



Swizz Beatz, 43, photographed by Emily Shur. Opposite: with his wife, Alicia Keys, at their house in California

## FROM THE BRONX TO AMERICA'S COOLEST PAD

He lives in Iron Man's futuristic house and is married to Alicia Keys – no wonder Swizz Beatz, the 'best rap producer of all time' and the man behind the music of Jay-Z, Kanye West and Beyoncé, is stunned by his own success. Helena de Bertodano meets him in his glass clifftop mansion overlooking the ocean in California

It is just another ordinary day in the Razor House, the glass cliff-top masterpiece in California dubbed “the coolest house in America”. Its owner, Swizz Beatz, the Grammy award-winning record producer, is juggling phone calls as he paces up and down beside the infinity pool that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. His sons, Egypt, 12, and Genesis, 7, run in and out of the glass front door, their mother – who happens to be the singer-songwriter Alicia Keys – ferrying them between karate and basketball.



Swizz Beatz at home



With Keys last year



With Jay-Z in 2021



With Kanye West in 2004

They are the ultimate music power couple. Keys, 41, needs no introduction; her husband, Beatz, 43, born Kasseem Dean, is less well known but equally successful. Named one of *Time* magazine’s 100 most influential people of 2021, he is the producer behind some of the biggest musicians of our day, including Jay-Z, Beyoncé and Kanye West. Fuelling sales of more than 350 million albums worldwide, he has been hailed by West as “the best rap producer of all time”.

“We have an art class later,” Keys reminds Beatz, moving in for a kiss as he puts his call on hold and wraps his arms around her. She is dressed in jeans and a denim shirt, her hair tied up in a purple scarf. As she drives off in her black Mercedes SUV with Egypt, Beatz explains that they do a painting class together at their sons’ school. “She wants to learn to paint this view,” he tells me, sweeping an expansive arm over the pool, the ocean beyond, the mountains curving to the north.

We are chatting in the garden, Beatz sipping whisky from a black crystal Saint Laurent Baccarat glass, part of a set that Keys gave him for his previous birthday. He is relaxed, speaking thoughtfully in a low voice, sometimes punctuated by an infectious giggle.

Something of a hip-hop renaissance man, Beatz’ interests range well beyond music. A fashion designer, art collector and philanthropist, he graduated from Harvard Business School in 2017 at the age of 39. In 2020, he launched the hugely successful webcast series *Verzuz* and this month he acquires a stake in 12on12, a high-end music brand that invites leaders in culture to curate unique vinyl works and bespoke collectors’ editions. To mark the partnership he has compiled his own album, *Long Live Jazz*. The sleeve features photography from his private collection. Beatz says he was persuaded to partner with 12on12 when he saw its previous collaborations. “The quality of the covers, the amount of detail. I was like, ‘Wow. This is not just vinyl; this is art.’”

There can’t be many people who can boast both a Grammy and a camel racing trophy (he has a team in Saudi Arabia and in 2020 became the first American to win a race there), although he keeps the awards out of view.

None of Keys’ 15 Grammys are on show either. Instead, their home is full of the art they have collected over the years – with more than 2,000 pieces, only 5 per cent of the collection is on display in the house.

The inspiration for the futuristic bachelor pad in the *Iron Man* movies, the house in La Jolla, north of San Diego, is cantilevered from the rugged bluffs and constructed from ivory polished concrete with floor-to-ceiling glass and floating staircases. It had been the screensaver on Beatz’ phone for eight years before he was finally able to buy it in 2019. “That was me just manifesting... The screensaver came to life.”

When it came on the market, he still had his work cut out to convince Keys to move from New York. After all she wrote the city’s unofficial anthem, the No 1 single *Empire State of Mind*, her 2009 collaboration with Jay-Z. “She is the Empire State,” says Beatz proudly. “She’s Miss Hell’s Kitchen. I knew that once she’d seen the beaches [in California] she

was gonna change her mind. And she did...”

