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Alison Hinds: *Soca Queen*

An enlightening conversation about empowering women, motherhood, and pure performance

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On the eve of November 7, 2007 the Queen of Soca – Alison Hinds prepares for one of the most significant events in her career -- her solo album release concert at the legendary SOB's in New York City. Calm, well poised, and relaxed in her Manhattan hotel, Janette Brin sits down for a very enlightening conversation with the Queen.

Alison Hinds:

Soca Queen

W | t's been up, it's been down, it's been all kinds of things," says multi-talented Alison Hinds, just one day after the debut of her first solo album, "Soca Queen".

My time in New York with the English/Barbadian talent was more like a girlfriend chit-chat session than an official interview. My Entertainment & Lifestyle Editor, Afrika Brown who joined me on the interview equally agreed that this was one of the coolest women one would ever want to meet. As we sat there admiring Alison's bright personality, the reality is genuinely beginning to dawn on her that she is taking giant steps up the ladder to yet another rung of fame and success.

"I flew in from Grand Cayman late last night after doing a show called 'Woman'. I was the closing act. I was tired but the success of the album really hit me when I did the J&R (J&R Music and Computer Store) in-store performance," recounts Alison. "I thought, wow, I have a CD...an album out in major record stores. Yeah. It's a big deal!"

The major years of her singing career have been nestled in the creative arms of Square One. Her decision to leave the band to become a solo artist was an emotional one. "It was not a bad break up," Alison says. "It was a little sad. But they respect my decision. Everyone is going on and doing their own things. It's something I really wanted to do. It's the Alison Hinds show now. I have my own band. It's my music, it's me. Overall, it feels good to be in charge, to be the boss lady!"

Van Gibbs is managing Alison's career. "He has a lot of experience in the business and he has helped me to understand that there are a lot of people out there ready to work with me," she says. "I've met people that I wouldn't have, otherwise. It's been a lot of good work. Good hard work. When you do the hard work you know you've achieved something positive."

"Soca Queen" was produced by Chris Allman, who has worked with Amy Winehouse, the Fugees and other big name recording artists. "I've been working with him (Allman) for many years through Square One," says Alison. "He is so down to earth and easy going. He makes it fun. He is a musician

himself and allows you to be the artist you are. Working with and getting to know Salaam (Remi Gibbs) and the album's producers---especially on the "The More You Get" and "Thunda" tracks---made it much easier to go into the studio and knock it off in no time," adds Alison.

Those important recording sessions and the resulting debut album took the singer to yet another level, allowing her to drift in and out of soca, while getting play on mainstream radio stations. "There is still the vibe of soca, with dance vibes and the reggae tone, keeping the whole market happy, including my Caribbean audience. I am still a soca artist," says Alison.

From the time she was little, Alison knew wanted to be a singer and a mother...in that order! She always envisioned singing to audiences of people, who were waving their arms to the music, applauding and having a good time. "In England I grew up on The Police, George Benson and others...my father played records all the time on those old record players," she says.

Today, the sound of Alison's three-year-old daughter, yelling, "MOMMY!", is the sweetest music to this performer's ears. "When I pick up the phone and I hear, 'Hi, Mom', it just lifts me up. My husband brings her to the airport when I come home and she just runs full on to me... to Mommy," says a smiling Alison. "Apart from my music, there is nothing more worthwhile than watching her grow."

She and her husband will soon be celebrating their fourth wedding anniversary, although they had known each other a long time before marrying. "He is my rock," says Alison, "when it seems that everybody is ganging up on me and I'm trying to put my best foot forward. He helps me get my equilibrium back. He tells me I'm strong and that I am going to achieve my goals when I'm not really feeling like "Super Alison"!

One of their most memorable Valentine's Days happened when Alison was performing in Trinidad during Carnival. Each of them was frantically calling friends at each other's locations, arranging for romantic surprises. Since she is on the road more than she is not, even if they are not physically



PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLLIN WILLIAMS

"The Alison you see today was not the Alison I was in school. Nobody could have predicted that I would become this person. I had to create Alison."



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together, their hearts are in the right place across the miles.

"I thought I was surprising him so much but he was really surprising me. He totally surprised me with flowers and chocolates in my room. I had gone to interviews that morning and I thought he had really forgotten about Valentine's Day. I called him and said, 'you got me!'"

Alison is not shy about expressing her views about women in society, including issues of self-esteem, setting and achieving goals and being good, solid role models for young girls with dreams. Her life experiences have fueled this fire.

She feels, for example, that women should finally be admitted to the predominately male English Parliament as intelligent, educated, worthy voices. "It is important to me, even more so since I have a daughter. I want her---and her generation coming up---to know that there's nothing out there that she can't do, as a woman. I want her to know that I made a positive contribution, through my music, through my image, in empowering women, young and old."

"There are so many videos today that do not show women in a positive light, especially women of color. You have to be a certain size, look a certain way, to be sexy. I was young once---we all were at some point--- but even then I dressed differently. I was not going to go onstage with something cut up my backside or wear something that looked like I wasn't wearing anything at all. I am still that person and I want to be able to encourage women to be sure of themselves and reach for whatever it is you want. It's a balancing act between self-esteem, pride in our appearance, strength, independence, the ability to conduct yourself a certain way to garner people's respect."

"I'm a grown woman now, a wife and mother and an entertainer," says Alison. There were times, however, when her security and confidence were shaken to the core.

"As a child growing up in England, which was openly racist at the time, I was in the minority. There were two other black kids in school and the teacher used to pick on us. He was the last teacher I had in primary school. He played with my self-esteem. I should have gone to the headmaster, but I just was happy to get out of the class. I felt I wasn't pretty, I felt that nobody



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Alison Hinds being serenaded by Daville

liked me. ...so I was so glad when my mother decided to go back to Barbados," recalls Alison.

"This was a turnaround for me in a class full of black kids, where white kids were in the minority. Teachers, lawyers, doctors and prime ministers looked like me and that did a lot for me. After I grew up, I realized what a big difference it did make and I could see people achieving. My mother said something that I never forgot: your education is not going to be compromised because of your color. **The Alison you see today was not the Alison I was in school. Nobody could have predicted that I would become this person. I had to create Alison.** How you allow people to treat you is very important."

In retrospect, as Alison thinks about the demeaning treatment she suffered at the hands of the teacher in England, she has proclaimed his efforts as "absolutely wasted".

"When I think about it, he was a coward to pick on kids. He couldn't do the same with a black man or

a woman, so he had to pick on kids. I wondered how many he picked on before us or after. When I came to look at the big picture, his efforts were really inconsequential. I'm glad I really didn't hold on to that definition of what he told me---that I was dumb and I'd never amount to anything."

"I remember a girl named Beverly. He also taught the English class and she just couldn't correctly say the word, "ask". West Indians will say "aks". He drilled that child 'till she cried. He was on her and on her. Thinking about it upsets me because I was right there. I was in that class and there was nothing I could do," says Alison. "I also don't remember hating math until he came along! The experience made me question everything about me."

They say you can't go home again. Living in England certainly held harsh realities for Alison at a young and impressionable age. Yet, Alison's intelligence and tough, resilient spirit emerges when she talks about going back to the UK and visiting the same school she attended there, to



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Alison dances with an audience member



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Shaggy gives his spin on Roll it Gal