

Column: Yes, Nick Cannon has 11 kids with six women. He also makes \$100 million a year



Let's just talk about the kids first. Because that's what everyone knows about Nick Cannon — he has a lot of kids. He's fathered 12 — five of whom are less than 1 year old — with six women.

This was never his plan. He comes from a big family and always imagined he'd create the same for himself, but he's not trying to establish a clan or lead a cult. His problem, he says, is that he's a hopeless romantic — the butterflies, the first kiss, the ego boost. And when the dopamine rush subsides, he wants another hit.

Who are the people shaping our culture? In her new column, Amy Kaufman will examine the lives of icons, underdogs and rising stars to find out — “For Real.”

Also, he says, he's a people-pleaser. So during the pandemic, when a number of his lovers began to express anxiety about their biological clocks, he obliged. “A lot of them are in the same age group,” he says. “And I just wanted to give them what they desired. I kept saying, ‘I can handle it.’”

That's how he ended up with a nursery in his office building — a neon-lit room with tumbling mats, a ball pit and toy instruments. Today, his 6-month-old daughter, Onyx, is the only one of his children using the space. It's 6 p.m. on a Monday, and Cannon is running late. He has yet to return to his Burbank headquarters after dropping off his 6-year-old son, Golden, at Mandarin class. So Onyx is alone in the play space with her nanny, who notices me waiting and invites me to take off

my shoes and join them. We watch the baby bounce in her jumper, cooing at her when she presses buttons or shakes a rattle.

At 6:45 p.m., Cannon arrives, cuddles Onyx and then leads me into his office. It's the most sober area at Ncredible Productions, where the chalkboard walls are covered in scribbles and employees have access to a candy bar, game room and a pingpong table. In Cannon's private domain, immense black-and-white photographs of him marching in Black Lives Matter protests hang above the desk. Steel letters spelling out "Zen" — the name of his 5-month-old son who died from brain cancer last year — rest against a windowsill.

So no matter what people think, Cannon, 42, knows the cost of parenthood. Emotionally and, well, financially.

A few months ago, Cannon rebutted a tabloid report that he pays \$3 million per year in child support. In fact, he responded, the figure was actually much higher.



"That's not a lot of money," he says now, swiveling his chair.

It's not?

"When you think about my lifestyle, I have to generate at least \$100 million a year."

You're currently making \$100 million a year?

"Yeah," he says, laughing. "Everybody thinks Ryan Seacrest has tons of money. I do everything that he does times 10. Well, not times 10 — times three. Because he does a lot."

Here are all of the things Nick Cannon does: He hosts two seasons a year of the Fox competition series "The Masked Singer," for

which he says he's paid more than \$20 million. He hosts "Wild 'N Out," the freestyle comedy show he created in 2005, which starts filming its 21st season for VH1 next month. There's a Live Nation "Wild 'N Out" arena tour too, plus themed sports bars in San Diego and Miami that he owns.

He's currently in Dublin shooting 12 episodes of Fox's guess-the-lyrics game show "Beat Shazam" — a fill-in gig that came up suddenly after the show's usual host, Cannon's old mentor Jamie Foxx, was hospitalized in April with an undisclosed illness. Meanwhile, E! is airing the first season of "Celebrity Prank Wars," Cannon and longtime friend Kevin Hart's own version of "Punk'd." He recently shot "Counsel Culture" for Amazon Freevee, an all-male version of "The View" where Cannon leads five fellow "councilmen" through discussions on hot-button issues such as toxic masculinity. It will premiere in the fall, along with BET's "Future Superstar Tour," a filmed version of the recently wrapped live tour where Cannon showcases up-and-coming talent. And he just co-starred in a movie opposite Alec Baldwin, "Hollywood Heist," but that doesn't have a release date yet.



(Scott Legato / Getty Images)

Every weekday morning, he hosts "The Daily Cannon," a three-hour live radio show that started in April for Amazon's AMP app. He and Jonathan Greenblatt, the chief executive of the Anti-Defamation League, also have their own podcast that aims to bridge gaps between different cultures — "#2HateorNot2Hate."

More than a half-dozen musicians are signed to Cannon's own imprint at Ncredible, and one of the company's acts — the teen boy band Pop Money — has

a deal with Republic Records. He's part owner of the Hollywood Hills restaurant Yamashiro, and has an Ncredible-branded gym on the premises. He is trying to complete a master's degree in child psychology and a PhD in divinity.