Born in the Bronx to teenage parents and expelled from multiple schools, Beatz could not have travelled further from his roots. His favourite phrase – “The sky’s not the limit, it’s just a view” – is not just a slick motto, but the axiom by which he lives his life. “Why should the sky be our limit when there are footprints on the moon and rockets going into space and billions of galaxies? To be sitting here, it still feels like I’m in VR [virtual reality]. It doesn’t feel real. My whole life has felt like that. I’m not even over my first big record yet.”

Because his parents were so young (his father was 16, his mother 17), Beatz lived with his grandparents. “They weren’t too young to make me, but they were too young to have me living with them. My grandparents raised me, which was a blessing. They gave me all the skills I feel I have today, as far as dealing with people, manners. They would make me help people with their bags... A lot of people hear I’m from the Bronx, they feel sorry for me.

## ‘I never thought we would be together. Alicia was really tomboy and I liked girlie girls at the time’

And I’m like, ‘No, I had fun. I didn’t have a bad childhood.’ I never felt I was poor because everybody around me was on the same level.”

It helps, he says, that Keys comes from a similar background. “I think it grounded us – and it gave us a drive to want to go to the next level. And be an example of what more can look like with hard work.”

He first met Keys at high school. “I was 15. Her friend was in my class and she always used to say, ‘You have to meet my friend Alicia. She plays piano. She’s into music like you. You two should work together.’ I remember coming out of school and [Alicia] was there. She had on a bomber – a North Face jacket – and Tims [Timberland boots]. She was looking harder than me. She looked like she could kick my ass.” Was she friendly? “She was reserved. I tried to get her number; she didn’t give it to me.”

They went their separate ways and Beatz moved away from New York after getting into fights at school. “It’s called survival. I was a

skinny kid... I kept getting suspended. And my stepfather [by then he was living with his mother] felt it was too dangerous: I was getting older and the fights started to get bigger.” So they moved to Atlanta. “It wasn’t sweet either. Because Atlanta had gangs and I wasn’t used to gangs. So I got into it the first day, based off some colours I was wearing.”

While still at school, he started to work for his uncles, Joaquin “Wahh” Dean and Darrin “Dee” Dean, co-CEOs of the Ruff Ryders Entertainment label. “They were legends in the street,” says Beatz. As a boy, he would count money for them. “I used to hate money, from counting it on the weekends and not playing with my friends.”

He was much happier immersed in music. “I was making the intros to my mixtapes and looping up the tracks and my uncle said, ‘What you’re doing there is producing.’ So I just slipped into it.” At 16 he sold his first beat to the late rapper DMX, which became the chart-topping single *Ruff Ryders’ Anthem*.

When he first started receiving royalty cheques, he thought they were fake. “My grandmother told me to keep them in a shoe box. Then I went to ASCAP [American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers] and they said, ‘How does it feel being rich?’ And I was like, ‘You think I’m rich? I took two buses and three trains to get here and it was raining like hell.’ And they said, ‘We sent the cheques to your house.’ I was like, ‘Wait a minute. Those are real?’”

So at the age of 17, he found himself almost a millionaire. “I’ve never needed anything financially since that day. I paid for my brother to go to school and I bought my mother her home.” Yet he says he hasn’t lost his perspective on money. “I remember very clearly not being able to afford the things I wanted.” Even today, he talks about having to work “to pay for the gas and electricity”, and when I ask him where his dusky pink suit comes from he replies: “Sandro – its price points are pretty decent.”

Originally known as K Swiss (“That came from me wearing K-Swiss sneakers back in the day”), he became DJ Swiss when he got into the music business. “Then when I did beats I was Swiss Beats. I needed to get away from this K Swiss thing, so I spelt it different.” To many people he is still Kasseem, or Mr Dean. What does Alicia call him? “Baba,” he says. “My mother calls me Kazy Wazy. My dad calls me Mr Magic, because he feels like I make magic.”

