

# Successful Keys keeps fame in perspective

NEW YORK (AP) - The pressure of following up a multiplatinum, Grammy-winning album is enough to give even veteran artists nervous fits.

So 22-year-old Alicia Keys - whose debut album sold more than 10 million copies worldwide and won a record-tying five Grammys - must be feeling a bit apprehensive about the release of her sophomore disc, "The Diary of Alicia Keys," last week.

Keys knows that's what everyone expects to hear - and she's happy to disappoint them.

"They're dying! They're like, 'Please Alicia, just say it, say it! Say that you feel like, terrible,'" Keys laughed during an interview with The Associated Press backstage at MTV, where she was preparing for yet another promotional appearance.

"(But) for whatever reason ... I'm really able to keep things in perspective. I don't look at myself as how people

describe me, as a five-time Grammy Award-winning, 10-platinum artist, first album - I don't see myself like that," Keys says.

"I look in the mirror and that's not what I see. I just see me. I just see a young woman that's searching and growing and changing and just trying to hold on to something good."

The success of 2001's "Songs in A Minor" was more than something good - it was spectacular.

Keys was introduced by music mogul Clive Davis on his J Records label and hyped as a superstar in the making. And Keys - a classically trained pianist with stunning looks and soulful, powerful pipes that recall Whitney Houston or Mariah Carey - lived up to her billing.

Her first single, the dramatic ballad "Fallin'," went to No. 1 on the charts, and she was only the second woman besides Lauryn Hill to receive five Grammys in one night (Norah Jones repeated the feat



Grammy Award-winning songstress Alicia Keys works hard to maintain her everywoman, down-to-earth sensibilities.

earlier this year). The album sold more than 5 million copies in the United States.

In a little less than a year, Keys went from fledgling to superstar - and the instant fame took a little getting used to. "I would just feel awkward because I wasn't used to that type of attention," she says.

Yet she handled the sudden change in a low-key manner, according to those close

to her.

"She has the maturity and wisdom of somebody really much older than her 22 years," says Davis. "It's an amazing thing to witness because it's innate wisdom, it's innate maturity."

"Alicia's always been a very private person, and I think she always will be a very private person," says her manager, Jeff Robinson, who has been with Keys since she was a teen. "You have to have that balance. People who seek out the camera 24-7 are always doomed to have a bad spot on 'Page Six' someday."

Keys credits her attitude to a close-knit group of friends and family - like her mother, who works as her assistant. And on the surface, she doesn't seem to have changed much at all.

She still sports her cornrow hairstyle, though a little less frequently. She hasn't converted herself into a glammed-up diva or sexpot. She tries to stay away from

the spotlight when she's not performing, eschewing late-night, A-list parties. And she still speaks with same the streetwise, New York accent.

"That's the reason why I'm (expletive) sane, I promise you, is because I don't believe my own hype," she says with a smile. "If I believed my own hype right now, you'd be talking to a majorly different person, I can guarantee that."

But she does believe in her own talent. Ask how she thinks her new album will do, and she beams with a confidence that borders on cockiness.

"I know this album is the bomb," she says. "This album is going to do what it's supposed to do, and it's going to do damned good."

Her prediction seems on target. The first single, the retro-soul "You Don't Know My Name," is already a top 20 hit on the Billboard charts and rising.

"I think everybody around her was more stressed out than she was," says Robinson. "Alicia's always been like very, very laid-back, and it's truly been about the music."

The story of how Keys' early material was rejected by her first record company has been often told. Despite her current confidence, she still remembers when critics left her questioning her own abilities, sending her into a tailspin.

"I felt like I had to have these people validate me to make me mean something, and it tore me apart - it tore me apart in a major way, and

it was really hard for me to merely get up because of how much I had put into it," she says. "It killed me."

Even today, she admits, she can still get a little insecure - like during the early stages of recording her new album, when someone doubted her material.

"(I) was looking for one to validate to me, and new things I was trying to experiment with, and they didn't get with it," she says. "And I felt hurt because this was the one person that I looked to be like. 'Go get 'em.' But what does that mean? That I'm not going to be true to what I think?"

But Keys usually finds a way to talk herself back to reality - like after winning her five Grammys.

"I felt bugged! I felt wrong. I felt so out of place ... I felt like there was no way this could be right, I don't deserve this - every negative thing that person could (think)," she says, laughing.

"I asked myself, 'Where is this coming from? Why are you feeling like that? Why are you hiding?'" she says. "Just you enjoy it. ... live in it, revel in it and move on."

Although she doesn't have the trophies sitting on her mantel - she sent all of her Grammys, in addition to the majority of her other awards, to her manager - she now feels worthy.

"I worked (hard)," says Keys. "I don't do it for the money, I don't do it for the fame, I don't do it for any selfish, devilish reasons. I do it because my heart sings. So yes, good for me."



Antoine 'Big Boi' Patton, left, and Andre 'Dre' Benjamin of Outkast accept their award for best digital song Wednesday during the Billboard Music Awards at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas.

## Billboard

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He took home awards for Hot 100 producer, R&B producer, Hot 100 songwriter and R&B songwriter - and closed the show with a flamboyant performance that had him riding down the aisle in a horse-drawn chariot.

No Doubt opened the nationally televised show, hosted by Ryan Seacrest of "American Idol," with a performance of their hit single "It's My Life."

Singers Nick Lachey and Jessica Simpson featured on the MTV reality show "Newlyweds," presented the first award for duo/group of the year to 3 Doors Down. Simpson - now famous for her dippy blonde moments on the show - turned to her husband and said, "Don't say anything dippy or stupid. I keep telling myself the sex is worth it."

Triumph the Insult Comic Dog provided additional comic relief, saying he and Michael Jackson had a lot in common: "We're both partly made of rubber."

Rapper 50 Cent had a leading six nominations heading into the show at the MGM Grand hotel-casino. By the end of the night, he won three awards - for top artist, R&B artist and rap artist.

Stevie Wonder presented Sting with the Century Award for creative achievement. The Grammy Award-winning singer has sold 100 million albums and singles with The Police and as a solo artist.

But Sting said album sales didn't matter: "If you play music with passion and love and honesty, then it will nourish your soul, heal your wounds and make your life worth living."

For the first time, the Billboard Awards recognized the sales of legally downloaded music tracks, honoring "Hey Ya!" by OutKast as the digital track of the year.

The Billboard Awards honor the year's chart-topping artists. Winners are determined by the magazine's year-end chart listings, which are based on record sales and airplay.


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