



“I play Postmodern New Orleans music.

Louis Armstrong and Danny Barker play Traditional New Orleans Music.

Ellis Marsalis and James Black play Modern New Orleans music.

Kidd Jordan and Clyde Kerr play Avant-garde New Orleans music.

Donald Harrison plays Neoclassical New Orleans music.

I play Postmodern New Orleans music.

I am a part of a lineage.

I am a part of a blood line.”

~Nicholas Payton, November 27, 2011

As the album title lays out, Payton hews to an imperative that he first brought forth on his second leader CD, *Gumbo Nouveau* [Verve, 1995]. Like a master chef possessing a deft sense of proportion, taste and poetic flair, this forward-looking heir to the traditions of New Orleans blends an array of related musical food groups—Bebop, Swing, the Great American Songbook, New Orleans second-line, Mardi Gras Indian, Instrumental Soul, Rhythm-and-Blues, Urban, Hip-Hop, and various Afro-descended dialects of Central America and the Caribbean—into a focused sound that is entirely his own argot.

On *Afro-Caribbean Mixtape*, propelled by keyboardist Kevin Hays, bassist Vicente Archer, drummer Joe Dyson, percussionist Daniel Sadowick, and turntablist DJ Lady Fingaz, Payton seamlessly coalesces his interests, drawing on a global array of beats, melodies and harmonic consciousness to serve his lifelong conviction that music is a process by which the practitioner uses notes and tones to map identity and tell a story.

“I’ve been thinking of the resilience of Black people and African culture,” Payton says of the gestation of *Afro-Caribbean Mixtape*. “How Africans came on ships to ports in the Caribbean. How those rhythms from Africa got dropped off at points like Haiti and Cuba and Puerto Rico. How those influences and elements sauntered on to New Orleans, which many consider the northern-most part of the Caribbean, and on to Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago and then New York. How, with the advent of the phonograph, this New Orleans music became the world’s first popular music as the result of this new medium. How Louis Armstrong became the world’s first pop star, the Michael Jackson of his era. How the music in this African tribal DNA, as I call it, contains all the codes that connect all people—not only all Black or African people—throughout the world.



“I’ve incorporated elements from all the things I’ve written and spoken about for years. It speaks to the moment politically in an overt way that my other albums don’t. On a musical-conceptual level, I think it’s my greatest work thus far.”

*Afro-Caribbean Mixtape* is the logical successor to a series of albums Payton has released since *Sonic Trance* [Warner Bros., 2003], on which, for the first time, he heavily incorporated electronic instruments and the rhythms of contemporary Black popular music into his palette. He offered further elaborations and refinements of those ideas on *Into The Blue* [Nonesuch], from 2008. In 2011, Payton released the “post-Dilla Modern New Orleans” album *Bitches* [In+Out], for which he wrote lyrics that he sang, joined by guest vocalists like Cassandra Wilson and Esperanza Spalding, and accompanying himself on all instruments on the album. In 2013, Payton formed his own imprint, **BMF**, and issued *#BAM: Live at Bohemian Caverns*, a trio date with masters Vicente Archer on bass and Lenny White on drums, of which he first released on album his practice of playing trumpet and piano or keyboard simultaneously in realtime, and *Sketches of Spain*, a virtuosic interpretation of the Miles Davis-Gil Evans classic.

In 2014, Payton changed the name of his label from **BMF** to **Paytone** and released a trilogy of albums—*Numbers*, *Letters*, and *Textures*—that showcase the fruits of his decision a decade earlier to eschew the practice of writing tunes in favor of “creating moods, distilling the compositional element to its most essential thing.” He said: “If a melody comes into my head while walking through an airport, I’ll hum it into my Voice-Memo. If I dream a melody at night, I’ll walk to the keyboards in my bedroom and play it into my phone or recorder. I stockpile these ideas, and quite an accumulation of motific themes have built up.”

He presented over 20 of those themes on the 12 multi-sectional tracks of *Numbers*, a groove-heavy instrumental date accompanied by the young members of the quartet Butcher Brown, which he primarily plays keyboards. Another 26 appear on the 2015 double-CD *Letters*, on which Payton and his then working trio of bassist Vicente Archer and drummer Bill Stewart use the pithy motific ideas as springboards for interactive, stream-of-consciousness improvisations, highlighted by what pianist Benny Green described as the leader’s “crystal clear articulation,” “refreshingly welcoming economy of notes” and ability to elicit “a warm, infectiously optimistic mood from the piano without broadcasting any sort of agenda to exhibit ‘pianism.’”



