

# THE STUDIO DIARY OF ALICIA KEYS



If there's a secret recipe to sonic success, a calculus composed of right place-right time realities, **ALICIA KEYS, KERRY "KRUCIAL" BROTHERS**, and engineer **ANN MINCIELI** are *deep* in the mix of making musical magic pay. **Someone's in the kitchen with Alicia? Indeed.**

by John Dylan Keith

Alicia Keys' Long Island studio, The Oven, flips the time-tested archetype of the live/work space, creating the work/live space, establishing a pro space with a lived-in feel. The name obviously evokes the appliance where most cooking comes together, but it also suggests that old party truism that everyone at a party inexplicably feels most comfortable hanging out in the kitchen. Keys and collaborator Kerry "Krucial" Brothers wanted that homey feel for their studio to get back the feel they had working in Alicia's apartment before *Songs in A Minor* catapulted the Krucial Keys team to the big league of professional, but maybe a bit sterile, Manhattan studios.

So if Krucial and Keys are co-proprietors and head chefs, if the house specialty is chart topping pop, R&B, and hip-hop, the secret ingredient is evidently *vibe*. Ms. Keys answered my request for technical tips with the glib reply: "We have a saying around here . . . keep the *vibe* turned *up*."

Ok. So which fader on the SSL AWS900 desk is "Vibe" mapped to? Is there a separate bus?

"You can't see it, but it's there," laughs Krucial, sitting at the console in his Herman Miller chair, the world's most comfortable way to mix, or evade technical questions.

I eventually pulled some more geek-love wisdom out of them, but from The Oven's inception, their saying certainly applies. From the design concept to the transparent approach of tracking engineer Ann Mincieli, who teamed with Krucial and Keys to put the studio together, the main principle driving Krucial Keys projects is to foster *relaxed*. To drive *creative*.

## THE STORYCK CLUB

John Storyck, the award-winning architect for everything from Electric Lady Studios to the Jazz at Lincoln Center space, from home theaters to destination studios, was the natural choice for Keys, whose studio would have to fit in a preexisting structure, a three-story house in a commercial zone of a New York suburb. A seasoned vet who has faced every imaginable acoustical design problem; Storyck had to gut the house without rebuilding, while maintaining the feel of a house.

While the space considerations mandated a small control room, to fit Augsburg monitors in the control room, with adequate low-end absorption, they used two different sized broadband modexes, which, explained Ann Mincieli, "expands the bandwidth of the absorption even further."

Storyck insists that one of the most exciting developments in studio design stems from what, on its surface, is hardly sexy: the appearance of cheaper and thinner low frequency absorbing modexes, which at once afford more precise bandwidth targeting, while at the same time physically taking up less space. This is the key to working in smaller spaces, and it lets acoustics take more of a guiding than a determining principle in the aesthetic design.

The previous owner (also a studio owner), had dug down into the foundation to give more head room in the live room, but was limited to about a 500 square foot rectangle by load bearing headers. To keep the middle, and maximize area, Storyck designed a sort of walkway around the edge; the resulting tiered space turned out to have both visual and acoustical advantages — lines of sight from control room window, walkway, main floor are unobstructed and have an ideal focal unity, and the headers provided good locations for three big low frequency diffusers.

For a pianist and vocalist like Keys, Storyck kept the room as reverberant as possible with wood flooring, which you can throw a rug across for full band sessions, and a stone wall on one end. One problem with the properties of a wood floor is the high-end reflections, managed by Topakoustic high-end absorption on the far wall and flat, curved

Photography: Bradford Noble



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wooden panels for flutter-free absorption on the back wall, leaving a half second reverb for the room.

Mincieli was more than satisfied: "Storyk's assistant shot some pink noise, and it was pretty much dead even. That guy's a physics genius, knows everything about time-aligning speakers and all that."

## THE NUTS, BOLTS, & SPACE IN BETWEEN

Alicia's enthusiastic about how the set up affects both her composition and recording process: "We have this great sounding room, we want to get people in here and *jam*; records hardly ever get made like

"Did we want the J?" she asks, then answers, "Yes, but where do we put the power supply? Anyway, this is the future, there's no need to have an 80 input desk"

Most of Keys' projects at The Oven lie in said future, something she's very excited about. "It's great to finally have a place set up the way we want to work." Her first feeling of being at home with the new setup came as her crew brought tracks from her *MTV Unplugged* session to mix. "It was so great to just be in here with that, even though we didn't track it here, it was the first time we felt like, 'we're home now.'" Which isn't just figurative, as Keys performance for MTV came during her 2004 tour while Krucial, Mincieli, and company stayed behind to get everything in place.

