

**The following interview with
ALICIA KEYS
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 13, 2022**



Library of Congress: “Songs in A Minor” was years in the making and even required changing record labels. Please tell us about who you were when the album came out? How old were you? Where were you living? How long had you been working on the album when it came out?

Alicia Keys: When “Songs in A Minor” came out, I thought that day would never come. Prior to that moment, I guess I was about 18 and I had been trying to put the music out or get an album together, or create this music since at least 14 years old. At that time, it felt like forever. It felt like it was never going to come, that it was never going to happen.

I remember I was living in Harlem. I was living on 137th Street between 5th and Lenox. I recorded the majority of the album there. I was living in a little one-bedroom apartment, a sixth-floor walkup. We took the one bedroom that we had and turned it into the “studio.” The closet was my little booth. I figured if we hung blankets on it, it would create the sound we needed. The bed was still in the room. There's a bunch of equipment all around. It was definitely our safe haven, though.

I remember people on the street, when I would come home, they would be calling me “Hit a High Note,” that's what they called me. They would call me “Hit a High Note” because all night they heard me singing at the top of my lungs in this little Harlem apartment with the windows open because it was burning hot. That became a little nickname on the block, “Hit a High Note.”

It was definitely a tumultuous time. I had to really learn things don't happen when you want them to. They happen when they're supposed to happen. It takes a lot of patience. It takes a lot of perseverance. I think it was probably the biggest takeaway that I have today, the perseverance it takes, even when things aren't going your way or going the way that you wished they were.

[I] had to switch labels. The first people that brought me into the label was no longer with the label. I had to deal with new people who didn't understand me or like my music. I had to get out of a whole contract that was definitely not easy to get out of in order to sign a new one with Clive Davis and really start a whole new fresh start. At one point, it felt like it would never ever happen, but I did know that everything that was going on was happening for a reason. So I held on to that and I knew I was going to have a story to tell. Now I guess, this is me telling it.

LC: You started creating some of those songs when you were still in your teens, correct? Can you tell us about some of those songs that you first wrote that ended up on the album? I believe “Butterflyz” and “Troubles” both were on the album.

AC: Yes. I did. I wrote a lot of those songs-- every one of those songs when I was still in my teens. The album came out when I was 18. I had just turned 18. So, from 14, when I wrote my very first song, “Butterflyz,” which is on “Songs in A Minor,” that was the very first song I ever wrote. At least the first good song. I've written other songs for sure, but that one was the one that started to reveal itself, that when I connected to my actual feelings and wrote what I was experiencing, it really, really made a difference. That was a big one.

“Troubles” was another amazing one for “Songs in A Minor.” It was a very tumultuous time. As I said, it felt like I didn't know what was happening. I truly felt like it all could just never happen. Maybe it wasn't going to happen. Maybe all these kinds of trials and tribulations were going to be my story. I remember it was “Troubles.” I was exactly explaining what it felt like. I remember writing that beginning [of the] song in my mother's house on her piano. Even though I didn't live with my mother anymore, I would go there and just get some respite and play the actual piano. That's the only place I had an acoustic piano.

I remember coming up with those chords. The song concept was like, the verses were me explaining my troubles. The choruses were like, a higher being or God talking to me, like saying, “It's going to work out. Just let it go.” That was very therapeutic for me. Everything that I spoke about, even the conversation I had at the beginning, where I was talking about shadows on my wall, it was, literally, when I woke in the morning these shadows would be on the wall. It felt like a deep hole that I was trying to describe.

There are so many good songs on “Songs in A Minor.” Definitely one of my favorite albums, especially, because it's the first. I feel like “Rock wit U,” that's another incredible one. That was the first time that I got to connect with Isaac Hayes, which is a huge thing for me. Especially, as a kid, I was learning through his music, his arranging, and his orchestration. It was a big part of how I learned, how I arranged, or create and produce. To be able to connect with him, and him doing the entire orchestration for “Rock wit U,” was mind-blowing. I couldn't even believe it. I couldn't believe that I was experiencing this. Still, I didn't know if it was ever going to actually happen or come out. I did know, though, that I was having these very powerful experiences.

All of those songs are really, really special. “A Woman's Worth”? That one came from Thanksgiving dinner when I was finished eating and was watching TV. After you eat, you're feeling super full, and you're just on the couch, relaxing. I remember that commercial came on and said, “Because You're Worth It.” It just sent me off on a trip in that whole “Woman's Worth” concept; it was written about expressing you're worth and I deserve to be treated in these beautiful ways because I'm worth it. That led me even on the whole journey to writing songs that women really relate to. The entire album is a whole story. I'll never forget how those songs came together.

LC: “Fallin” was the biggest ever on the record; it won three Grammys and hit all over the planet. Tells us something about how you put that song together.

