

UNDERSTANDING

A portrait of Nicholas Payton, a Black man with a mustache, wearing a dark pinstriped suit, a white shirt, and a pink tie. He is holding a golden trumpet and looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

Nicholas Payton

BY DAVID R. ADLER

HE'S A RESERVED PROFESSIONAL WITH AN EXPLETIVE-LADEN TWITTER ACCOUNT, AN A-LIST JAZZMAN ON THE VERGE OF RELEASING AN R&B VOCAL ALBUM. TITLED *BITCHES*, THE PROJECT FEATURES SOME OF JAZZ'S BRIGHTEST FEMALE TALENT.

WELCOME TO THE WILD, CONTRADICTIONARY WORLD OF JAZZ'S MOST PROVOCATIVE TRUMPETER.

As the New Orleans-born son of musical parents, 37-year-old Nicholas Payton found his calling long ago. His status as one of the world's fiercest, most knowledgeable jazz trumpet players hasn't been in dispute since his emergence on record in the early 1990s. But figuring out Payton and his art isn't as simple as that description might suggest.

Leading his XXX trio at New York's Iridium in early August, Payton continued his now common practice of playing trumpet and Fender Rhodes, often at the same time—not just a feat of coordination, but a unique musical experience, like watching a split-screen without the screen. Payton also plays every instrument, and sings, on his forthcoming album, *Bitches*, an outpouring of straight-up R&B with 15 original songs divided into two “acts.” It's a studio creation to the hilt, yet Payton has found ways to present the material live. If you caught his big band, the Nicholas Payton Television Studio Orchestra (TSO), this past March at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola in

New York, you heard songs from *Bitches* in radically different form.

In recent months, Payton has also maintained a highly contentious presence on Twitter, to the delight of some and the bewilderment of others. (His handle is @paynic.) Quips, aphorisms and philosophical asides can give way in a moment to crude sexual banter, sallies on racial politics or barbs directed at critics. Followers have also come to expect a thought for the day on @paynic's signature theme, the catchphrase that serves as his entire bio line: “Mothafuckas chillin' on my nutz!” Bewildered yet? Read on.

If Payton's Twitter feed comes across as pure unleashed id, then consider how his associates describe him: “diplomatic,” “reserved,” “a gentleman,” even “shy.” It's true. During interviews he's all business: patient and proper, a bit guarded. At a club between sets he can be unnervingly silent—“shy” isn't the word. “I always tease him about it, because he's Clark Kent when you see him, and then he turns into a superhero online,” says bassist Robert Hurst, a member of Payton's XXX, TSO and other projects. In a way, to talk about Payton's antics is to talk about the peculiar dissonance of life in the age of social networking, or what Payton

calls the “virtual playground.”

In July the *Los Angeles Times* listed @paynic as one of 25 top arts-related Twitter feeds and called Payton “the jazz equivalent of Kanye West,” proving yet again that there's no such thing as bad publicity. Still, when one sizes up Payton's jewel-studded discography and his almost freakishly complete musicianship, the Twitter issue seems like a sideshow. “[Nick] is from a generation younger than me,” Hurst offers, recalling some early encounters. “But his approach was very old-school, very mature. A lot of times young guys are sticklers for getting a lot of notes together, super-rehearsed, all of that. But he was really trying to expand. ... He was open to letting anything happen on the bandstand.”

Saxophonist Tim Warfield, a member of Payton's heralded quintet from the mid- to late '90s, has known the trumpeter since age 18. “The thing about Nicholas,” he says, “is that he's able to bring music to life. It's not just about, ‘Alright, here's some bad stuff that I've been working on.’ It really touches. When I hear what he does, the body response that I get is not just cerebral, it goes much beyond that to where I'm completely fulfilled. I've seen that happen to a lot of people. I've watched him make people cry.”

Payton returned to New Orleans in late 2006 after a post-Katrina stay in Houston. In 2010 he lost two important mentors: trumpeter Clyde Kerr Jr., who taught Payton at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (and mentored Terence Blanchard, Irvin Mayfield and Trombone Shorty as well); and the esteemed bassist Walter Payton, Nicholas' father, a mainstay of the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. The elder Payton also played on "Working in the Coal Mine," "Tell It Like It Is" and other soul and R&B classics, setting an example of dogged, all-around professionalism. "Our house was the central rehearsal spot for whatever bands my father was playing in," Payton remembers. "Professor Longhair once came by the house and played on our piano for a bit. Seeing things like this had such a tremendous effect on me. My father was also very dedicated—he was a schoolteacher in the day, and he gigged pretty much every night. Sometimes he'd come home [late] and he'd put in a couple of hours on Bach cello suites, get a couple hours sleep and wake up early the next morning to teach school. Just seeing someone so disciplined—it's largely responsible for making me the person I am today." (There are two Walter Payton compositions, "Drucilla" and "Nida," on Nicholas' outstanding 2008 album *Into the Blue*.)

