

Finding projects that make her happy — and offer something new — is essential to Niecy Nash-Betts. The strategy is clearly working, because the actress–producer is everywhere these days. "Anything is possible," says the star–executive producer of ABC's *Rookie: The Feds*. "It's never too late." BY **HILARY HATTENBACH**

# *Her Happy Place*

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ROB ECTOR**



# Niecy Nash-Betts has a lot cooking right now.

But when the actress, producer, comedian and TV host sprinkles words into conversation like "spicy" and "a little sauce," she's not quoting song lyrics from her karaoke-style game show or talking about her upcoming Jeffrey Dahmer project (we'll get to all that later). She's describing Simone Clark, the rebellious FBI trainee she plays on her new ABC series, *The Rookie: Feds*, and the secret ingredient she brings to the role.

"I always look for the connective tissue between the character and myself. Where we intersect, I find what I've coined 'a little sauce for the ribs,'" Nash-Betts says.

That winning recipe has earned the actress many accolades, including an NAACP Image Award and an Emmy nomination for her work in the Netflix docudrama *When They See Us*, a Satellite Award for the TNT dramedy *Claws*, two Emmy noms for the HBO comedy *Getting On*, a Daytime Emmy for Style Network's reality series *Clean House* and a Gracie Award for the Comedy Central laugh-fest *Reno 911!*.

"Niecy can do anything," says Terence Paul Winter, cocreator and coshowrunner of *The Rookie: Feds* and an executive producer of *The Rookie*, which inspired it. "Niecy is known for comedy, but if you watch *When They See Us* [about the wrongfully convicted teens known as the Central Park Five], she just breaks your heart. She can make you laugh, cry or both at the same time." That versatility put Nash-Betts at the top of the list of actors to play Simone Clark, or rather, "She was the list."

Winter teamed with Alexi Hawley (showrunner of *The Rookie*) to develop *The Rookie: Feds*. Both serve as executive producers on the spinoff, along with Nash-Betts.

Set to debut September 27, *The Rookie: Feds*, like its predecessor, is an L.A.-based procedural with a middle-aged protagonist at the center of the action. In the original, which launches its fifth season on September 25, Nathan Fillion plays John Nolan, a midlife police recruit. In the new show, the rookie is Simone Clark. As played by Nash, she is a forty-eight-year-old high school guidance counselor-turned-FBI Academy hopeful, ergo, the oldest trainee in Quantico.

Introduced via a backdoor pilot in season four of *The Rookie*, Simone is sent to her hometown of L.A. to help investigate a crime possibly committed by one of her former students. When her intuition tells her the Feds are barking up the wrong tree, she is sent packing, dismissed by the top brass as an insubordinate know-nothing. That's when Nolan — recognizing a kindred spirit in this crossover episode — asks the newbie to ride along with him to get some answers. Spoiler alert: They solve the crime.

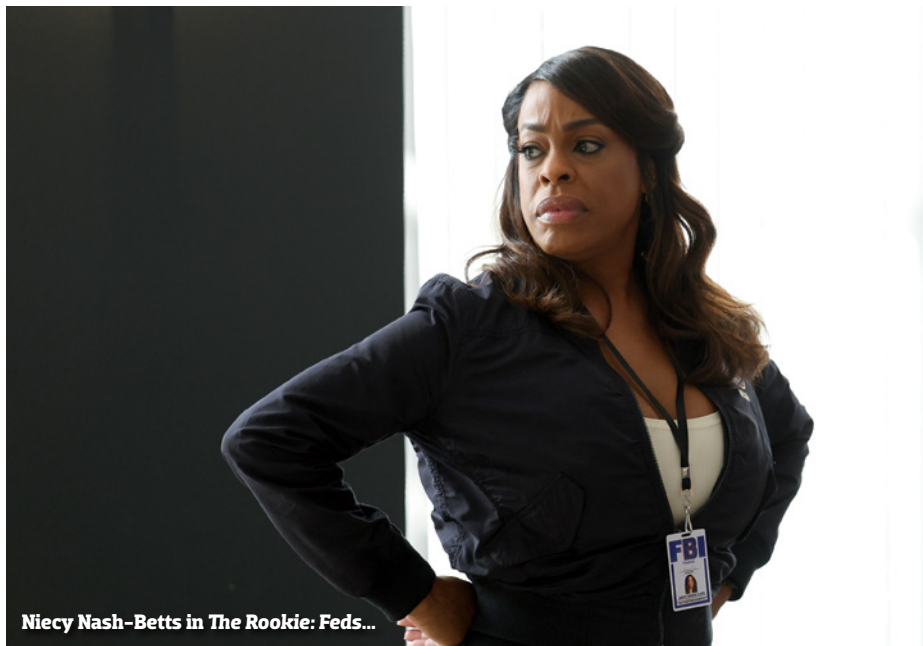
Nash is no stranger to portraying law enforcement types, most notably the bumbling and flirty Deputy Raineesha Williams in *Reno 911!* and asleep-on-the-job security guard Denise Hemphill in Fox's *Scream Queens*. But "Simone Clark is the real deal," Nash-Betts states. "Those other ladies were more like Keystone cops, adding an interesting topping to the shenanigans."