To Mincieli, the *Unplugged* session is also significant, as it vindicated her faith in the compact mixing console. Keys' mixing engineer Manny Marroquin "came in with 96 tracks of audio and a beta video deck. We had to recreate what they did in the truck so he could come in and mix," which ultimately proved that the AWS900's 24 faders, combined with a sub group patch to the extra summing bus and four extra external stereo inputs, was capable of handling anything someone of Alicia's stature would require.

Another exciting moment, on an equally high profile project, required the opposite extreme in complexity. Steve Lillywhite and Bono came in last year to work with Alicia on a version of Peter Gabriel's "Don't Give Up" to benefit the Keep A Child Alive Project. "We were standing in here, right here! We were playing them the backing

tracks and I don't know if I started singing, or he did, but something started happening and we tracked it right here on the spot, that's it, we're done. There was a crowd in here, everybody came in from the other room because they could tell there was something going on in here," says Alicia.

Mincieli added that "Bono's so used to performing with a handheld on stage, he can't really be in a booth. They just started up, so we handed him an SM58 and that was it." Partly inspired by the intimacy of being in the control room, but also the pragmatics: Lillywhite had a version of the song sketched out, and so did Alicia, and everybody liked both versions, so they were in the control room anyway, time-stretching and squashing them together. From that experience, Alicia keeps that option open for future projects.

But Alicia doesn't usually track with a 58, of course. They stock a large collection of mics at The Oven, and will vary the choices greatly depending on context, but the current starting point for Alicia's voice is the Telefunken M16, since Mincieli and mix engineer

## 5 EASY PIECES

### ANN MINCIELI

1. When using Pro Tools, no matter what kind of music you're working on, always lock your grid so you know the tempo changes and the song arrangement. It makes editing and flying vocals that much easier. Also, count how many bars you have in a verse and chorus. Using bars to locate to a certain spot is much easier.
2. When using Pro Tools and you're working with a lot of vocals, you can color code your Aux Tracks, Verse Tracks, and Chorus Tracks all different colors, so when you need to access them quickly, seeing them visually helps a lot in locating a certain vocal line or part. It's all about SPEED.
3. When tracking a piano, look to see what range the player is playing in, so you can adjust your mics accordingly. Also, the closer the mic on the piano, the brighter the sound. And the more you hear the decay of the hammers.
4. Try tuning your drums to a chord or key in the song arrangement: It's a lot of fun. Experiment, because you can make the bottom head either a half step or even a 3rd step down from the top head.
5. It's all about capturing the natural element of the instrument itself; go listen to what's happening in the live room and try to capture it. You want a certain snare sound? Tune the snare, or make it dead, or change a mic to suite your needs. It's not all about EQing everything to tape or using PLUG-INS. There is so much more to engineering these days than just knowing Pro Tools. There are "Engineers" and then there are people who know a few quick keys with Pro Tools and call themselves an Engineer.

that anymore." And that's exactly what they did for her remake of "People Get Ready," for the soundtrack for James Gartner's film *Glory Road*. They handled the dual challenge of keeping the oft-covered song fresh while maintaining the old vibe of it by staging a full band session in the live room.

Mincieli had everyone miked and at the last moment put a Yamaha sub kick (essentially an NS-10 driver, to catch the sub-harmonic frequencies coming off a kick drum or bass amp) on the bass guitar — but everyone was so thrilled by how it picked up bleed from the guitar and piano, they ended up keeping the main guitar and piano signals muted in the mix.

Wedge between two headers, directly across from the control room is Alicia's vintage keyboard nest, a pile of electric pianos, synthesizers, and a clavinet, all patched into a sub mix station so she can sit there and monitor it, but Mincieli can also take the direct out into Pro Tools, Mincieli's platform of choice, which dovetails nicely with the SSL AWS900 mixing console, perfect for the small control room, but still up to the demands of full scale industry use.



