploring coparenting and modern-day familial dynamics, this collaboration with Gen Z megastar A\$AP Rocky was both a conversation starter and a top 10 track on Billboard’s Adult R&B.

• **“GRAMERCY PARK”**

Alicia performed this meditative groove—equal parts soul, gospel, and folk—during her weeklong, socially distant concert residency on *The Late Late Show*. (Special guest star Bebe Rexha sang the second verse.)

• **“ME X 7”**

A collaboration with 25-year-old Tierra Whack (née Dizzle Dizz), this multilayered labor of love about the labor of love proved once again that Alicia’s take on contemporary sounds remains relevant and unique.

• **“PERFECT WAY TO DIE”**

Released in June 2020, weeks after police in Minneapolis killed George Floyd, the song quickly became a protest anthem for the reinvigorated Black Lives Matter movement.

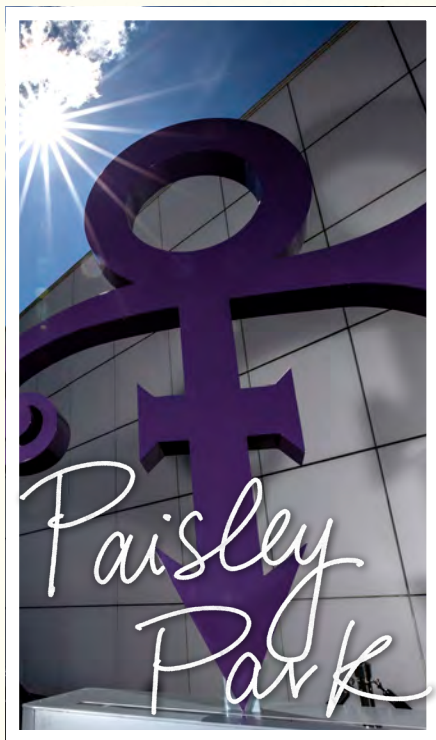
For more on how to write, structure, and record a great song, head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).

I keep on fallin'
In and out of love
With you

Scene 3 Heard

Inspirational

Alicia came of age surrounded by different cultures, and a career spent touring and traveling has only led to more discovery. Still, some places have particularly special meaning to her, leaving an outsize impression on her musical journey.



> Alicia needed permission from Prince to cover his “How Come U Don’t Call Me Anymore,” one of her all-time-favorite songs (the classic appeared on her debut album, *Songs in A Minor*). This meant traveling to the icon’s private Minnesota estate, known as Paisley Park, to essentially audition her version of the tune for him. Thankfully, Prince gave her his coveted seal of approval.

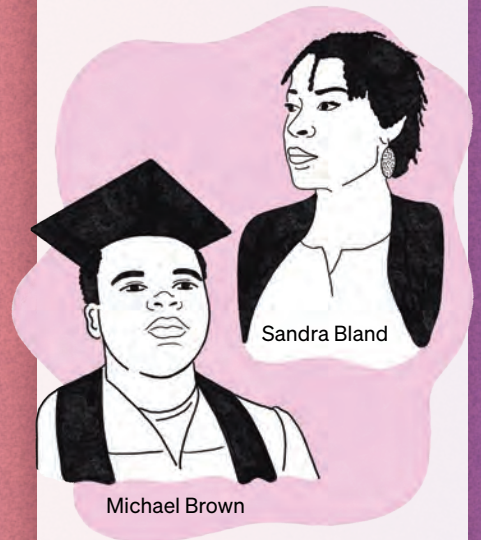


> In a city with no shortage of musical tributes, it takes a lot to stand out. Gotham’s buzzy artistic energy is a recurring theme in Alicia’s body of work, heard on exceptional tracks like “She Don’t Really Care_1 Luv” and “Gramercy Park” as well as her feature on Jay-Z’s New York-centric anthem, “Empire State of Mind.”



> When Alicia first traveled to South Africa, in 2003, she witnessed the devastation wrought by the AIDS epidemic firsthand. It inspired her to embrace activism and cofound her first nonprofit, Keep a Child Alive. The organization provides financial and programmatic support to community organizations in Kenya, Rwanda, India, and elsewhere, at last count serving more than 150,000 people a year.