*Textures*, from 2016, emanated from an experimental collaborative project on which Payton created nine songs on Apple Logic software in real time response to nine works conjured from a blank

canvas by New Orleans artist Anastasia Pelias. “Numbers, letters and textures exist at the fundamental

level of our culture and society,” Payton says. “These albums are a way of reclaiming and redefining these fundamentals from the way they’ve been distorted in the dualistic, homogenized, politicized world we live in. I’m developing my own #BAM lexicon.”

Payton’s aspiration to reclaim and redefine Black American Music fundamentals is a fulfillment of his birthright. He grew up across the street from Louis Armstrong Park, historically known as Congo Square, situated deep in the Treme, the neighborhood home base of many seminal New Orleans musicians and artists. In the 19th century, on Sundays only, enslaved Africans were allowed to gather in the public space of Congo Square to openly express African culture through singing, dancing and the playing of drums. Payton’s mother, Maria, is a former operatic singer and a classically-trained pianist, who at 70, still performs in church; his father Walter, a bassist-sousaphonist and music educator was a mainstay on the Crescent City music and recording scene. He would take his young son to gigs. He gifted Nicholas a trumpet when he was four.

“Our house became a rehearsal space for whatever band my father was in,” Payton recalls. “We had a big living room and a grand piano, and other instruments. Trumpet appealed to me most of all the instruments I saw around, and I got one for Christmas when I was four.” As his childhood progressed, Payton also became a proficient practitioner of tuba, trombone, woodwinds, piano, bass and drums. Before the age of 9, he sat-in with the Young Tuxedo Brass Band, a unit formed at the turn of the century that specialized in traditional repertoire. By 11, he received his first steady gig in the All Star Brass Band, a group of peers led by Trombone Shorty’s oldest brother, James Andrews, who were deeply influenced by the rhythmic and harmonic extensions of various bands. Mardi Gras Indian music was “in my backyard,” and he played no small number of rhythm-and-blues and hip-hop sessions. “I played all sorts of music,” Payton says. “I did everything.”



As a small child, Payton took as role models the “kool kats” who attended his father’s wee-hours rehearsals—drummers James Black and Herlin Riley; saxophonists Fred Kemp and Earl Turbinton; trumpeter Clyde Kerr, Jr.; pianists Ellis Marsalis and Professor Longhair.

“When the guys would take a break, I’d jump on the drums or pick up something else,” Payton recalls. “My father also taught at my elementary school, and after school I’d jump on different instruments in the band room and learn how to play them. So, I was developing my multi-instrumentalism long before I was a professional.”

Not long after joining the All Star Brass Band, Payton started digging into his father’s record collection, and came across Miles Davis’ *Four and More*, with George Coleman, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Tony Williams. “I put on the second side first, and from the moment I heard Tony’s 8-bar intro on sock cymbal, I was like, ‘I want to play music for the rest of my life.’ I listened to that record every day, to the point where I learned all the solos. I wasn’t trying to transcribe them. I’d just listened to

it so much that I learned all the music, every bassline, everything.”

“After that, I listened to Freddie Hubbard, *Red Clay*, and then I went to Clifford Brown. Then I went to Louis Armstrong, who I wasn’t really into at the time. Even though I was playing in brass bands, I saw myself as doing something more modern. Wynton Marsalis and Terence Blanchard were my hometown heroes. I wanted to go to New York and play with Art Blakey, and do what they did. But Wynton told me, ‘All that stuff you’re checking out is cool, but you need to check out Pops.’ I was like, ‘Man, I don’t want to listen to that Uncle Tom music.’ I thought about the handkerchiefs and bucking eyes, the things that were shameful and debilitating to Black people, and I didn’t want any part of it. But through Wynton’s influence, I started investigating Armstrong, and found Pops was the catalyst for all of this other stuff that I love and listen to. I developed a *simpatico*.”

Payton’s ability to infuse early 20th century repertoire with idiomatic authority and life force elicited a comment from the late trumpeter Adolphus “Doc” Cheatham—who shared bandstands with the seminal pioneers of the 1920s and beyond, and was 91 when he recorded the Grammy-winning *Doc Cheatham & Nicholas Payton* in 1996—of Payton, born two years after Louis Armstrong’s death, he said, “He is the greatest of the New Orleans-style trumpet



players that I've ever heard. And every time I hear him, he sounds better and better. I haven't heard anybody like him since Louis Armstrong."

On the strength of his New Orleans upbringing and various concert appearances playing Armstrong repertoire on Jazz at Lincoln Center engagements with Marsalis, Payton—who had already established bona fides as a consequential modernist trumpet voice as a member of Elvin Jones-led ensembles on various tours and albums (*Youngblood*, *Going Home* and *It Don't Mean A Thing*)—was soon branded as “the second coming of Armstrong.”

