

Philip Martin Gallery



MAGAZINE

Inside Alicia Keys and Swizz Beatz's Art-Filled Modernist Home Overlooking the Pacific Ocean

The superstar couple worked with AD100 designer Kelly Behun to craft their literal
“Dreamland”

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In the garage, three photographs by Kwame Brathwaite share space with (from left) a Ferrari Enzo, a Ferrari LaFerrari, and a Ferrari SF90. Frank Frances Studio

For more than a decade, Razor House, the stunning cliffside mansion by architectural designer Wallace E. Cunningham in La Jolla, California, has alternately been described as a “magnum opus,” an “architectural masterpiece,” and “America’s coolest home.” But since purchasing the modernist gem in 2019, Grammy Award–winning singer Alicia Keys and her husband, renowned music producer Kasseem Dean (a.k.a. Swizz Beatz), have preferred to call the home where they and their two sons, Egypt and Genesis, now reside “Dreamland.” Explaining the name, Keys says the expansive, nearly 11,000-square-foot residence,

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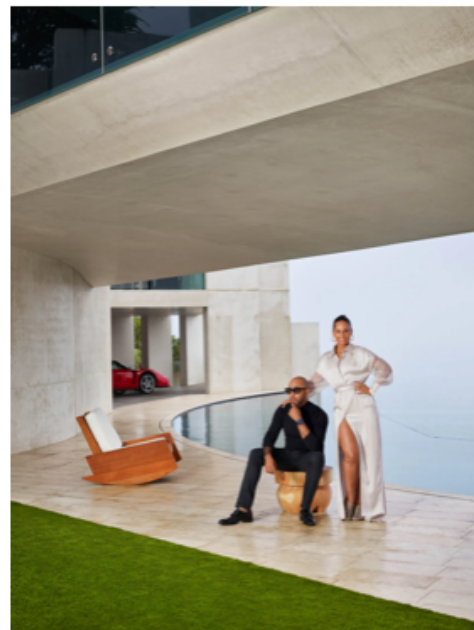
which overlooks the Pacific Ocean and is rumored to be the inspiration for Tony Stark’s futuristic bachelor pad in the Iron Man movies, is “a place to create dreams and to be bold enough to dream your wildest dream—for us to even be here is a wildest dream.”

It took some time for that dream to become a reality. Dean set a picture of Cunningham’s singular creation as his phone’s screen saver for eight years. During that time the multilevel manse, named after the neighboring Razor Point Trail, appeared and disappeared from the market, but the producer remained hopeful. “I was low-key manifesting it,” he states. When the couple’s real estate agent, Stephen Sweeney, called with news that the house was again available, Dean was elated. “When your screen saver comes to life, it’s unbelievably crazy,” he exclaims. Still, he worried that his wife, born and bred in Manhattan’s Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood, would veto a move to the West Coast. It’s worth noting that one of Keys’s biggest and most beloved hits to date is “Empire State of Mind,” the 2009 collaboration with Jay-Z that has become the unofficial anthem of the city that never sleeps. “She’s Miss New York,” Dean, himself a Bronx native, declares. “They might as well make a sculpture of her the [new] Statue of Liberty.”

Coincidentally, Cunningham invokes the word sculpture when asked about the famous residence. “Every wall in this house, every bit of it, is sculpture,” he states. “These beautiful S shapes, these chevrons going down the hillside, curvatures flying in space over your head. It’s more akin to sculpture than architecture.” And, he makes clear, it “is incredibly important to me. It’s dearest to my heart.” While it’s the type of spread that elicits awestruck reverence, it wasn’t until the couple spent a “date weekend” exploring the estate (at the invite of its previous owner) that Keys began to imagine her life there. The singer says that during a morning meditation session she was rendered speechless by the sight of parasailers soaring over a nearby mountain: “In that moment, I felt like I was witnessing a beautiful metaphor, and I wanted to not ever forget how endless we are and how the unimaginable can happen. That’s what did it for me. I was taken.”



A razor-thin edge defines the house’s southern façade. Frank Frances Studio



Keys and Dean on the pool terrace. Frank Frances Studio

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After snagging the home, the couple set about making it their own. Enter interior designer Kelly Behun, whom Dean contacted via Instagram. “I got this DM, and I was like, ‘Am I being Punk’d? Is someone playing a joke on me?’ We had never met before,” Behun recalls. Unbeknownst to her, Dean was a longtime fan of her work, regularly visiting her Instagram page for inspiration. “There are many designers who know how to put expensive things into your house, but the soul is missing,” he says. “Kelly has soul.”

