The Music Man

Two weeks before the new Jazz at Lincoln Center opens, the trumpeter talks about his father's advice, why he's not married and what's wrong with American music.

Do you feel personally responsible for the acoustics at your deluxe new home, Frederick P. Rose Hall?

Acoustics is like a draft pick. Until you get out and start playing games, you don't know how it's going to go.

So what if you blow your trumpet and the sound is fuzzy?

It won't happen. It's going to sound good. I can feel it.

On opening night, you're performing with the first musicians you ever played with: your dad, Ellis, your oldest brother, Branford, and your two younger brothers.

The program is called "One Family of Jazz," and some of the other jazz orchestra musicians will be playing with relatives, too.

What was it like, growing up in a jazz-obsessed household in New Orleans?

My father used to say, "If you want to be different, you got to do something different."

Wise advice. What did you do differently?

If you practice an hour a day, you'll be like everybody who practices an hour a day. If you want to be great, you be the one doing five hours a day.

Did your dad put a lot of pressure on you to succeed?

No. My father never put pressure on me. He's too cool for that kind of stuff.

How do you define cool?

The house could fall down and everyone would be running around, and he would still be sitting in his same chair.

You're often accused of being a cultural reactionary, of denouncing contemporary music.

Once we went away from professional musicianship in American popular song — from the big bands populated with great musicians like Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington and Count Basie — we went in a direction that has not borne great fruit for us.

You can't just ignore a person like Bob Dylan.

My point is not about a person. It's about a direction in American culture.

But then you're not talking about music, you're talking about position-taking.

Positions are the only thing worth espousing in public.

You've declined to marry either of the women who gave birth to your children. Is that a position?

That's complicated.

Do you think you'll ever marry?

I don't know. I don't know that I could be a good husband. In terms of my personal life, I don't try to be a saint.

Because art makes you needy?

Art makes you greedy too.

Doesn't it get lonely spending 10 months a year on the road, living out of a hotel room?

It depends on what goes on in the room.

You seem fairly content for an artist.

When I'm sad, I'm happy that I can be sad.

Which means what, exactly?

It's the blues. It's like when they say, I am going down the road to put my head on the tracks, and when the train comes along, I am going to snatch my full head back.

The blues influenced a lot of pop music. Shouldn't you be more tolerant of it, then?

All music is contemporary to me. If I put on a Beethoven sonata, it's contemporary.

Deborah Solomon

Photograph by Chris Buck