“There are worse people to be compared to,” Payton jokes. “But my albums weren't all Armstrong tunes, and yet that was the story attached to me, while I was actually doing a lot of other things. People thought I was sitting at home studying him, but I'm not an Armstrong aficionado, although I loved playing his music. I haven't transcribed a lot of Armstrong. I just got it. It felt natural, even the way I hold my horn up, like Pops. I felt like I was channeling him more than playing a style.

“You have to be confident enough to allow yourself to let these spirits speak through you when it's time for them to speak, and to know that you're going to remain intact, that it's not going to take anything away from you. The real masters take the path of becoming a master by studying the masters, then shedding the skin of that master and moving on. I've been through that process with a lot of different people. For me, it would always come about by hearing a recording when I was working on someone. For instance, there was a period when I wanted to be Freddie Hubbard. I wanted to know everything about him that I could, almost like method acting, so that I wasn't playing a style, but could channel his spirit to the point where I could become him. Then I did the album *Fingerpainting* with Mark Whitfield and Christian McBride, and I started the journey cycling out of that. But every master I studied, be it Miles, Clifford Brown, or Pops, I went through that same process. Each time, I learned more skillfully how to shed the trappings of that person's particular vocabulary.”

With the 2001 Armstrong homage, *Dear Louis*, Payton said “farewell to a perspective on playing music in terms of a repertory view of the masters,” and hello to the notion “that I would solely create music from my perspective as a young man in this world today.” That perspective, he adds, ties directly to his formative New Orleans experiences.



“New Orleans is there in obvious ways on albums like *Gumbo Nouveau* or *Dear Louis*, which are explicit homages,” Payton says. “But the central thread through all of my work, not only in the Paytone catalog, but back to the beginning of my Verve days, is just the sound of what New Orleans music is. People often associate New Orleans music with traditional music, or second line—that beat, or

how the polyphonic improvisational element works between the tailgate trombone and the obbligato

clarinet or the lead trumpet. But subtle things often go unrecognized.

“On *Numbers*, for example, you can hear an obvious New Orleans influence on ‘Twelve,’ which is more or less an adaptation of a Zigaboo Modaliste groove from the Meters, and on ‘Thirteen,’ where the second section goes into a New Orleans second-line groove. But everything about my music—harmonically, in terms of the movement and style—sounds like New Orleans to me. For example, Fender Rhodes is part of the sound of the first music I remember hearing, around 1975-76. I was at a birthday party for someone, and Stevie Wonder’s ‘I Wish’ came on. It was like I was snake-charmed right to the speaker. That was it. I grew up hearing guys like Ed Frank, Eddie Collins and even Ellis Marsalis on Fender Rhodes, and that association is there on *Numbers*.”

Payton adds: “If my music sounds like anybody’s, it’s probably more like James Black’s than any other one person I could name. *Into the Blue*, which a lot of people missed, is essentially an album in the post-Trad New Orleans tradition of James Black and Ellis Marsalis.”

In his deployment of out-of-the-jazz-box sonic textures on the 1998 CD *Nick At Night*, which included harpsichord and celeste, or of Fender Rhodes on *Dear Louis*, Payton foreshadowed 21st century Black American Music practice. “That’s the sound of music now, but at the time, the jazz environment was just not open to you doing a lot of that,” he says. “When I did *Sonic Trance*, it was like I had committed treason against the jazz world, and it polarized my supporters. This was around the time a lot of the ‘young lions’ were wanting to reclaim the music we grew up hearing, and did overt funk-electronic projects, because this is more who we are. Now everybody does groove music or hip-hop or has Fender Rhodes or what-have-you, and it’s almost weird for young cats to swing, which is a whole other problem.”



Since 1995, Payton has functioned primarily as a leader, though he has been a sideman on such upper-echelon, high-profile projects as Roy Haynes' Birds Of A Feather, SF Jazz Collective, Blue Note 7, Ninety Miles, and Dr. John, and on albums by valued bandmates like Tim Warfield and Adonis Rose. He cites Rose, a New Orleanian, "as central to my having the New Orleans rhythmic feel" in his first band, which also included pianist Anthony Wonsey and bassist Reuben Rogers, either alto saxophonist Jesse Davis or Warfield on tenor and soprano saxophone. "We were playing acoustic, straight-ahead music, but we could play a Jelly Roll Morton tune, or bebop, or something free, or something in the 1960s Miles Davis tradition, or something coming out of the classic John Coltrane Quartet, or something funky, or something with a hip-hop groove, not only within a set but within a tune," Payton says. "Our albums were far broader than the image created around me."

Warfield and Rose remained in Payton's next group, Soul Patrol, with organist Larry Goldings and guitarist Peter Bernstein. As his canvas expanded during the '00s, Payton used pianist-keyboardists like Kevin Hays and Robert Glasper, and recruited percussionist Daniel Sadownick as a regular bandmate. "Once Daniel joined us, my concept locked in," Payton says.