



Alicia Keys: Boffo With Bono, Crow, Stefani

Friday, October 26, 2007
By Roger Friedman

When we met her in 2000, Alicia Keys was a shy musical prodigy who didn't like to get too far from her piano when she performed.

Last night at the Hammerstein Ballroom, Keys — now a comely, confident young woman with several hit records under her belt — debuted her amazing material to a very difficult crowd. The occasion was the fourth annual fundraiser for the charity she adopted, Keep A Child Alive.

The room was filled with celebrities and record execs. Sheryl Crow and Gwen Stefani made guest appearances. Padma Lakshmi created the tasty menu. No less than Bono was the guest of honor, introduced by African supermodel Iman. Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong was at Bono's table. Clive Davis, Bobby Shriver, Gayle King, Petra Nemcova, Russell Simmons and Jeffrey Sachs (of Harvard) were here and there.

Or hear and there. **And what they heard may go down in contemporary music history as the night Keys sang a Bono song — “Ms. Sarajevo” — with opera star Kathleen Battle in English and Italian.** The performance, I learned, was Keys' idea as a tribute to Bono and the late Luciano Pavarotti. The two had recorded the song as a duet.

But nothing could prepare the audience for this moment, not even the astounding new songs from Keys' forthcoming album, “As I Am,” not even Keys and Crow's sublime take on Bono's “Sunday Bloody Sunday” or Keys and Stefani on the latter's hit, “What You Waiting For.”

In fact, by the time Keys got to the Battle duet, she'd performed the Marvin Gaye hit “Inner City Blues,” R&B songs, pop/punk with Stefani and the blues with Crow on “I Shall Believe.”

All of it was revelatory including the six new songs that were so well-received the packed audience was singing along to lyrics they don't even know to songs they'd never before heard.

And the new material is extraordinary modern R&B glossed with '70s soul, from the single “No One” — No. 1 on the charts — to the driving rocker “Go Head,” the anthemic ballad “Superwoman” and a pair of insanely good singles, “That's the Thing About Love” and “Like You'll Never See Me Again,” that should make the new CD a hit for many months.

The latter already is being sent to radio stations as the album's second single.

Bono did join Keys for the last number of the night, their own duet, “Don't Give Up (Africa)” in which they were joined by an African children's choir. But the jubilant night was put over the top by the appearance of Battle, the legendary and often thought difficult diva.

Battle told me later she'd had six days to learn “Ms. Sarajevo,” a haunting mid-tempo ballad. “And then at the last minute, Alicia decided to open it up so we'd trade verses,” she said.

Still, the result was so disarming and captivating that one day it will have to be released in some form. Unlike Pavarotti and Bono, Battle and Keys felt as if they were perfectly blended. Keys' voice is husky but often finds gorgeous notes. Battle's voice last night, as always, was crystal perfection. It could not have been a better idea.

Bono, who wrote the song (it's one of his less well-known gems), gave a typically charismatic speech after Iman's introduction. “What makes a truly great rock star?” she asked. “You have to have a great heart.”

Bono — after recovering from Iman's incredibly glamorous visage — thanked family and friends for his honor and talked enthusiastically about the future of Africa. He announced an auction on Feb. 14 in New York at Sotheby's of works donated by famous artists for his Red campaign that benefits Africa.

He said his wife, Allie, reminded him of the Neil Young song “Like a Hurricane,” which he then clumsily quoted. And he gave several prophecies, the last being, “Tonight, I will drink wine and dance on the tables.”

By the time the audience headed up to the 7th floor for a party thrown by party maven Amy Sacco, Bono was doing just that. And he had Keys and friends to party with. They deserved a good time.