ON From Location



STRENGTH, POWER, FEELING

Finding a voice for social change

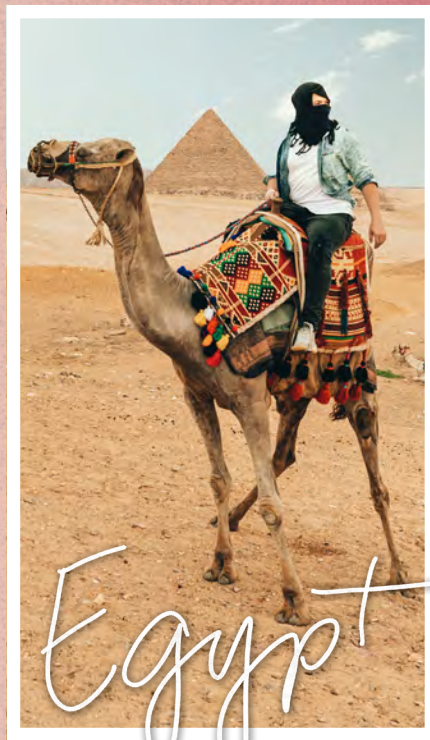
In her autobiography, Alicia says she studied “every note” of Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On*. “It blew me away each time I heard it. I admired how artists like Gaye and Nina Simone stayed in tune with their political times, how their music reflected and defined the spirit of change. I dreamed of one day doing the same.”

Alicia’s latest album finds her doing just that, and many of its most powerful songs address injustices. “Perfect Way to Die,” a heartbreaking ballad inspired by the deaths of Michael Brown and Sandra Bland, confronts police brutality and the unlawful killing of Black people in America through poetic storytelling; “Good Job,” which Alicia penned in Egypt (where she witnessed children busking for change) sets out to remind disenfranchised people that they matter. The song became an anthem during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the triumphant single “Underdog,” the latter of which resonated with the frontline workers whom Alicia addresses directly in the song’s lyrics: “Keep on keeping on at what you love/ You’ll find that someday soon enough, you will rise up.”



Joshua Tree

> Great songwriters are always looking for new locales to nurture their creative energy. Alicia is no different. One of her favorite recent discoveries has been the serene desert landscape of Joshua Tree, California, where she spent time working on *ALICIA* and celebrated her wedding anniversary with husband Swizz Beatz. In an interview, she compared the experience to being “on Mars or something because it just felt...otherworldly.”



Egypt

> Grappling with the pressures of fame, Alicia made her first pilgrimage to Egypt in 2006. She’s returned many times since, and a recent trip there inspired her to write the song “Good Job” for *ALICIA*. The country now represents, as she writes in her memoir, *More Myself*, space for her “spirit’s deep rejuvenation.”

Play, Lady, Play

The future of music production is female—and so is its past

Producing has empowered Alicia to shape her own sound and allowed her to see firsthand the inequalities within an industry historically dominated by men. But plenty of women have made space for themselves behind the recording console—here's a sampling.

SYLVIA ROBINSON

- > Two influential rap songs—the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message"—were produced by Robinson. An accomplished R&B artist in her own right, she brought the sound of the streets into the mainstream during the late 1970s. Hence her nickname: The Mother of Hip-Hop.

SUZANNE CIANI

- > Ciani has been described as "America's first female synth hero." In the 1970s, her glistening, otherworldly, self-produced compositions introduced many people to the then-unfamiliar sounds of the Buchla synthesizer. The pop-and-pour audio in Coca-Cola ads and those GE dishwasher bleeps? She made both.

SYLVIA MASSY

- > Massy has shaped the pummeling hard-rock sounds of bands like System of a Down and Tool as well as the Red Hot Chili Peppers. She's also worked as an engineer alongside Rick Rubin on Johnny Cash's Grammy-winning 1997 album, *Unchained*.

LINDA PERRY

- > Best known as the frontwoman of 4 Non Blondes, Perry's prolific behind-the-scenes work—as both a songwriter and producer—helped define modern pop music as we know it. She's worked on hit songs with P!nk, Christina Aguilera, and, yes, Alicia.

ESTER DEAN

- > Dean has written and produced so many hit songs that she's known as the Song Factory. She's worked extensively with Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj, received a Grammy nomination for her production work on Rihanna's 2010 album, *Loud*, and maintained a successful acting career, notably appearing as Cynthia-Rose in the *Pitch Perfect* films.