While Beatz was establishing himself, Keys was making her way as a singer. “We would see each other at events. It was always a cool vibe but I never thought we would be together.” Why not? “Because we were two different energies and she was really tomboy at the time. I liked girlie girls at the time.”

At 22, Beatz had his first son, Prince Nasir, with Nicole Levy, then in 2004 he married the singer Mashonda Tifrere with whom he had Kasseem Dean Jr, now 15. But the marriage crumbled. He had a daughter, Nicole, now 13, with UK-based singer Jahna Sebastian, only finding out about her a year after her birth. Although she lives in Croydon, south London, they have a close relationship. She phones him while they are talking and his faces lights up as he answers: “Happy Friday! What are you up to, Miss Beautiful? Did you get the stuff for the music class?” She tells him she has just been to the dentist. “Do you have to get dentures?” he teases her.

Eventually, he and Keys both found themselves single. “I think the universe had the perfect plan and timing for us. When we got together we was trying not to be with each other, to be honest.”

Keys has confessed she was not attracted to Beatz at first. “He just wasn’t my vibe,” she

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once said. “He’s pretty loud. He’s pretty over the top. He loves a lot of attention. Everywhere is like a bunch of people, the brightest colours, the biggest chains, the biggest cars. [He would say] ‘I can write music in 10 minutes,’ the show-off shit. I was just like, ‘Eeeeeewwww.’”

“She used to hate that,” Beatz laughs today. “What she realised is that ten minutes was actually years and years of work.”

They recently celebrated their 11th anniversary and while they clearly adore each other, Beatz says there is no such thing as a perfect marriage. “It’s a work-in-progress marriage. The key thing is communication. If something’s bothering me, I’m gonna speak on it at dinner tonight and we move past it. We never raise our voice at each other – the kids don’t even know what that means. They’ve never seen us even curse at each other.”

They are never apart for longer than two weeks. “I have to come wherever she’s at. Or she has to come where I’m at. That’s the rules.”

And they also schedule time alone together. “Date night is essential. We spend so much time making sure the kids are good that we gotta spend time making sure we’re good.” Often they escape to a hotel. “It’s something about room service. And the kids [aren’t calling]: ‘Mommy, Mommy. Dad.’ Quiet. Just reflecting and listening to each other.”

It is Keys’ birthday a few days after we meet and he is planning a surprise. “It’s going to be the unexpected. By the time this comes out, she will have had it [so I can say] it will be in Vegas. She doesn’t like Vegas...” Definitely a surprise then. “Yes,” says Beatz. “I wanted her to do something she wouldn’t normally do.”

Prince Nasir, 21, his oldest son, is staying in the guest house at the moment. Beatz wolf-whistles him as he crosses the lawn and he comes over to introduce himself. His younger sons are equally well mannered, introducing themselves, apparently without prompting. They’re all so polite, I say to Beatz. “They better be,” he replies. He credits Keys as “the superparent”. “I’m the assistant parent to the superparent.”

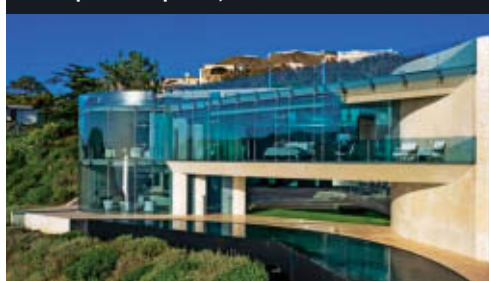
In the past he would work at night then sleep during the day. Now his day begins early and he starts work from bed, making calls. “The kids get up at six, jumping on each other, on the bed, so I’m up from that time. I’m laying down but I’m up.”

Over the years, he says, he has improved as a father. “I might’ve not been a great parent the whole time, because I didn’t know how to be a parent. My eldest son, he probably got the worst of me.”