From an early age, Payton was immersed in the New Orleans brass-band tradition, and somehow along the way he learned to play piano, bass, drums and more, all with marked proficiency. ("Yeah, that's always been bizarre," says Warfield.) As for higher learning, "I had a full ride to Princeton that I turned down," Payton recalls. "I opted to stay home in New Orleans and study with Ellis Marsalis, Harold Battiste and also Victor Goines [now a Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra notable], whose band I was in. I went to the University of New Orleans, but before my second semester I got the offer to play with Elvin Jones' Jazz Machine. I left school and went on the road with Elvin for two years."

In 1994 Payton recorded his debut, *From This Moment*, one of the finer products of the Young Lions era. The albums that followed—*Gumbo Nou-*

veau, *Payton's Place* and *Nick@Night*—introduced one of the most potent working bands of the '90s, with Payton and Warfield in the frontline, Anthony Wonsey on piano, Reuben Rogers on bass and Adonis Rose on drums. The quintet members also played on Payton's 2001 large-ensemble disc *Dear Louis*, a much-misunderstood tribute to Louis Armstrong. Warfield and Rose stayed on for *Sonic Trance* in 2003.

Guitarist Mike Moreno, who has gigged with Payton in the TSO and several smaller units, shares an infectious memory of Payton's great quintet at the Village Vanguard. "I think it was February 1998—it was definitely freezing cold—and me, Robert Glasper and [trumpeter] Carlos Abadie, we went to the last show on Sunday, sat in the front row and it was just ridiculous. Still today one of the most inspiring gigs I ever saw."

Payton's Place was released that summer, and "the same night it came out," Moreno continues, "I transcribed and learned all the tunes, wrote charts out and when I came back to [the New School in Manhattan], we started playing a lot of them." Payton, whether he knew it or not, had begun to shape the vocabulary of a newer generation—players he'd soon be hiring. Lawrence Fields, who plays Rhodes in the TSO, comments, "The most difficult thing is living up to [Payton's] standard of musicianship. That part alone is definitely a lesson."



SOUL ON TOP: (Here and below) Payton during a March engagement with his Television Studio Orchestra. Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, New York City



On one level, Payton is a "stickler for the tradition," as he puts it. He held his own at age 23 on *Doc Cheatham & Nicholas Payton*, a two-trumpet summit steeped in old New Orleans repertory. But tradition also means tearing into music by Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane and Herbie Hancock as the original trumpeter in the SFJAZZ Collective. Or playing Hancock tunes in a drum-less trio with Christian McBride and Mark Whitfield on 1997's *Fingerpainting*. Or joining Roy Haynes' recent Charlie Parker project *Birds of a Feather*. Or deftly arranging Joe Henderson's "Inner Urge" for the Blue Note 7, the all-star septet that released *Mosaic* in 2009. Or collaborating with Bob Belden and Sam Yahel on 2006's



- paynic** Nicholas Payton
 In Hip-Hop, u are not a dope MC if u do not have a strong rhythmic concept 2 ur flow. I don't care how lyrically brilliant u are. #mfcomn
 17 hours ago
- paynic** Nicholas Payton
 If you ain't gettin' lost every now and then, it means you're headed nowhere. #mfcomn
 12 Aug
- paynic** Nicholas Payton
 Marvin, EW&F, and Stevie all borrowed from the chordal structures Herbie was dealing with in the '60s. #npcohhn #mfcomn
 7 Aug
- paynic** Nicholas Payton
 It is common for a queen to mate with several males.
 1 Aug
- paynic** Nicholas Payton
 It's a good feeling to look back on all my Verve recordings and know that I stayed true to my mission of developing a band sound.
 #mfcomn
 31 Jul
- paynic** Nicholas Payton
 Twitter is great. I no longer have to talk to my friends anymore. They can just decode the subliminal messages I'm sending thru my timeline.
 31 Jul

Mysterious Shorter, an organ-driven Wayne Shorter homage.