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**The half-second decay of the room lends itself nicely to the M/S trick of mixing — “two mics aimed at middle C, say a 414 face down and the 270 above at a 90 degree angle in figure-eight pattern, which collapses to mono perfectly,” but also works as a kind of zoom lens, in which the stereo image blooms seemingly forward as you cross fade against the mono.**

Manny Marroquin staged a “microphone shootout. . . . We tested Alicia on a bunch of different mics, C800, U47, the Elam 270, and so on. With the Telefunken, you get the highs, the warmth, but the mid doesn’t sound too pinched. It sounds great on guitars and percussion, as well. ”

They tried out several monitors, as well, but settled on the BM15As. According to Mincieli, “the Genelec 8050 sounded great, but a lot of what we do is live and hip-hop, and the Genelec just can’t handle low end.”

Alicia’s studio pianos are a clear-lidded Yamaha C3 Neo Grand (one of only three ever made) with a bright, poppy sound and a Steinway A Series Baby Grand, which she prefers for a more classical, darker sound. For miking them, there are a lot of variables to consider, from the type of song to whether it’s a part that will be

mixed into the song, or will be resampled and used in another way.

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And in a session like “People Get Ready,” where the goal is a classic, full band sound, the miking will reflect that (ATM25s on toms, U47 on kick, and so on), but another favorite, especially for tracking drums that Krucial will loop, tweak, and collage in Pro Tools or his MPC, is to use one RCA ribbon mic above the whole kit, and just get the loop sound out of the room.

## BUT WAIT. THERE’S MORE

The Oven stocks 32 virtual synths — some local favorites being Reaktor and the BFD drum set plug-in. “We use it all the time, it really feels like a live drummer, because it has so many layers of velocity sensitivity, each one triggering a different sample. . . . It’s one of our favorite plug-ins.” In addition to finishing the new construction, and delving deeper into the modern world via software synths and plug-ins, Krucial and Mincieli intend to build up the

vintage arsenal as well, adding classic amps and keyboards to the array of drums, drum machines (909, 808, MPC 4000, Linn, SP-1200). And the best advantage to the drum library is that they have the luxury of experimentation, mixing and matching the 50’s Gretsch with the 60’s Ludwig, tuning to pitches in the key of the song, and so on.

There are also plans to put in a tape machine at some point — “I’m a big fan of tape,” says Mincieli “We’d like to have a deck, just to record *through*, you know, to get the sound without having to print tape for entire sessions.”

Besides the microphone, drum, beatbox, and keyboard collections, the typical gear for tracking Alicia’s sessions include (in addition to the AWS900’s 24 channels of SSL pre-amps) Neve 1073s, and 16 API 3124 mic pres, which Mincieli particularly likes. “They have a lot of headroom, you *can* hit them hard.”

And compression strategies vary. “A lot of times we’ll use it more for tone than squashing something,” says Mincieli. She also favors the Tube Tech CL 1B, “you really cannot go wrong with it; it’s so easy to use, it’s like it teaches you how to use a compressor.” Likewise, the Distressor sees a lot of action, “on vocals, bass, everything, it’s so versatile, unlike a lot of the standard formulas, like dbx 160 on a kick, LA2A, or 1176 on bass, whatever.”

But Alicia stresses that her process is hard to pin down. “There’s no single way of doing it. Sometimes I come in with something I’ve done at home, or Kerry will have some stuff going on the MPC that I’ll start singing over, or run in there and play something. Sometimes we’ll hit it as a blank slate, I’ll just sit down and play something and take it from there.”

“It’s so unpredictable one day to the next,” agrees Mincieli. “They’ll have a demo from modules at home on a Pro Tools system . . .” so the goal might be to use the “space and depth [of the studio] to take it to another level in terms of tracking. . . . Or maybe one day someone’s sitting here putting an MPC through an Roland SP1200 for that dirty sound.”

Construction is underway for the B room, which will be a third floor duplicate of the main studio A room, with a separate entrance from the back stairs and will afford seamless transition from A to B, so that any phase of tracking, mixing, or arranging and sequencing at either extreme of complexity can take place simultaneously across three multi-functional floors.

## FLASH FORWARD

When I asked Alicia for a favorite track, she

and Krucial traded a quick, nostalgic glance and both answered at once: “Troubles,” recorded back in the Harlem apartment days, with Krucial scrambling to pull a groove out of the MPC, and Alicia laboring to get a decent piano sound out of some old module. Though they took it downtown for mixing and vocal dubs, the album features most of the original demo.