Oh, and he's putting the finishing touches on a romance novel — his second, in fact — based on his personal life; he describes it as "an urban 'Fifty Shades of Grey.'"

After 25 years in the entertainment business, Cannon oversees what could reasonably be described as a multimedia empire. His career has been nearly as unconventional as his personal life — but that headline is apparently way less interesting.

It used to bother Cannon that his success wasn't widely recognized. He wanted everyone to know that he could play seven instruments, that he first enrolled in college at 35, that he deserved a spot on a Forbes list. He's learned to quiet those frustrations.

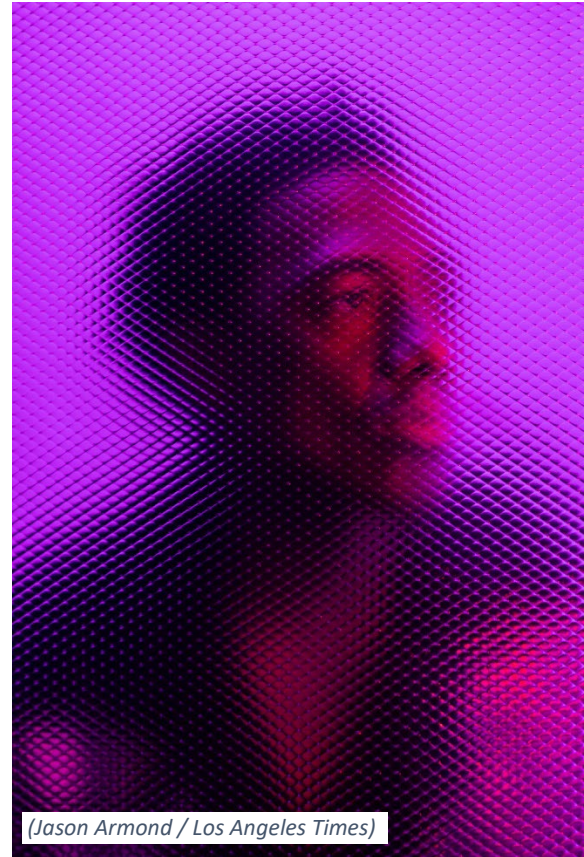
"Right now the narrative is, 'He has a bunch of kids,'" he says. "But I'm really at a place now where I don't care what people know. I'd rather just operate. It's more about really being a good person instead of telling people you're a good person."

Cannon's manager, on the other hand, is very interested in shifting the public's perception.

“Nick Cannon is the most misunderstood person I’ve ever encountered,” says Michael Goldman, who has worked with Cannon since the star was 15. “Nick’s success and what he’s generated don’t match up to where the industry places him. And I think that’s what inspires and motivates him every day.”

Jimmy Kimmel made a joke about Cannon while hosting the Academy Awards in March. He said that Disney spent so much money making the “Avatar” sequel that “just to break even, all of Nick Cannon’s kids had to see [it] four times.”

The bit didn’t bother Goldman. You want to tell a joke about his client in front of 17.6 million viewers? All good. What grinds his gears is when people think Cannon is “being this irresponsible guy that is just launching kids into the universe.” Goldman says Cannon is so dedicated to his offspring that he’ll bring them to network pitch meetings so that they can spend more time together, a rarity for working men in the industry.



(Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

“I’ve been villainized,” Cannon agrees. “I hear all the time: ‘You can’t be present for all those children.’ So therefore I get this deadbeat dad title.”

Of course, there are other famous Hollywood men with large broods: Eddie Murphy has 10 kids with five women, Clint Eastwood has eight children with at least five partners. But they’ve never been subject to the same scrutiny.

Perhaps it’s because Cannon is polyamorous. Not that he’d characterize himself as such; he doesn’t do labels. But he has multiple romantic partners, and he doesn’t believe in monogamy. He gave it one real shot, with Mariah Carey; they married in 2008 and divorced eight years later. He went full Nicholas Sparks when he was trying to woo her — filled buildings up with roses, “rented out the Four Seasons.” For their one-year anniversary, he printed out 365 days’ worth of love notes he’d texted her and bound them into a book.