Then again, tradition might mean recasting “Hello, Dolly!” for *Dear Louis* in a slow and undulating 6/4, with dark harmonies, subtle cross-rhythms and simmering percussion. It might mean closing *Nick@Night* with a cover of Ramsey Lewis’ 1974 hit “Sun Goddess,” or tackling the Stylistics’ “People Make the World Go ‘Round” on *Payton’s Place*. These moments laid the groundwork for *Sonic Trance* and *Into the Blue*, not to mention *Bitches*. “I don’t think our predecessors saw the distinction,” Payton argues. “Somewhere along the way all these labels broke up the different branches that are part of the same tree—jazz, R&B, gospel, soul. At their best, the same roots apply: a soulfulness, a black aesthetic and a sense of groove. That’s one of the things I’m trying to reclaim and bring to light, that all these things that exist in the black diaspora are a lot more similar than they are dissimilar. And that’s not to say that white musicians can’t swing or play the blues—not at all, to the contrary. It’s just to say that it’s a part of our heritage, the black cultural heritage. But of course it belongs to everyone.”

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In true hip-hop style, Payton has termed *Bitches* a “mixtape,” although it could just as easily be called a concept album. Concord Records signed on to the project in 2009 but ultimately backed out. “I was never really given an official reason,” Payton says, though he

adds there were “some political issues with the title of the record.” (Concord did not respond to requests for comment.) When *Bitches* arrives this fall, it will be on the German In + Out label. Payton circulated an older mix for free online in late 2010, but he recruited Tom Soares, whose credits include Erykah Badu, John Legend and others, to remix the album for official release.

Yes, there is trumpet on *Bitches*, but it’s one sound among many. The melodies, particularly on “Shades of Hue,” “The Second Show,” “Togetherness Foreverness” and “iStole Your iPhone,” are thoroughly irresistible. The harmonic thinking is deep, the note choices surpassingly hip, the execution superb (catch the piano and organ on “Give Light, Live Life, Love”). Vocally, Payton gets the job done, but he has help from special guests Esperanza Spalding, Cassandra Wilson, Saunders Sermons, N’dambi and Chinah Blac.

Of Payton’s myriad influences—among them Prince, Stevie Wonder and Earth, Wind & Fire—perhaps the most significant is Marvin Gaye. Payton wrote about Gaye in early January on his site *Into the Blog*, calling attention to the 1978 opus *Here, My Dear* as his personal favorite. Significantly, *Here, My Dear* is a “breakup album,” as Payton calls it. Three weeks later on the blog Payton touched on his own recent divorce, as he does briefly in the liner notes for *Bitches*. The album chronicles the rise and fall of a stormy romance between two unnamed characters.

While *Bitches* is a departure in many ways, it was not unforesee-

able. “In terms of coloring and orchestration,” Payton notes, “that’s something I’ve been into from my first record, dealing with different textures and sonic properties, like combining guitar with vibes and trumpet on *From This Moment*, or looking for unique sounds, like the harpsichords and celeste on *Nick@Night*. *Dear Louis* was the first time I employed the Fender Rhodes, and the first project that I sang on. I also sang on *Into the Blue*. As far as writing tunes with lyrics, I’ve been doing that since about ’98. I used to have a band in New Orleans called the Time Machine, which had a vocalist, and even back then I was recording R&B demos. The song ‘Freesia’ [from *Bitches*, featuring Spalding] is from that period.”

These roads led Payton not just to *Bitches*, but to the Television Studio Orchestra as well. “I used to watch TV like mad when I was a kid,” he explains, “and I was often fascinated by TV themes. I’m a big fanatic for melody, countermelodies, harmony, textures, the lush sound of French horns, flutes, bass clarinets, tubas and bass trombones, electric keyboards and guitars and percussion. The [TSO] gives me all the possibilities of all the different things that I love to hear. I think I write in that style of, say, a [Henry] Mancini, of a lot of the great TV themes that we saw come about in the ’70s and ’80s.”

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In a series of tweets on March 25, Payton attempted to unpack “bitch” as a word of conflicted and multiple meanings. “A bitch is anyone who you love and breaks your heart.” “A bitch is anything that causes pain.” And so forth. He has argued, like others in the world of hip-hop, that the word is not gender-specific, that “none of the lyrical content [on *Bitches*] is derogatory.”

If flinging around the b-word tags Payton as a misogynist, this is complicated by the fact there are seven women musicians in the TSO, including almost the entire reed section (Chelsea Baratz, Sharel Cassidy, Erica von Kleist, Anat Cohen). Female representation—and the lack of it in organizations like the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra—has become a hot-button issue in recent years, and in light of this Payton deserves credit. “He’s a genius: He’s got instant recall; he’s got a photographic memory,” saxophonist Baratz says of Payton. “I came out of that week at Dizzy’s fully inspired and in awe,” says Anat Cohen, the band’s clarinet virtuoso. Is it chance, however, that the largest contingent of women was seated up front in the reeds? “If you ask him,” says Baratz, “he’ll say that every one of these women is a great artist in her own right and they belong here because of their playing and their playing only. But then part of him will be like, ‘Yup, I got the ladies. They sound good; they look good.’”