Suddenly he stands up and points out to sea: “I think I see a whale... It just jumped out the water. Okayyy,” he says delightedly. “Putting on a show!”

He seems to fizzle with energy and enthusiasm. He invites me to tour the house.

The couple’s clifftop home, the Razor House



## ‘I haven’t had a legendary party here. Well, maybe one. Jay-Z was the first to arrive’

Just inside the door is a jumble of trainers and footballs. Their dog, Samba, a cane corso, is sprawled on the floor asleep. The rest of the house is immaculate. First stop is the sleek, modernist kitchen, where he helps himself to a slug of tequila and pours me a shot. The house starts to look even better. In the family room, which overlooks the swimming pool, is a huge colourful triptych by Derrick Adams and an elaborate Nick Cave sculpture in the corner. A 1956 photograph by Gordon Parks – of an African-American mother and child standing under a “Colored Entrance” sign – looks down on the custom dining table. He sees himself as a custodian of the art. “We don’t feel we own it. We don’t think of it as a transactional thing. Artists take it out on the road and use it for shows. We’re not supposed to collect this work and hide it for 20 years.”

He started buying art when he was in his early twenties but, as he candidly points out, for the wrong reasons. “I didn’t even care: I was like, ‘Oh, Warhol. Oh, Keith Haring. Oh, Chagall.’ I used the art as a status thing. Which is the worst way of collecting. You should collect from the heart.”

He has done much to change the imbalance of power in the art world, founding the Dean Collection, which curates the festival No Commission, where artists receive space free of charge and are not charged commission on sales. “When I buy a piece, I usually give one piece to a museum too.” But he does not think of himself as a philanthropist. “It’s called being human. I don’t want to get points for it.”

We step into a glass lift, which glides upstairs, the view towards the sea unbroken. On the first floor is the library, dominated by Keys’ Steinway piano. As we walk down the passageway, Beatz points out the master bedroom behind a curved concrete wall.

“I can’t show you because my wife would kill me.” Instead, he shows me the bedroom of one of his sons. “This is my middle son’s room. We call it the sky room – [it feels like] you’re floating.” He shakes his head as he walks through it. “He’s got it too goddamn good.”

The tour ends in the garage, which needless to say is not your typical garage. There is art on every wall, a billiards table, a wine fridge, a rack of designer clothes. Oh, and four pristine red Ferraris: an Enzo, a LaFerrari, an SF90 and the single-seater Monza SPI. Does he drive different ones for different moods? “I like driving the LaFerrari best: you’re sitting super-low, like in a cockpit. The Enzo: it’s the devil. It shakes the house. I only drove the Monza one time, for my birthday. You have to wear a helmet as it has no windows. It’s the most James Bond. But my wife’s car is the most badass of them all.” He shows me a miniature model of a Project One Mercedes, a black full-size version of which will soon be delivered.

The garage, he says, is the heart of the house. “We call it the fourth floor.” His new album, *Long Live Jazz*, is on the turntable. “Can you feel those vibes?” he asks excitedly as the soulful trumpet of Jeremy Pelt playing *Little Girl Blue* echoes around the garage. The couple have a reputation for throwing legendary parties. “That’s at the house in Jersey,” he says, referring to their former home. “I haven’t had a legendary party here. Well, maybe one. Jay-Z was the first to arrive. I was like, ‘I’m not even dressed yet...’”

He counts Jay-Z as one of his closest friends. “It’s amazing to think where he comes from and his success. You think this place is something? His place is serious.” This place isn’t serious? “The view is serious,” concedes Beatz. “But I keep dreaming. One day I want to build something that’s even more incredible than this. This is just a stop on the way.”

A text lands on his phone and he glances at it. “My wife is hitting me up about the painting class.” The sun has set and he checks the time. “Oh man,” he groans, rushing off. “She’s really going to shoot me now.” ■

Swizz Beatz’ *Long Live Jazz* limited-edition vinyl is available to pre-order at [12on12.com](http://12on12.com)