What then, is the strategy in a high-end studio, working with say, an MPC, to keep the grit, but maximize the strengths of the rest of the gear? Working with MPC’s requires the same flexibility

## POP QUIZ

### Control Rooms: Getting Bigger or Smaller?

We wish we had the answer to this question. One thing seems certain though, regardless of size, we are definitely going to have MORE control rooms. So I will borrow a term that I first heard over 35 years ago from Buckminster Fuller (I was lucky enough to study with him in 1970) — “bare maximum.” I want to suggest that we create a control room size that always is the “bare maximum.” Control Rooms (critical listening and production environments) will always have to hold required equipment and be comfortable for the exact number of people a client or end use desires. This is now the mantra of control rooms. It is our assignment as designers and as acousticians to make these two fundamental requirements work in harmony and at the highest possible standards.

Oven Studios for Alicia presented this challenge. It’s interesting to consider the final size of this control room — only 280 square feet, including build-outs for speaker housings and Pro Tools equipment closets. This is actually quite small compared to other control rooms (Allaire in Woodstock by way of comparison is over 600 square feet). Part of the reason for this size is, of course, existing conditions in The



Oven’s building structure. But I wonder if given a “clean white page,” whether we would have made a control room much larger. This is all Alicia needed though: room for a very compact control surface (SSL AWS is amazingly small, considering it is both an analog full function console *and* digital control surface); Augsburgers (custom designed); custom equipment furniture designed to accommodate “hands on” aux equipment with computers and other “in room” devices being placed in the corners of the room.

The acoustic challenge of this small room (with low ceiling height as well) is the use of very thin low frequency control. This is accomplished with a number of different membrane absorbers (both pre fab, as well as site constructed). Thin plywood veneer on the side walls are targeted at the width dimension modes, while RPG “modex” membranes and a “site built” Helmholtz resonator are positioned at the rear of the room to accommodate the room depth modes. The result is an extremely controlled and evenly distributed low end modal response in a room that gives Alicia and Annie no more, and no less, than what they need. — *John Storyk Architect/Acoustician Walters-Storyk Design Group*



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as the rest of the tracking, as Mincieli points out, "sometimes it's a skeleton, which we'll dump into Pro Tools and track live instruments on top, but a lot of times they've been doing mixes

the experience of acting for film to tracking music this way: "It's really different. It's a great experience, very freeing to play a character; you have to give yourself over to someone else's creative vision.

Even if I'm a guest on someone else's record, that's *my* voice on there, so I've got to be well prepared and in control of that."

Though The Oven has hosted some high profile guests, Brothers explains that they aren't really interested in running a commercial operation for outside talent. He says, "Though when we have people come in, it's professional, mainly, we want to bring people in that we want to collaborate with, more than as clients." Current projects include sessions for Sony artist Lyfe Jennings, and Krucial's own EP, *Take Da*

*Hood Back*, featuring the rapper Illz, out later this year, and an Alicia Keys album sometime next year. Alicia's poker faced about what that might sound like, but did admit to dreams of trying some radically different things in the future, "Classical pieces, modern stuff even, instrumental stuff I write. I'd love to do jazz standards, do a tour of classical halls or jazz clubs — that would definitely kick my ass and make me get it together." [EQ](#)

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## 5 EASY PIECES

### KERRY "KRUCIAL" BROTHERS

1. It doesn't matter what equipment you have, it's how you use it.
2. Master your gear, narrow it down to three or four pieces of gear and study them.
3. Always make a 2 track of the song you're working on, in case its lost, you have a 2 track and you could reprogram it the exact same way.
4. Have your favorite tools and sounds together on your computer. You can be so organized nowadays with today's technology. . . .
5. Keep A & R Label people out the studio while you're creating.

as they go along, they're used to it, been living with it. So we'll try to maintain the same balance, put the [tracks] on separate outs, doing multiple passes if necessary [as it only has eight outputs] to keep the separation. . . ."

Cool.

And this year, Alicia had her film debut in *Smokin' Aces*, an ensemble cast thriller directed by Joe Carnehhan, currently in post-production. She hasn't yet been called in for ADR, which she imagines might be more like vocal tracking, but generally compares