Payton asserts this of his female corps: “It serves several purposes. One, it’s trying to break down barriers and misconceptions and stereotypes in our society, trying to develop a band that is more inclusive of different types of energies. Also, I think the feminine energy brings a different sensibility to the group and it balances out the yang energy, which is cool.”

Sex does play a role in Payton’s art, as he’s the first to admit. (He didn’t come up with the band names XXX and the SeXXXtet for nothing.) “I’m not about jazz being relegated to a stuffy performance environment,” he says. “That’s not why I fell in love with the music, and it’s totally not what I saw coming from New Orleans, the birthplace of what this music is supposed to be about. The dance sensibility must be prevalent, and there’s a strong sensual or sexual

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message that has become very muted in jazz and has served to kill it. I want to keep a hold of that aspect of the music. It's the life force."

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Small wonder that Payton uses social media as he does. "I feel like if I'm gonna be on there, I might as well do it up," he says of his bent for blue humor and sexual wordplay. And what of the Clark Kent/Superman dichotomy? Is Payton playing a role online? "I don't feel like it's outside myself," he answers. "To people who really know me, they know I'll talk shit, I'll say whatever. I'm a pretty shy person, I don't immediately warm up to people that I don't know, so I think the feeling people have is, 'Where's this coming from?' I just don't know any other way to be. If I can't say what I really feel and not be afraid of the cons, then what's the point to me?"

This goes some way toward explaining why Payton, in the aftermath of his father's death, opted to take a swipe at Ben Jaffe of Preservation Hall. In a blog post from November 2010, Payton called Jaffe a "vile predator" and accused the organization of a pattern of disrespect toward musicians. "It just needed to be said," Payton offers, "and once I did it, I was able to be done with it. No hard feelings or animosity at all." Has he patched things up with Jaffe since? "Nah, not really."

Payton's Facebook and blogging activity has slowed since he joined Twitter, which affords greater immediacy and a space for an all-but-official campaign around the hashtag #mfcomn. "Mothafuckas chillin' on my nutz" has no single definition, as Payton spelled out in a June 16 tweet: "Something #mfcomn can mean something disturbs you, someone is hating on you, or admires you." Depending on the day, it could be the hotel concierge, or traffic, or buggy software, or a lack of respect shown to Art Tatum, that is chillin' on Payton's nutz. It is the impinging of the outside world, for worse or for better.

Whatever one thinks of #mfcomn, or Payton's online drama in general, it certainly makes him stand out. (At one point he proudly defended Charlie Sheen.) "I talk about things we deal with every day," he contends. "No one wants to deal with the pink elephant in the room. I put a saddle on him and ride him around and celebrate the things that we're ashamed of in our society."

So is Payton bravely confronting taboos, taking a stand against hypocrisy and insincerity as he sees it? Or is he lashing out, burning bridges and alienating his public? "It's never coming from an angry space, per se," he maintains. "A lot of times people take this stuff far too seriously. A couple of days ago I posted something about going camping and I had people asking me, 'Oh, that's great, where are you going?' Well, I'm not really going camping. It was just something funny to say. I think it's fun but it becomes a problem when you place too much stock in anything that's said online. It's like the Wild West, and anything can go down."

"I don't really know what [Nick] is doing on Twitter right now, but he does," says Baratz. "He's kind of an enigma." (An "eniggama," Payton tweeted about himself.) "I hope not a lot of underage people read it, that's all I can say," jokes Anat Cohen. Taking the historical view, Mike Moreno asks us to "imagine if Miles [Davis] had a Facebook page, what he would say from day to day—it'd be ridiculous." Kevin Hays, the keyboardist on *Sonic Trance* and *Into the Blue*, keeps social media at arm's length but ventures that "Nick likes messing with people, and he likes baiting. I wouldn't be surprised if he's just having fun with that." For Tim Warfield, Payton's online doings might have a musical significance. "That's a wide parameter of expression," he says, "and I don't think it's any different than what we're hearing. I see it like that."

"I know some of you mothafuckas out there think I'm crazy," Payton tweeted on July 20, offering what seemed to be his ultimate word on the subject. "Well, you know what? You're crazy for thinking I'm crazy!" Never a dull moment, then. In jazz that's probably as it should be. **JT**

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