CATHERINE MARKS

- > Working out of the Assault & Battery studio in London, the pianist turned alt-rock producer has worked with an eclectic group of artists like the Killers, Wolf Alice, and St. Vincent.

TOKIMONSTA

- > Los Angeles-based DJ and producer Jennifer Lee (a.k.a. TOKiMONSTA) stays busy. Beyond making her own music (her acclaimed 2017 album, *Lune Rouge*, was nominated for a Grammy), she also produces for other artists and remixes tracks by everyone from Beck and Justin Timberlake to Lil Uzi Vert.

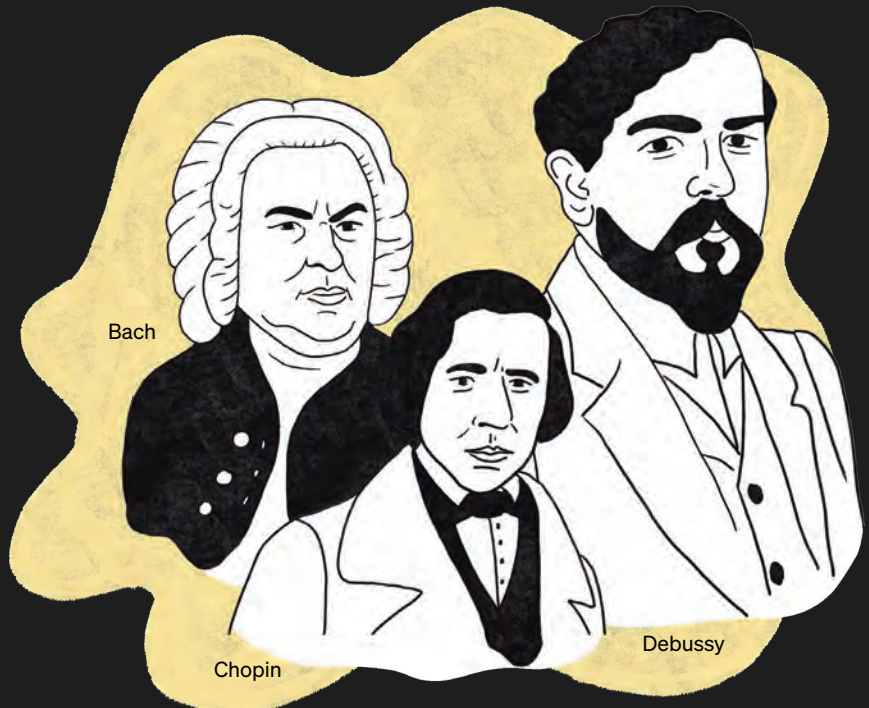
FATIMA AL QADIRI

> Born in Senegal and raised in Kuwait, Al Qadiri produces experimental dance music. She's a member of the Future Brown production collective, created an alter ego (Shaneera) for a concept album exploring queerness in Arab culture, and recently composed and produced the score for the acclaimed French film *Atlantique*.

WONDAGURL

> In 2013, one of Ebony "Wondagurl" Oshunrinde's beats wound up on "Crown," a song on Jay-Z's *Magna Carta Holy Grail*. The Canadian-Nigerian producer has since racked up production credits with Drake, Travis Scott, Rihanna, Mariah Carey, and others.

Want to learn more about synthesizers, music sampling, and how to set up a home recording studio? Head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).



Clavier Caviar

These classical composers have informed Alicia's distinctive approach to piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Provenance: Leipzig, Germany
Years active: 1708–1750
Influential compositions: *Brandenburg Concertos*; *Goldberg Variations*
In his own words: "The final aim and reason of all music is nothing other than the glorification of God and the refreshment of the spirit."

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Provenance: Warsaw, Poland
Years active: 1830–1849
Influential compositions: The Nocturnes, op. 9; Piano Sonata no. 2 in B-flat Minor, op. 35 ("The Funeral March")
In his own words: "Simplicity is the final achievement. After one

has played a vast quantity of notes and more notes, it is simplicity that emerges as the crowning reward of art."

