

“Songs in A Minor”--Alicia Keys (2001)

Added to the National Registry: 2022

Essay by Jene Roswell (guest post)*



Alicia Keys

Multi-award-winning female American singer/songwriter Alicia Keys, launched her career with her debut album “Songs in A Minor,” released on 5th June, 2001 by J Records. To understand why this was selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Recording Registry, in 2022, we need to look at what was going on at that time and why this album garnered so much interest.

Prior to the release of “Songs in A Minor,” BlackPlanet.com was launched with forums discussing political and social issues; the Y2K scare at the turn of the millennium had come and gone; the largest merger in US history with America Online buying Time Warner; and the lead up to the Presidential election was playing out across the country. By the end of 2000, Destiny’s Child, Aaliyah, Savage Garden, Dr. Dre, Santana, Britney Spears and Pink were the music industry’s leaders.

During the same year of the album release, George W. Bush became President by the slimmest of margins; there was a recession with unemployment rates rising to 5.7%; the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City; a series of anthrax attacks through the mail in New Jersey; the US invaded Afghanistan; and Apple announced the release of the iPod, a portable digital music player.

By the end of 2001, Alicia joined the music industry leaders on the “Billboard Year-End Hot 100 Singles of 2001,” in number two position with “Fallin’” from “Songs in A Minor.” She was up there with the likes of Christina Aguilera, Destiny’s Child, Janet Jackson, Jay-Z, Faith Hill and Jennifer Lopez. At the 44th Grammy Awards, this particular album won her five Grammy Awards. A truly significant achievement for someone so young and for their debut album.

Alicia is an artist from humble beginnings. She was raised in Hell’s Kitchen, she is biracial, and is a classically-trained pianist who sang, wrote, arranged, and produced her own music.

She was 20 years old when the album was released, had been writing the songs since she was 14 and started recording the album at 17 years of age. The majority of the album was arranged and produced by Alicia herself and she wrote 32 songs in total, of which she chose 16 tracks for the album.

Hell's Kitchen, New York, is where Alicia grew up. It was a melting pot of different races and cultures where people could mix freely and provided the young Alicia a wonderful backdrop for her creativity. The colours, smells, noises and energy helped to imbue her young life, coming through in her lyrics which were heartfelt, emotional, spiritual and full of social awareness. The compositions were about survival, self-worth, and happiness. She sang of love and desire. At her impressionable tender age, she did not have a lot of experience in these areas, but she was an "old soul" that could reach deep inside you when she sang.

Alicia described the album as a "fusion of my classical training, meshed with what I grew up listening to [...] things I've been exposed to and drawn from and my life experiences."

The album, "Songs in A Minor," had 16 tracks with only two of these being in the key of A minor. They were "Mr. Man" and "Jane Doe." The album is generally classified as a neo soul album with elements of classical, soul, gospel, R&B, pop, hip hop, jazz and blues. The album debuted on the US Billboard 200 at the number one spot selling 236,000 copies in the first week. The success of the album has resulted in sales of over 6.2 million copies in the US and over 12 million copies worldwide. Once the album was released, Alicia went on to promote the album with her first concert tour, the "Songs in A Minor Tour" which confirmed that she had fully arrived and was a superstar in the making.

The Black Entertainment Television (BET) network celebrates African Americans in music, acting, and other areas of entertainment each year. At the 2011 BET Awards ceremony, Alicia performed a medley of songs from the album that included "Fallin'," "Typewriter," "Maybach Music" with Rick Ross and "A Woman's Worth" with Bruno Mars. In conjunction with the awards ceremony, "Songs in A Minor" was re-released in June 2011 to commemorate its tenth anniversary, featuring unreleased songs that were accompanied with a documentary on the making of "Songs in A Minor."

In addition to the awards ceremony celebrating the tenth anniversary of the album, two days later on "Good Morning America," Alicia performed three of her songs from the album. The documentary, "The Story So Far," highlighted her ten-year career and aired on June 28, 2011. Two days later, Alicia performed all the tracks from "Songs in A Minor" and told stories about the recording, in an evening titled "Piano & I: A One Night Only Event With Alicia Keys" at the Beacon Theatre in New York City.

In an interview for MTV, Alicia states, "This album is possibly the most precious to me as your first album only happens once, and so 'Songs in A Minor' will always hold a special place in my life that's filled with amazing memories. I'm so proud the songs are still being enjoyed, and I'm crazy excited to share songs never heard before."

Celebrating the 20th anniversary of the release of "Songs in A Minor," the album was re-released in June 2021, this time with an additional four bonus tracks, including the unreleased titles "Foolish Heart" and "Crazy."

Alicia has a vocal range from C3 - E6 (3.3 octaves) with the lowest pitch of C3 on “The Life” and the highest pitch of E6 on “Why Do I Feel So Sad” from the album. She has a rich mezzo-soprano voice with a solid lower register and can reach outside her comfort zone to the mid fifth octave. Alicia really showcases her vocal talent as a recording artist in the studio. There is no doubt about her creditability as a music legend who can sing, write, produce and arrange music, as well as be a consummate musician.

Jene Roswell has been a lover and connoisseur of all types of music for the past 50 years, and it has had an incredible impact on his life, especially learning about rhythm, beat, and different music genres, was essential to the success of his career. Jene is well travelled and has witnessed how music can have a positive impact on people, leading to his passion to understand the artists that provide that emotional connection to people the world over. He is the author of “Leading Women in Music” (2022).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.