But the relationship eventually failed. “Imagine if, like, Trump and Putin had to live in the same house,” he says, attempting to describe the dynamic. “It wasn’t even about her and I — we’ve always been good. It was more about us understanding that instead of making it about our relationship and what I want or what you want, we should just do what’s best for the children.”

Carey and Cannon share 11-year-old twins Moroccan and Monroe. He had Golden (6), Powerful (2) and Rise (7 months) with former Phoenix Suns dancer Brittany Bell; twins Zion and Zillion (1) and Beautiful (5 months) with DJ Abby De La Rosa; Legendary (9 months) with new “Selling



Sunset” cast member Bre Tiesi; the late Zen and Halo (4 months) with model Alyssa Scott; and Onyx (7 months) with photographer LaNisha Cole.

All of his parenting partners, Cannon says, understood when they met him that he wasn’t interested in a traditional relationship. They’re women who “know who they are,” he says, who would rather be in an honest partnership with a lifelong companion than with “someone who’s telling them they’re the only one but still f— the neighbor.”

I reached out to all of the women Cannon has had children with, and several declined to be interviewed. Last year, however, De La Rosa said on a podcast that she was “well aware of what she was getting into” when she began her relationship with Cannon and was also seeing other people at the time. On a recent episode of “The Daily Cannon” — where she serves as one of the co-hosts — she admitted she feels “a little jealousy” with the dynamic, but ultimately “has love for all the women” in Cannon’s life.

A big reason Cannon doesn’t want to partake in the institution of marriage is because he thinks it’s a business proposition. As a man “who’s made his bones, you’re not looking to give half of what you built to someone you don’t even know.”

Which isn’t to say that Cannon doesn’t provide for the mothers of his kids. He says he’s bought them all places to live, and “there’s nothing that they could ask [him] for” that he would say no to.

He even supports some of their choices that he doesn’t personally agree with. He believes in childhood vaccinations, but some of his partners don’t — “and I go along with it,” he says. “This mom may love Ms. Rachel [videos], and this mom may love ‘Your Baby Can Read.’ I know that every mother is making decisions based off of love and what they believe is best for the child.”

Cannon has a calendar for each of his children that includes their school schedule and extracurricular activities. Golden, for instance, is exceptionally busy. At 6, he’s already going into

the third grade. He's learning three languages — Mandarin, French and Spanish — and does basketball, baseball, track, martial arts and piano.

A lot of the time Cannon spends with his children is as a chauffeur. Often, he determines where he'll sleep each night by figuring out which kid he has to drop off last. He has his own homes in New Jersey, Temecula and soon Joshua Tree — but keeps clothes at all of his partners' places for when he stays with them.

But how do you decide where to sleep?

"A lot of times it's whichever of them has called me that day, to be honest," he admits. "I am such a creature of habit. I like who like me."

He doesn't sleep much, anyway. Since Cannon was diagnosed with lupus in 2012, his doctors have insisted he get a minimum of six hours per night. So after the kids go to sleep, he does too. He goes to bed at around 8 p.m. and wakes up at 2 a.m. — usually on a couch instead of in bed. "I save the bed for the weekend," he explains.

How many of your partners do you still have romantic relationships with?

"Because everybody's so busy, nobody's looking to have sex with me," he says, laughing. "Everybody's focus is the children."

A lot of the romance in his life is gone now, which he's OK with. He'd feel like he was doing his kids a disservice if he was off on an island somewhere, romancing a woman. He's turning down prospects in his DMs every day, he says, usually from women who he thinks see him as a lottery ticket. "I guess it's like the 50 Cent model: 'Have a baby by me baby / be a millionaire.'"

He does feel guilty about not being able to spend enough time with his children. He says he talks about it all the time in therapy, and counters the feeling by trying to remain as present as possible when they are together. "It's not about what I do for you or what I say to you, it's about how you feel when I'm with you," he says. "If you feel loved when you see your dad, that's what's gonna resonate."

Besides, he says, plenty of working parents aren't around all the time — people in the military, truck drivers. "I mean, Muhammad Ali had a bunch of kids and he was the greatest fighter there ever was. Bob Marley got more kids than I got. These are great men."