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

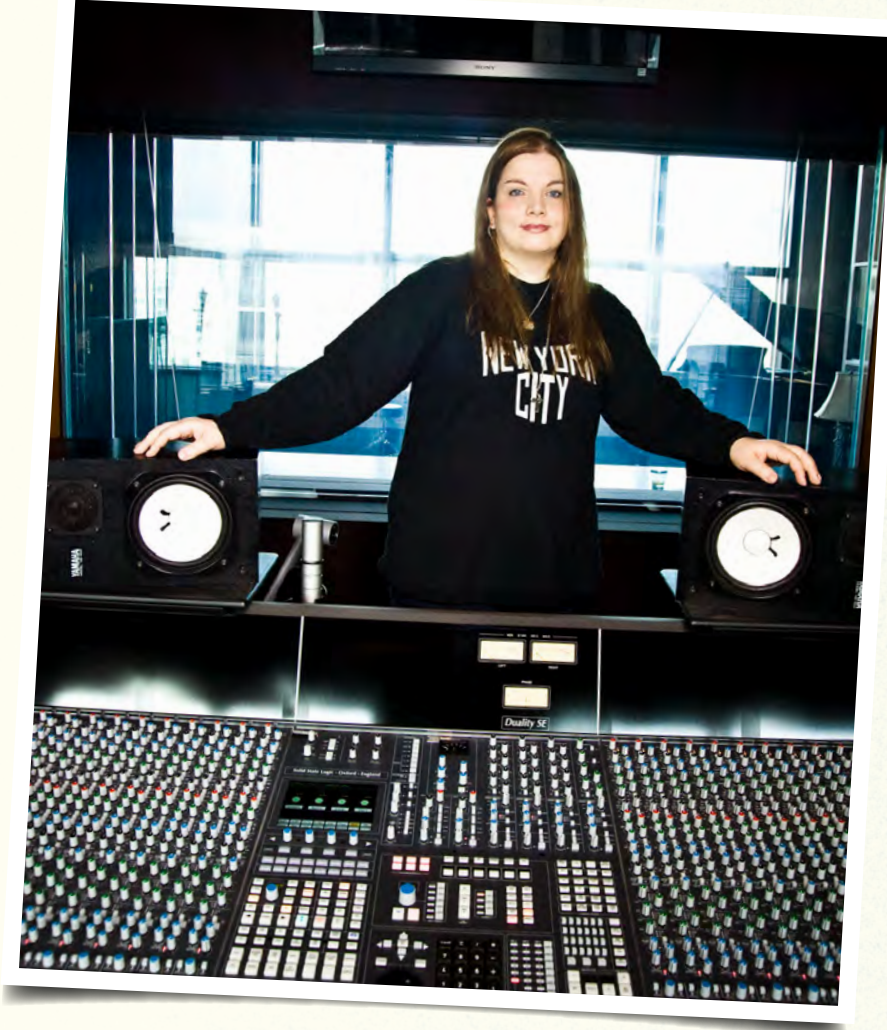
Provenance: Paris, France
Years active: 1880–1918
Influential compositions: "Clair de Lune"; "La Mer"; *Pelléas et Mélisande*
In his own words: "Works of art make rules; rules do not make works of art."

ERIK SATIE

Provenance: Paris, France
Years active: 1887–1925
Influential compositions: *Trois gymnopédies*
In his own words: "I have never written a note I didn't mean."

MAURICE RAVEL

Provenance: Paris, France
Years active: 1893–1937
Influential compositions: "Boléro"; "Gaspard de la nuit"
In his own words: "Music, I feel, must be emotional first and intellectual second."



Track Star

Mix Master

Meet Ann Mincieli, cofounder of Jungle City Studios in New York City and Alicia's most trusted producing partner

You're in the studio with Alicia all the time. How did you two meet?

I started working with Alicia way back at Quad Studios in 1998. I was an assistant engineer, and she was an up-and-coming artist. We built our partnership and collaboration over time—the type of producer that she was was the type of engineer I wanted to be. We both saw making sounds as an art.

You and Alicia are big-time gear collectors, and your studio, Jungle City, is a wonderland of cool finds. What are you looking for when you're sourcing different instruments?

When I look for rare gear, I scour everything from Guitar Center in Los Angeles to Vintage King to eBay. We have old Mellotrons, which the Beatles made famous back in the day. I

have one of the first Höfner 500/1 violin basses that we used on Alicia's album *As I Am*. I have an old EMI TG-12345 console. I have a 1937 Gibson EH-150 guitar amp, which people used to carry around because they could plug their guitar and microphone into it, pull up to their gig, and sing. We probably have 20 different drum kits and 50 different snare drums and 100 different cymbals in our arsenal, and they all sound different. But Alicia and I are into the brand-new gear, too, like the whole Dave Smith keyboard collection.