She also has patience. Behun had to work around pandemic limitations—a majority of the collaboration happened remotely—and the power duo’s packed-to-the-minute calendars. One week alone in September saw Keys debut her new single “LALA” at the MTV Video Music Awards, host a birthday revel for her husband, and enjoy a secret soiree celebrating her new album, KEYS. In that time, Dean, recently named one of Time magazine’s 100 most influential people of 2021, also presided over the latest installment of Verzuz (the popular rap battle series he co-created with Timbaland in 2020) at Madison Square Garden. As if that weren’t enough, the couple even squeezed in a twirl at the Met gala for good measure.

A hectic schedule, however, didn’t keep Dean from being a hands-on collaborator during the nine-month-long project, says Behun. “He lives and breathes that house; he understands every square inch of it. Being remote would normally be an obstacle, [but] he was so in tune with what he knew he wanted, and that’s why everything just clicked.” Erected in 2007, the cantilevered structure comprises floor-to-ceiling glass, white concrete, grand walkways, manicured courtyards, and floating staircases. Keen on making the home more family-friendly and less like a place a “superhero would live in,” Behun brought in warmth by introducing wood elements, Moroccan wool rugs, and seating upholstered in soft fabrics like shearling and cotton velvet. The palette leans heavily on colors that harmonize with the views—golden sands, caramel browns, buttery cognacs. “The interiors don’t in any way shout; they’re simple and timeless,” says Behun, later adding, “It was never going to be about trying to upstage the natural surroundings, the architecture, or the art.”

Dean and Keys’s art collection, amassed over 20 years and totaling more than 1,000 works, is as extensive as it is enviable. Years ago, the couple chose to focus on acquiring pieces by African American and African artists, ranging from Kehinde Wiley and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye to Barkley L. Hendricks and Henry Taylor. They also possess a treasure trove of Gordon Parks images—the largest in private hands. “It really feels like he’s a grandfather to us,” says Keys of the celebrated lensman. “To be able to keep his collection together and for it to live in the home of Black artists is really very emotional for me.”

According to Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, “Alicia and Kasseem see themselves not only as collectors of art but as custodians of the culture.” She continues, “Over the years, I’ve watched their collection develop as their vision has widened and expanded to create a collection that really represents the breadth and depth of the work being made by Black artists.” Dean, a member of the board of the Brooklyn Museum, and Keys also collect to be in close community with fellow creatives. “I love that 90 percent of the art in the house is by artists who are now our friends,” Dean boasts. “We’ve broken bread with them, they’ve partied at our house, they’ve spent the night. It’s not transactional for us.”

Tucked away in the subterranean garage and adjoining lounge (Dean’s favorite realm) are a fleet of luxury automobiles, a recording studio, and five arresting Deana Lawson photographs. It’s not uncommon to find the producer here smoking a cigar or tooling around on quad skates to classic ’70s R&B. “I don’t call it a man cave, because me and my wife share the space equally,” he notes. “We call it the grown-up floor.”

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Cunningham, who has since become friends with the Dean family, says that “it’s nothing like you would imagine. When you look at a home like this, you think people are living in it stiffly—they’re not. They’re running around enjoying themselves. They are not intimidated by this place at all.”

On the main floor, Derrick Adams’s hypnotic ode to leisure, *Floater 74*, rests above the custom ebonized-oak table by Kelly Behun Studio in the formal dining room. Vintage Africa chairs by Afra & Tobia Scarpa quietly dazzle, as does Jordan Casteel’s vibrant *Fallou* and a multimedia drawing by Nigerian American artist Toyin Ojih Odutola. African sculptures—a vintage Baga Nimba ceremonial shoulder mask from the early 1900s is a treasured standout—also abound. “I watched her finish that piece in front of me,” Dean says, referring to one of a pair of remarkable Odutolas that has pride of place in the library/music room. “She was going to get rid of that piece, and I was like, ‘Toyin, I don’t think you should. That can be really special.’” The room also houses Keys’s first baby grand, a gift from the record label that signed her when she was only 16. Her elder son plays it now. “When Egypt is practicing piano, he has a Basquiat behind him and the Toyin in front of him,” Keys marvels. “Without even knowing it, he gets to absorb this excellence.”

Known in the industry for their legendary house parties, Keys and Dean are consummate hosts who need no excuse to throw a bash. They’re all too eager to swing open the doors to “Dreamland” as soon as it’s safe to do so again. “When you hear a song or something we’ve produced, the foundation is to make people feel good and feel loved. That’s what our art is about,” Keys states. And “when you come into our home, that’s exactly what we want you to feel. We want you to feel loved, to feel safe, to feel relaxed. We want you to have a great meal. We want you to feel inspired.”