Cannon's parents were so young when they had him that as a baby he attended his father's high school graduation. He never saw his mom and dad together as a couple. His dad, James Cannon, was one of the founding members of the Lincoln Park Bloods in southeast San Diego. During a stint in jail, James found God and cleaned up his act, moving to North Carolina to start over as a minister. Nick stayed behind with his mother, Beth Gardner, in the Bay Vista Housing Projects. While she finished school and worked to make ends meet, her son was taken care of by his grandparents.

By 11, Cannon was already hanging out with the same street gang his dad helped start. He was shoplifting, smoking weed, throwing rocks at police cars. Gardner decided his father would help straighten him out, and sent him across the country.

Beth Gardner, left, and James Cannon had Nick when they were high school students in San Diego.

In North Carolina, Cannon's dad had his own show on public access television. His son started hanging out around the station, and soon he and some other kids launched their own interview show — talking to Gladys Knight and Kid 'n Play when they came through town.



“Every kid wants to be a rapper,”

Cannon's father told him. “Every kid from these projects are trying for the same dream. You got something more to offer than the average kid.”

Turned on to public speaking, Cannon began entering local talent shows and doing a stand-up act. When he returned to Southern California for high school, he would make the two-hour drive from San Diego to the Sunset Strip to perform in comedy clubs. It was at the Comedy Store that Cannon, then 15, met Foxx, 28.

“Jamie would be at the comedy club all night, and then we'd all go back to his house,” Cannon recalls. “Because I was too young to go out with them, I would just fall asleep on Jamie's couch.”



Within a year, Foxx had invited Cannon to Laffapalooza, a comedy showcase he was hosting in Atlanta. It was there that an executive from Will Smith's Overbrook Entertainment spotted the fledgling comic, and soon, the “Men in Black” star was mentoring Cannon. Smith helped him get a six-episode

commitment for a show on the WB — it was never picked up — and signed him to his imprint at Interscope Records.



“That was like, pre-J.Lo — so he was the model of someone who could do music, television and film,” says Cannon. “He was the biggest movie star in the world, and he was embracing this 16-year-old kid, letting him come to his office and hang out in the studio with DJ Jazzy Jeff. I got to be on private jets. And that type of stardom blew my mind. That’s the super rare air.”

But despite being branded “the next Will Smith,” nothing was

hitting. Cannon was still commuting back and forth to L.A., where he befriended Nickelodeon stars Kenan Thompson and Kel Mitchell. They were in the midst of their “Kenan & Kel” success, and Mitchell sometimes let Cannon crash on his couch after his stand-up gigs.

One night, around 5 a.m., Thompson was driving home and passed Mitchell’s house on the way. Cannon — who had been camping out in his car — spotted Thompson and followed him.

“I pull into my garage and before the gate could come down, Nick was pulling in behind me,” Thompson says, calling during a break in “Saturday Night Live” rehearsals. “I recognized his car and was like, ‘Yo, what are you doing?’ He said, ‘Man, Kel was with his lady and left me outside all night.’ I was like, ‘Word? You might as well take my extra bedroom.’”

Thompson didn’t charge Cannon rent and suggested to Nickelodeon executives that his new roommate should do the warm-up act for the “Kenan & Kel” audience. He got the job, which led to a part on the show, then a spot in the “All That” cast and later his own short-lived program on the cable network.

“We were all very young, so to be hyper-focused like he was on an acting or comedy career still seemed newish for young Black kids,” remembers Thompson. “One day, the old BMW was gone and there was a Range Rover. I was like, ‘All right. This guy’s just making moves.



He's not saying he wishes he could do this or that.' He just went and did it all."

Then came the real big break — the lead in "Drumline," the 2002 film about a streetwise drummer who struggles to fit into his college's stringent marching band.

"That was the part that everybody in the industry was going out for," says Kevin Hart, who began what he refers to as a "brotherhood" with Cannon around that time. "There was an understanding that whoever got this opportunity had next — that it was the springboard to the next stages of stardom. And he got that role because he deserved it."

After "Drumline," Cannon was everywhere. Dating Kim Kardashian. On the cover of teen magazines. At MTV Spring Break. He bought houses for his mom, dad and grandmother.

But in his early 20s, when he finally started to get the money he'd long dreamed of, he was more interested in financial gain than critical success. Cannon says he was offered Larenz Tate's part in the 2006 best picture winner "Crash," but passed to do a "silly comedy where I thought I could be an action star."