What's one of the hardest instruments you've had to track down for Alicia?

When we were recording "No One," we used a plug-in for 149 bucks. But then I had to source the real keyboard for her to perform live—a Jupiter-8, which I found on eBay.

What's the vibe when Alicia comes into the studio to record?

Sometimes she has a vision for an album: the sonic picture of each song, the arrangement, the writing and production, the musicians that we're going to bring in to complement the tone she's hearing in her head. But then sometimes there's no expectation—when we start, we don't really know what the end result is going to be. At the end of the day, there are no rules.

Where does Alicia's inspiration come from when she's creating on the fly?

All of the elements in the room can be part of the inspiration behind the song. Sometimes a particular keyboard inspires a lyric or a melody. Our gear, whether it's microphones, guitars, amps, pedals or keyboards—from Wurlitzers to Rhodes to Moog synthesizers—they all have

different sounds. They're all crayons in the crayon box. It's very granular, down to the type of guitar strings that are on the guitar. Some days she sits behind her piano and writes a song by herself, other times there are five different producers on a track and she uses elements from all of them. Some songs take a day, some songs—like “Love Looks Better”—can take six years. She's kind of like Prince in that she's always working on music. We might be working on songs right now that are for two albums from now.

How does that philosophy—of finding the perfect instrument or musician for the job—affect the final product?

One reason why we love old records is because musicians sat in a room together and played. There's magic when everyone gets in the room. That's the beauty of Alicia: She is so retro-futuristic in that she still has musicians come in. And when Alicia has a musician come in, she doesn't copy and paste his part throughout the song. She makes him play it over and over because the human swing can never be duplicated. The tempo changes, the part has more soul, the song can breathe. That's why there's so much emotion behind her music—it's raw and it's real. These days you can identify some of the sample packs and drum loops that people are using, but you don't have to be robotic just because you're getting a sequencer. Make your own sound, hit your own drums, distort your mic preamps. Do the things that are going to help you find your style.

For a guide to different pianos and their unique parts, head to masterclass.com.

The Private Collection

Ann shares some of the equipment that she and Alicia can't live without

ANN'S TOP PICKS

1. Pro Tools

“This digital workstation is the gold standard in recording and mixing.”

2. Ableton Push 2

“A great workstation to learn sequencing and how to structure music.”

3. Shure SM7B Microphone

“The best \$400 mic you could ever buy.”

4. Native Instruments Complete

“This package offers virtual keyboards and plug-ins. Alicia's piano plug-in comes in this package, too—it's called Alicia's Keys.”

5. Apollo Twin Interface

“This interface comes with a great Universal Audio Digital (UAD) plug-in production bundle. It also has a mic preamp for vocals built in and Direct Input (DI) built in for instruments.”

ALICIA'S TOP PICKS

1. Alicia's Keys

“This pocket piano currently sold through Native Instruments is one production tool that we use in the studio and on tour.”

2. Moog Voyager

“The Electric Blue Edition is great for many synth bass sounds.”

3. MPC Drum Machine

“It's the best drum machine you can buy. Experiment with all the different models to figure out which one works for you—Alicia started with a 3000, and now she uses many different models depending on what she is working on. The swing of this drum machine and the user interface make it fun to

program and sequence with.”

4. UAD Plug-in Bundle

“This incredible plug-in bundle can be used as a production tool and for recording and mixing. It has some of the best EQs, compressors, and fun analog tape plug-ins all in one.”

5. CP-70 Electric Grand Piano

“This electric piano was made famous by Prince on ‘Purple Rain.’ It was also used by on U2's album *The Joshua Tree*.”

6. Höfner 500/1 Vintage Violin Bass (1956)

“Alicia can't leave home without it. It's one of the first models of the

infamous bass that Paul McCartney made famous.”

