Alicia Keys just might make you shed a tear with her fifth studio album “Girl on Fire”. Since releasing her last album “The Element of Freedom” three years ago, many things have changed in Keys’ life. She is a married gal with record producer and rapper Swizz Beatz and she’s a mother. She has even gotten a taste of production on Broadway. A good amount of things have changed in the life of the legendary R&B songstress and that change bleeds through on the new album. “Girl on Fire” definitely showcases a different side to the 31-year old Keys, or maybe it’s just the new Keys.

The album varies from her old stylings of soul to integrating completely new sounds with some bodacious beats provided by the hubby and even some reggae flare sprinkled in. There are moments when Keys effectively shows off her classical training and other times when Keys takes a stab at things a bit different with melodic twists and odd chords. “Girl on Fire” definitely offers something different than what we are used to.
This new Keys is unleashed right off the bat with the track “Brand New Me”. Keys relies on the simplistic roots of her old R&B style and a beautifully smooth piano melody to deliver one of the best tracks on the album. “Brand New Me” paints a stunningly honest picture of the life of Keys then and now. The message serves as a proclamation to critics who may not always approve of the changes in Keys’ life, whether it is over her career or her personal life. When Keys was asked about the message in “Brand New Me” she states, “There’s something about a time in your life that we all go through – if you haven’t gone through it you will – that you find you’re going to rise above something that’s kind of held you back and you find this thing inside of you that really says, ’I’m new now.” (Taken from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/28/alicia-keys-girl-on-fire-music-review_n_2204927.html#slide=1759102)

Keys shows off another very personal side to herself with the next track on the album, “When It’s All Over”. At the tail end of the song, Keys’ son Egypt makes a surprise feature with some babyish banter back and forth with his good ol’ mom. This little anecdote might annoy some of her listeners since this “I have a family now” message is being thrown in our face… But fine, I guess it’s still sort of cute.

Of course we can’t avoid the title track “Girl on Fire”, which managed to work its way to number 22 on the top 100 before the album release. Although the title track has certainly made its way around and rode the radio circuit, it doesn’t convincingly capture the title of “top track” for this record. While it is certainly a great anthem with the assistance of Ms. Nicki Minaj, it doesn’t seem to hold true to the Alicia Keys we know. The track seems like a reach for radio and doesn’t hold true to the classic Keys sound.

One of the contenders for top track of the record is “Tears Always Win”, a lyrical and production collaboration between Keys and Bruno Mars. This song pays homage to the old Motown sound and it just goes to show how Motown can transform the tragic tales of heart break to somewhat cheery melodies, and that is exactly what “Tears Always Win” does here. This collaboration, along with some other notable influences from Jamie xx, Frank Ocean, and Emeli Sande, allow this album to pursue completely different styles simultaneously, which is exactly what we expect from our genre-bending songstress.

“Girl on Fire” proves that the only thing needed from Keys to command attention is her powerful voice and a decent hook. This can be done over the smooth melodies of “Brand New Me” and “Tears Always Win” or it can be done over the pounding of “New Day” and “Girl on Fire”. Keys may have grown up a bit since we’ve last heard from her, but this is still classic Keys and “Girl on Fire” is arguably one of the top R&B records of 2012. This girl is most certainly on fire.

**Top Tracks**: “Brand New Me” and “Tears Always Win”

**Rating**: 4/5