He regrets the "poor choices" he made back then — ignoring advice from filmmakers like Lee Daniels and Spike Lee who told him to act more.

"But I was just trying to get my mom out the hood," he says. "I went for the money a lot of times. There were huge directors that wanted to meet with me, and I'd be like, 'How much?' I was so good that if I would have focused on my craft, things could have been different."

Still, when his efforts received poor reviews, he never got upset. His manager recalls him logging onto IMDb to have conversations with the commenters about their critiques.

"He'd be like, 'Hey, man, why did you think I sucked?'" says Goldman. "He wanted to understand what it was about him or his performance that this completely faceless person sitting in a basement somewhere didn't like. I guess that he looks at criticism as an opportunity."

"Yeah, he has an interesting perspective with that," agrees Thompson. "I think he kind of gets inspiration from it, or uses it as a mirror or something. Me, personally? I can't handle all that."

Cannon says he learned to develop a thick skin as a teenager hanging out with adult males in comedy clubs; as the kid comic, he was the target of many of their jokes. Turning into an armadillo and letting things roll off his back, as he puts it, became a survival mechanism. "I just saw it as a superpower," he says. "Maybe it's my natural narcissistic energy. I love myself so much that even the things that people make fun of, I think, 'I love it! That's me!' I embrace everything that I am."

That's also why he's remained open to opportunities that others might have turned down. He was the chairman of TeenNick for a few years, served as the chief creative officer at RadioShack and did an ad for Ryan Reynolds' Aviation Gin even though he doesn't drink alcohol.

Cannon's down-for-whatever attitude is also what got him into the hosting game.

In 2009, Goldman got a call from a friend at NBC, asking if Cannon would be interested in hosting “America’s Got Talent.” The manager had never heard of the show and didn’t think it would be a fit for his client. To his surprise, Cannon was a fan of the competition series and wanted the gig.

Cannon doesn’t like to define himself as a host, even though that’s arguably the job he’s most famous for. He believes he’s good at it because he’s good at dealing with people, putting them at ease, in part because he’s so comfortable being the butt of the joke. And despite his bombastic wardrobe — a lot of primary colors, sunglasses indoors and his signature turbans — he’s surprisingly tranquil in person. He gives off class president vibes — the kind of guy who will step up when necessary but never gets heated, who just wants everyone to get along.

“Wild ‘N Out” is the most lucrative property in Cannon’s portfolio — a show which has helped to launch the careers of comedians like Pete Davidson, Taran Killam and Mikey Day. He created the concept in 2005, self-funding a pilot that featured Hart. “That’s [intellectual property] that can be repurposed forever,” says Hart. “And that’s one of the biggest accomplishments that anyone can have. I congratulate him constantly. It’s something I’m pissed off that I didn’t think of because I’m envious about it, man.”

But in 2020, Cannon nearly lost the cornerstone of his business.

ViacomCBS, then the parent company behind “Wild ‘N Out,” fired him after he made antisemitic comments on his podcast, “Cannon’s Class.” During an interview with former Public Enemy



(Jason Armond/Los Angeles Times)

member Professor Griff, Cannon asked why “we give so much power to the ‘theys,’ and ‘theys’ turn into Illuminati, the Zionists, the Rothschilds,” — referring to the wealthy Jewish family often mentioned in antisemitic conspiracy theories.

“Some of the things he said were very reminiscent of remarks that Louis Farrakhan has made over the years — that you can’t say a Black person is antisemitic because Black people are the real Semitic people and Jews are impostors,” says Greenblatt, the ADL head, who publicly reprimanded Cannon for his comments.

A few days later after the dismissal, Greenblatt heard from one of Cannon’s mutual friends, asking if he’d consider meeting with the performer. He agreed on the condition that it remain off the record — no photos, no social media, nothing performative. So Cannon flew to New York and showed up at the ADL headquarters without any entourage or PR team in tow.



to the Jewish community.

“We began a plan where we couldn’t talk about the business until we corrected what was wrong,” McCarthy says. “He fully owned it and leaned in, using it not only as a lesson for himself, but hopefully for some of the members of the audience that may have unfortunately shared some of his hurtful perceptions.”

