

Girl on Fire—Alicia Keys closes her eyes to the world

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6 February 2013

Alicia Keys has been among the more critically acclaimed and popular selling contemporary R&B singers for more than a decade now. Her debut album *Songs in A Minor* (2001), which included the hit singles “Fallin’” and “A Woman’s Worth,” earned the budding star five Grammy Awards that year and was accompanied by a massive public relations campaign to build up a reputation for the singer that she had not yet entirely earned.

While much of the hype surrounding Keys has overrated her, the classically trained pianist and singer, whose music bridges both R&B and hip hop genres, was able to find and has maintained a large audience.

Keys’ better songs *did* have something to grab onto. And as a performer, she mostly played it straight, restraining herself when it came to those showboating vocal runs that dominated the work of many of her contemporaries.

However, there has always been something lacking in Keys’ music and, unhappily, the singer has only grown more conventional over the years. There has been less and less to grab onto. She seems to be an artist all too willing to play by the rules.

The majority of songs on *Girl on Fire* seem far removed from real life. The love songs tend to feel like play-acting. The more anthemic, all-empowering “girl power” songs consist of self-involved boasting. Keys too often attempts to inject a sense of drama into her music by pushing her voice beyond its natural range, giving a strained and struggling quality to her performances.

How much of this music feels genuine? How often, on listening to the new album, does one think, “I’ve felt that way too. That’s exactly how it is!”?

“Party people say ‘It’s a new day’,” sings Keys on “New Day,” “It’s alright to feel however you want to.”

Stuffed to the gills with drums, the song attempts to work itself up into some kind of anthem, but falls flat. The composition has no real grounding, relying instead on the in-your-face drums to hook the listener. Keys’ voice comes in and out of the fray, never quite overcoming her rhythm track. The song about “new days” and “new chances” ultimately feels vapid.

“Brand New Me,” is another empowering ballad about a “brave girl” who confronts an egotistical former lover. Keys sings, “It took a long long time to get here/It took a brave, brave girl to try/It took one too many excuses, one too many lies/Don’t be surprised, don’t be surprised.”

The song is predictable, including the sudden swell of the music in its concluding section, the inevitable exclamation point at the end of the message Keys is trying to deliver. This type of song, of which there are too many, tends to be one-sided, even a little egotistical. The rather bland musical expression goes along with the superficial feeling. None of the drama of real relationships is communicated, very little is understood.

Only on two songs, in fact, does one feel Keys is not posturing, or putting on a contrived sense of cool. “Tears Always Win” and “Not Even the King” fare better than most on the album and feature sympathetic and effecting performances. These songs do have a certain thoughtfulness about them. They offer an all too brief respite from songs like “Listen to Your Heart,” a lifeless composition and another recipe for self-indulgence, in which Keys instructs her listeners to “Turn off the world and close your eyes, lose yourself and listen to your heart.”

“Girl on Fire” is the album’s most recognizable single and its title track. One hears it everywhere. The song lifts a section of its melody from Berlin’s 1986

power ballad “Take My Breath Away.” Like that song, the single features its share of melodramatic qualities, as Keys’ reaching vocals herald the triumphs of a girl—any girl will do—against the odds. A repetitive and bombastic work.

“Girl on Fire” was also the song played by Keys during her recent performance at President Barack Obama’s Second Inaugural ball. As the president and his wife looked on, Keys sang and changed her song’s lyrics to celebrate them. “He’s living in a world and it’s on fire,” Keys sang, “filled with catastrophe. But he knows he can find a way.” “Everybody knows Michelle is his girl,” she added, “together they run the world.”

This was pretty shameful, although predictable as well. Keys belongs to an affluent layer for whom race, gender and sexuality—and themselves, mostly—are the chief concerns in life and who have no difficulty at this point accommodating themselves to the actions of the Obama administration. Unfortunately, in fact, they hardly give the matter a thought. Such an accommodation with power and money, however, does not go hand in hand with serious artistry and an important treatment of life.

Is it any wonder so much of this music feels so thoroughly empty?



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