Alicia Keys is the central figure of the page, a full-page portrait. She has voluminous, dark, curly hair and is wearing a colorful, patterned halter-neck top with a red and white geometric pattern at the bottom, and blue jeans. She is smiling and looking slightly to the right of the camera, with her hands raised in a gesturing motion. The background is a dark, textured grey.

KEYS TO FAME

Alicia Keys shares her formative firsts

Alicia Keys, assassin? The 25-year-old singer is preparing to stretch as a killer in her first film, the action-comedy *Smokin' Aces*. And this month, she releases her *Unplugged* CD. Here, she shares some other firsts with PEOPLE contributor Kelly Carter.

The first time I sang . . .

I was in kindergarten at PS 116 [in New York City]. I had this really eccentric teacher named Ms. Hazel. She exposed us to a lot of different things; one was doing *The Wizard of Oz*. I remember she took me into a room with a piano. I shocked myself because I didn't realize I could really sing. They chose me to be Dorothy. I was terrified to get on the stage. When I did I felt free! Ms. Hazel is still around. I speak to her.

The first song I wrote . . .

The first, first, first, first song I wrote I was 11, but the first good song I wrote I was 14. My first song was a depressing song called "I'm All Alone." I had lost my grandfather a year before. I had never really gotten the

opportunity to grieve in the way I needed to. I wrote the music out for it but I never recorded it.

The first time I got braids . . .

I was going with my friend to Puerto Rico. I got all of these little, tiny, tiny, tiny braids. It took 10 hours. I was around 10 or 11. From then on I was pretty much rockin' braids.

The first record I bought . . .

It was probably this reggae artist Mad Cobra or Salt-N-Pepa. The first record I remember loving was Cookie Monster, "Me Lost Me Cookie at the Disco."

The first time I heard one of my songs on the radio . . .

I was driving on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in my little Mazda 626 late at night. Funkmaster Flex, who is a big New York dee-

THE FIRST RECORD I BOUGHT THE FIRST RECORD I REMEMBER LOVING WAS COOKIE MONSTER, "ME LOST ME COOKIE AT THE DISCO"

jay, would drop [sound effect] bombs on the records that he liked. This is my record "Girlfriend," before "Fallin'." I heard this beginning piano but I didn't pay any attention. Then I heard it again and he drops bombs on it. Finally I heard my voice singing. I was like, "Oh my God!" I'm almost crashing into the orange construction thingamajigs.

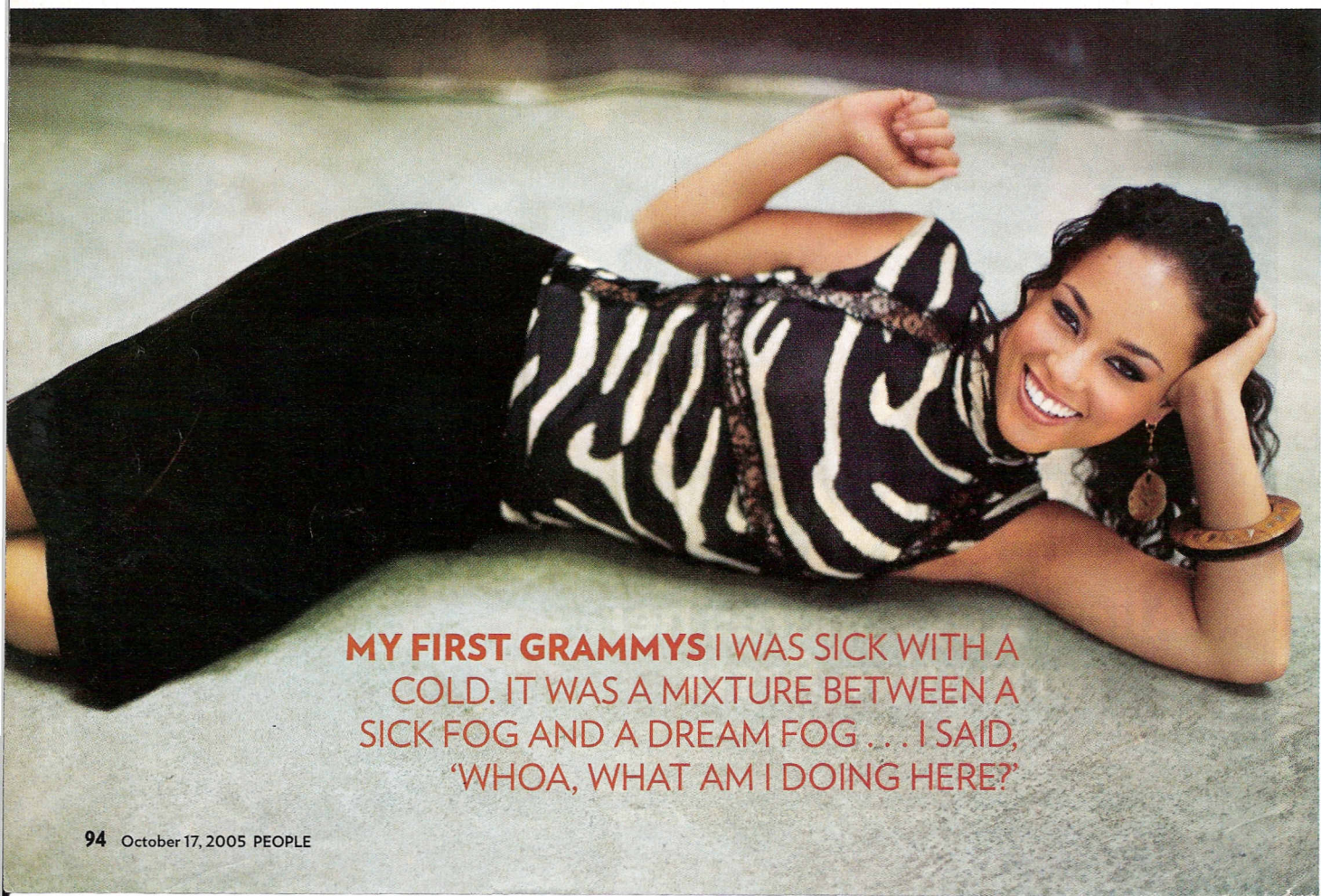
The first time I attended the Grammys . . .

I was sick with a cold. It was a mixture between a sick fog and a dream fog. I sat down and I looked to

my right and there was Bono and Celine Dion. Brian McKnight was in front of me. I said, "Whoa, what am I doing here?"

The first thing I did for my mom [actress Terri Augello] after I made it big . . .

The first really great thing was being able to buy her her first home two years ago. It's this beautiful apartment uptown. That was really exciting to be able to decorate it. And she brought the oldest stereo. Before I was born she had this stereo. I said, "What is this doing here? Get a new stereo!" ●



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