AK: “Fallin’” is so crazy. To this day, when I’m performing “Fallin’,” I’m like, “What is happening?” It still has the same magic. It still has the unique ability that just touched people, even me. I get swept away in performing it. I could perform it in any way. I could perform it with a whole band. I could perform it just on piano. I could perform it with guitar. I could perform it in any capacity and it resonates and it stands up. And that is such a testament to a song, that just, it’s timeless. I can’t believe that song. I still feel like that to this day.

It really came together very personally. Again, it was a personal expression of a feeling I was having, where it was my first serious relationship. It felt like there were these moments where it was so good. There were these moments where it just was so bad. It constantly just went back and forth like that. I was trying to express that. I remember writing a lot of it in my car. I had a Mazda 626. That was my first car. It was gold. I was in my car thinking about this emotion. I wrote a lot of it driving in New York City, down in New York City streets.

That process really brought me to the piano. I started to explore these very simple arpeggios. Obviously, I was raised with non-classical piano. I study classical piano. A lot of the ways that I play piano today has a lot of classical influence in it. Those arpeggios from “Fallin’” were very much inspired by that classical inspiration.

It was just like I just spoke right from the chest. Right there. I remember the whole thing was just like, that meaning, in every time that I share it, people lost it. They just felt it right through their core. And that being my first album, I didn’t understand about hits or, you know, how to pick songs or, whatever. I was just writing exactly what I felt. And I’ll never forget that was a barometer for why we went with “Fallin’” because no matter who you were, you heard that song, and you felt something about it.

But it was also a testament to the team, to my first manager, Jeff Robinson, to Clive Davis, to Peter Edge, and Larry Jackson. And all the, you know, all the people who were promoting it because this was not a normal song. This wasn’t a song that just fit into the format of radio. We really had to bust a door down. But putting that together, it was so simple, it was so easy and so pure.

And I remember all the pieces, the piano, programming the drums, those sweet violins, and all those pieces all together. Those big voices at the end. They were actually background artists that Luther Vandross used. And so, their voices were magnificent. And so that big choir part? Man, all those pieces, all those were so powerful. And that song just, it just resonated. And you just never know if that’s going to happen. And it did.

LC: The record sold more than 12 million copies, won 5 Grammys and has now been added to the Library of Congress’ National Recording Registry joining the list of all the most notable recordings in American history. You did everything on that record when you were a teen. What about it, do you think, connected so much to so many people for such a long period of time?

AK: I think that it’s kind of crazy when you say it. And I’m so honored and grateful that it gets to be-- “Songs in A Minor,” the entire album, gets to be recognized as such a powerful body of work. It just goes to be timeless. But what is it about it that I think resonates with everybody for so long, I just think that it’s because it’s so pure. It was so pure. You felt the truth that was coming from me. I think the “New York-ness” in me was definitely-- a new energy people hadn’t quite seen: a woman in Timberlands, in cornrows, and really straight, a 100% off of the streets of New York girl performing classical music and mixing it with soul music, and R&B, and these songs that had big choruses and meaning.

And you know, really kind of gave you what you felt. You know, was able to relate what you actually felt inside. And I didn't realize that I was doing that I was actually just relating what I was going through. But I think that's the reason why it resonates so much, it's because it's so pure. And it was like this clash, this collision of culture, and style, and music, that didn't have a beginning and an end. But people could find themselves in it. And I loved that.

LC: In the opening track, “Piano & I,” you did something Hazel Scott was known for-- using classical music with modern twist. Would you talk for a moment about her influence on you?

AK: Hazel Scott is definitely a huge inspiration for me. As you know, she's just a pioneer in every sense of the word. As the embodiment of black excellence, the embodiment of barrier-breaking, boundary-breaking. You see her play that piano and there is nobody that could play like her. There is nobody that does it like her. She is a one-of-one. You knew it the minute you saw her and you never forget it.

So, for me, she has been a huge influence on me as a black woman playing the piano without boundaries. She is incredible to me. I was inspired by her performance of that double doodling piano when I performed at the Grammys. And it was hard as hell. When I tell you I had to carry two pianos with me everywhere I went--every hotel, every room, every place--because of the dexterity it takes to play in a way that you're not normally used to playing.

And in fact, right before the Grammys, I thought I was going to have to cancel because I didn't think I could actually pull it off. So, I did pull it off, and she definitely helped me pull it off. But as an artist, Hazel Scott is one of my all-time favorites. And I think that she is grossly under-recognized for the brilliance and genius that she represents. So that's why I love saying her name as often as I can, same as Nina Simone, same as Patrice Rushen, same as so many females-- Philippa Schuyler--so many female piano players who just have changed the game. I'm proud to be among them.