7. Various Vocal Chain Items

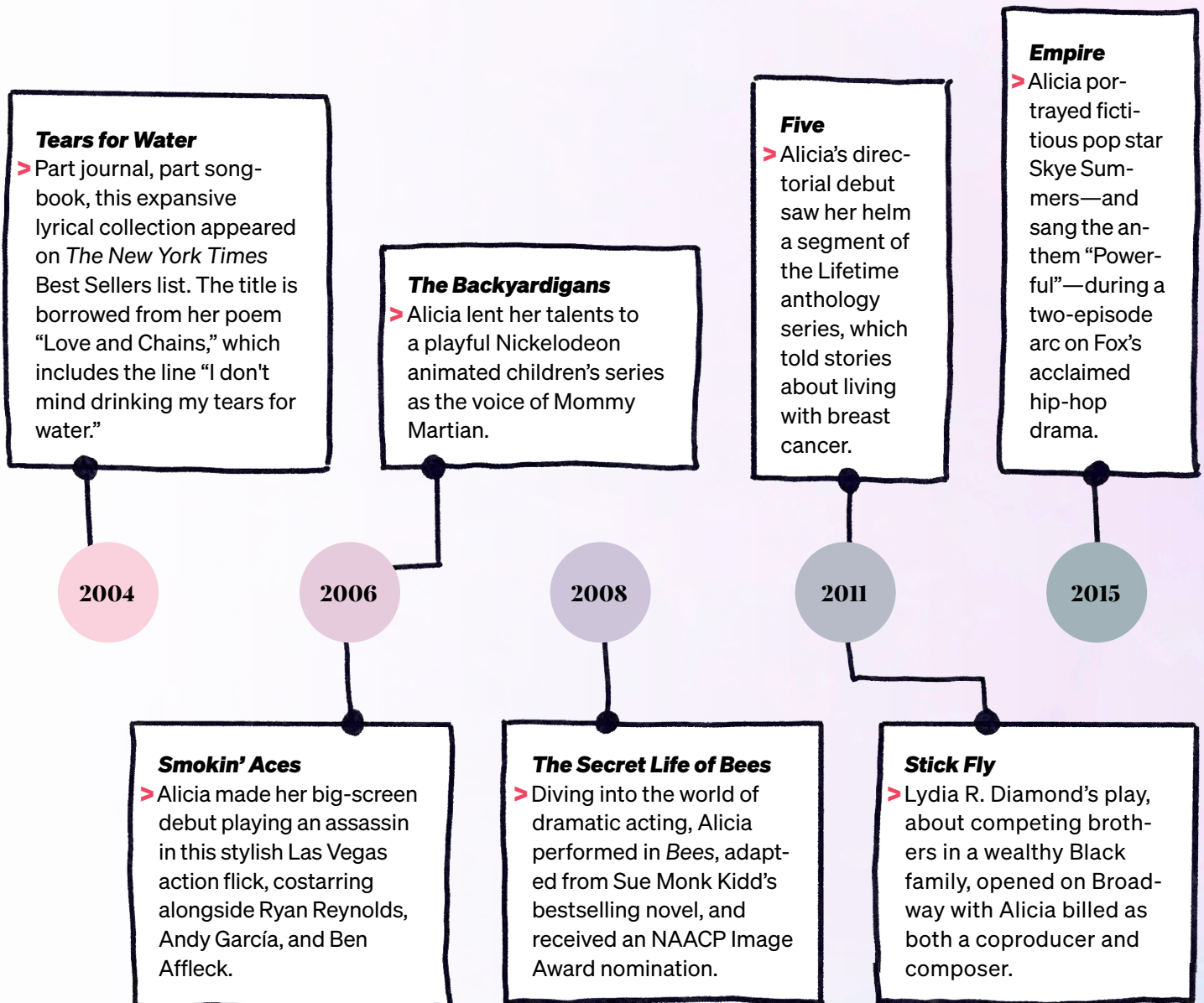
“Neve 1073 mic preamps, Telefunken V76 vintage mic preamps, Tube-Tech CL 1B compressors, Urei 1176 compressors, Neve 2254 vintage compressors, and anything Solid State Logic consoles—they make incredible mic preamps and mixers for your home studio setup as well as for professional studios.”