Less than a year later, in February 2021, Cannon got his job back. He’s since teamed up with Greenblatt on their podcast, where he continues to explore thorny race issues. On a recent episode, he insisted that Kyrie Irving wasn’t antisemitic despite the Brooklyn Nets player backing a film that denied the existence of the Holocaust. The Nets outlined steps for Irving to follow to get his job back, a move Cannon found “dehumanizing” and an example of the “buck-breaking” Black slaves once endured. He continues to defend that position, underlining the complications that can arise when two historically-oppressed groups clash.

“You’re going to hang me out in front of everybody and whip me in public — buck-breaking me so all the others know not to do this? That’s a bigger sin and travesty than someone saying

“And I was really, really impressed,” says Greenblatt. “He displayed the kind of humility that I don’t think you often see in people of his level of public fame. And he seemed to be truly concerned about the hurt that he had caused and wanted to explore how to do better.”

Over a three-hour conversation, Greenblatt explained how the tropes Cannon was propagating had historically been used to discredit Jewish people. They continued their discussions over video chat, with Greenblatt suggesting a number of books for Cannon to read. He’d come back “demonstrating a mastery of the material and understanding of the issues,” says the ADL chief.

Meanwhile, Chris McCarthy, who now runs Paramount’s media networks and Showtime/MTV Entertainment Studios, kept in touch with Cannon. A week after the company fired Cannon, the executive visited him at his home to talk about how they could “work together to repair the damage” that had been done

something,” Cannon says now. “To tell a Black man what he can and cannot say takes you right back to ‘You’re not allowed to read. You’re not allowed to speak when you’re amongst white people.’”

He believes Irving is a good person whose pride might be clouding his decision-making. Kanye West, with whom Cannon once made music and was a friend for many years, is a different story. His kids play basketball at the Sports Academy founded by Kobe Bryant, where West and Kardashian’s kids also go. “There are pictures out there, and I’m like, ‘Kanye, you hot right now! Get away from me! I’m just trying to take my kids to sports.’”

“Kanye is saying some wild s—, and I don’t know if he really believes it,” Cannon continues. “I tried to talk to him. I tried to put him with leaders in the Jewish community. I think it’s a lot more there. I just know he’s in desperate need of help and love and people to not abandon him.”

Cannon believes in learning, and not just from his own mistakes. Hoping to set an example for his kids, he enrolled at Howard University in 2016, getting an apartment in Washington, D.C., and traveling to campus once a week for class. At first, he thought he’d coast through — “get a communications degree” — but after engaging with his professors, he decided to focus on criminology and juvenile incarceration. He graduated in 2020 and started to pursue further degrees at Rutgers and Columbia near his home base in New Jersey. But his personal life now requires him to spend more time in L.A., so he has yet to figure out where to complete his studies on the West Coast.

He also needs to be mindful of his health. Last December, a bout of pneumonia landed him in the hospital due to lupus complications. He’s been healthy since, he says, with his doctors telling him he’s outlived their expectations, “walking through the stuff that would take most people out.”

His goal now, he says, is taking the wealth he’s accumulated — “even if it’s a wealth of information” — and spreading it around. His company walls are filled with images of money: a painting of Leonardo DiCaprio’s character in “The Wolf of Wall Street” holding a \$100 bill, a sign with the slogan “Money Never Sleeps.” Cannon says the artwork is designed to motivate his employees: “Yo, you gotta get your bag so you can do what you want to do.”

He feels like he’s at that spot. He doesn’t stay up at night thinking about all of the things he wishes he could do. He’s “kind of over” money.

What about the Rolls-Royce parked out front?

“I used to have seven,” he says. “Once I started having kids, I got rid of them. They were just out there looking pretty.”

A couple of weeks later in mid-April, he calls to follow up from a different kind of car. He is in one of two limos taking two dozen 12-year-olds to Six Flags Magic Mountain — he’s rented out the entire park for his oldest twins’ birthday. The fatigue is evident in his voice — it’s 4 p.m. and he went live on AMP radio for the first time that morning at 6.

“I flew in all their friends, so I’m taking a little time off to turn up,” he says. “I did everything I could have ever wanted to do as a teenager. I married Mariah Carey at 28. I went to South Africa

with Nelson Mandela in my 30s. Now, this is the next stage: How can I operate as the best father I can be?”

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