

Film Close-Up: Alicia Keys

by Joey_Berlin

Acclaimed R&B singer-pianist Alicia Keys had the beauty and the talent to make an early splash in the highly fickle and competitive music industry. Now this New York born-and-bred songbird has spread her wings to give acting a serious shot.

ALICIA KEYS - Alicia Keys plays an assassin in the dark comedy 'Smoking' Aces.' CNS Photo courtesy of Jaimie Trueblood. She has appeared in a few network TV shows and makes her big screen debut in "Smokin' Aces." But she is not the only marquee draw in this offbeat action thriller. Filmmaker Joe Carnahan assembled an eclectic cast that includes Ben Affleck, Ryan Reynolds, Ray Liotta, Jeremy Piven and hip-hop artist Common for this bloody tale of a competition between contract killers. Keys plays one of the professional hit men trying to take out a magician turned mafia snitch.

The classy Keys has obviously set her sights beyond the pop charts. She names Barbra Streisand and Frank Sinatra as inspirations because they succeeded both in the recording studio and the sound stage. The 26-year-old Keys next steps up to a bigger role, appearing alongside Scarlett Johansson in the upcoming comedy "The Nanny Diaries."

Q: When you were considering this role, did you really see yourself as a pistol-packin' mama?

A: I surely did. It was truly something the minute I read the script. I knew that it was so out of my element, so out of my normal character and so out of what many people probably expected of me. I knew it was the right thing for me to do.

I wanted to break away from anyone's expectations. I wanted to dive into myself in a way that I've never done before. And to be surrounded by such incredible actors was truly inspiring. The entire cast, and Joe, was so motivating. I think that I'm totally spoiled because anything I do following this will probably not compare.

Q: Does that come easily to you, giving up your comfort zone?

A: Well, anything that's worth it, I don't think comes exactly easy. But to work for that was completely worth it. I know that with everything that I do, I want to give up my comfort zone. I don't want to stay in the same place where I know myself. I like to get out of that area and challenge myself, and I find the best comes from that.

Q: What kind of relationship did you have with Taraji Henson, who plays your partner in crime?

A: Taraji and I hit it off immediately. She is a wonderful lady, an incredible actress. Joe actually brought us together very early on. Before we even thought about filming scene 1, we sat together. We met, we went to the movies. She fell asleep. I was like, "You fell asleep, Turaji?" So we definitely hung out.

We wanted the relationship to be really authentic and it was. I mean naturally you find either you connect with people or you don't, and she's one of the people that you connect with. So I did learn a lot from her, from watching her and from listening to her. We developed our characters' back stories together. So she definitely was a great inspiration for me.

Q: Did you have to fight for the role since it was not how people typically think of you?

A: I have to say that it was something that was mutual with myself and Joe. I think that from the beginning he had a very clear vision that he wanted to use fresh people and that's one thing that he spoke to me about a lot.

Q: Is success everything you thought it would be? And now that you have it, were you really prepared for it?

A: I mean I define success as a happiness, a personal happiness, and I feel that personally I am happiest when I'm able to express myself, when I'm able to do things that are my choice. It's especially rewarding when people enjoy it as much as I do. So I call that success.

Q: Who helped you as a child to really believe in yourself?

A: As a young kid I had two wonderful women in my life that helped to raise me. One is my mother. She was a single mother, a very strong woman who showed me everything about being a woman. And the second woman was my grandmother. She was another very intelligent, very compassionate and very giving woman who showed me everything about being intelligent.

So I would say the two of them combined were two of my great inspirations.

Q: Bob Dylan has a lyric about you in the first song on his new album. How did you find out about that and what did you feel? Did you call him when you heard about it?

A: I could not believe it. A funny thing is the first person who told me was John Mayer.

He said, "You're never going to believe this."

I said, "What?"

"I just heard that Dylan has your name in his song."

I was like "What?!" I was totally not expecting to hear that, obviously.

Then I couldn't wait to hear it, since it wasn't coming out for a while. So, big honor. He's such a lyrical genius, a storyteller and a person who has so much history. And as a writer myself, I admire him greatly.

Did I call him? No. I figure with certain things like that, it's better from afar, you know? You don't call a person after that. You thank them. So I thank him greatly.

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