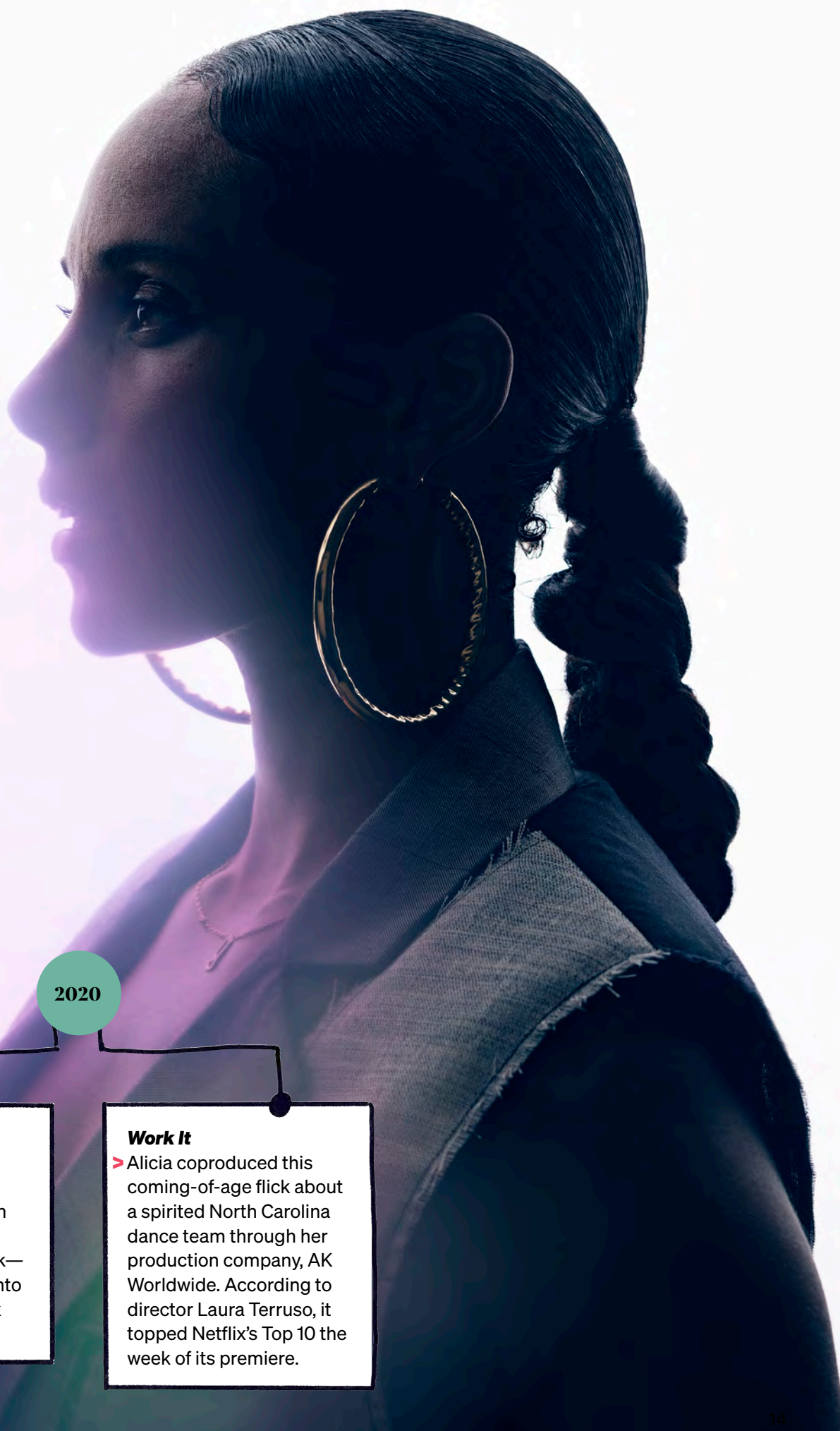
8. Ampeg B-15 Bass Amp

“Vintage for not only bass but for my Moog synth as well when I want to use an amp.”

Beyond the Music

A prolific recording career hasn't kept Alicia from pursuing other creative endeavors, from movies and TV to book publishing and voice-over work. Here is a short list of her most surprising nonmusical pursuits





Grammy Awards

> After amassing 15 gilded gramophone trophies of her own, Alicia took over hosting duties of the TV event to great acclaim.

2019

2020

More Myself

> Alicia's raw and candid autobiography was the first release from Oprah Winfrey's publishing imprint, An Oprah Book—and Alicia's first foray into the world of audiobook narration.

Work It

> Alicia coproduced this coming-of-age flick about a spirited North Carolina dance team through her production company, AK Worldwide. According to director Laura Terruso, it topped Netflix's Top 10 the week of its premiere.