Not that her newest enforcer is inclined to follow orders.

"There's the FBI way, and the Simone Clark way," she says. "It gets her in trouble, but her plan works out somehow and she's always redeemed."

What drew her to the role? Nash-Betts cites the show's timely theme of reinvention as well as the opportunity to play a character representative of many kinds of women.

"In the world after lockdown, where people are course-correcting and taking different paths, Simone is making a complete shift in what some would call 'later in life.' I'm pulling air quotes from heaven when I say she's 'a woman of a certain age.' She's a Black woman in the FBI [less than 1 percent of federal agents are Black women], she's over forty, not married, a single mother, and she dates men and women.



Niecy Nash-Betts in *The Rookie: Feds*...

She's a multi-hyphenate."

Anyone familiar with Nash-Betts's personal life — she's married to singer-songwriter Jessica Betts following two previous marriages to men — will spot similarities in Clark's story. That's by design.

"We came up with the character first," Winter explains, "and through collaborative conversations with Niecy, found that specificity to Simone's voice, how she reacts to people, and all the delightful characteristics that make her unique. At first, Simone wasn't sexually fluid. It wasn't until we heard Niecy talk about Jessica that we asked if we could incorporate that aspect into the show."

Rooting story elements in truth has always been part of the show's DNA. *The Rookie* was inspired by a real midlife police officer — forty-something Bill Norcross, who left his family printing business in Pennsylvania and joined the LAPD with no prior experience. (Norcross is an executive producer on both shows.)

**I**t's a classic fish-out-of-water tale that makes for compelling TV. In the case of John Nolan, he's a small-town guy trying to go by the book in the gritty world of big-city

RAYMOND LUU/ABC

policing, while Simone Clark is "a wild card in a really fun way," Hawley says. "She's a Black woman who's had to prove herself to end up in any room — and prove herself again to stay. Nobody is going to advocate for Simone except Simone. That infuses her character in a way that's just not in Nolan's experience as a cis white man in his forties. It felt important to explore a character that's not traditionally seen on television."

While the differences between Nolan and Clark are vast, they see eye-to-eye due to their lived experiences and non-traditional backgrounds. "They've spent twenty more years as adults than most of the people around them," Fillion observes. "Simone is more willing to push boundaries because that's how she's gotten where she is. But they both want to do what's right and figure out the best way to serve."

The on-screen connection between Nolan and Clark echoes the respect and admiration the actors share off-screen. "Niecy has a poetry," Fillion says. "She has a music. She'll say things like, 'My

Next on the menu (so to speak), she stars in *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, a limited series created by Ryan Murphy and Ian Brennan and coming to Netflix in September. Nash-Betts plays Glenda Cleveland, Dahmer's real-life neighbor who called the police repeatedly to report suspicious activity, only to be ignored time and time again. Over its ten episodes, the series will focus on the police incompetence that allowed Dahmer to commit his crimes over more than a decade, as well as the victims of the serial killer and the unsung hero who tried to rescue them.

"The police accused Glenda Cleveland of abusing 911," Nash-Betts says. "If they'd listened to her, many lives could've been saved. The Dahmer story is old, but African-American women not being heard and not having a voice is still relevant today."

With *Monster*, Nash-Betts can share the legacy of Cleveland with audiences, for which she says she is honored (Cleveland died in 2011). It also allowed her to reunite with Murphy, the creator-showrunner of *Scream Queens*. "Ryan Murphy will always and forever have me at hello," she says. "He's a genius."

And when it's not Murphy on the line, how does Nash-Betts choose her gigs? Based on two factors: either the project makes her happy or it's something she hasn't done before.

This summer, she's been serving up lighter fare — and having a blast — as host and executive producer of Fox's *Don't Forget the Lyrics!* In the fill-in-the-verse singalong game show, contestants compete for a chance to win \$1 million. One of the highlights for Nash-Betts is working alongside her "hersband" Jessica, a member of the house band.

"We have so much fun together," she enthuses. "That's my best friend. We could be together all day and still not get tired of each other. When I'm working — even though the lights are on me, the camera is on and the audience is there — I still want to flirt. But my better half is very professional. As long as the camera is live, she's going to be her best. Me, I let the good times roll."

Speaking of good times, Nash-Betts recently posted a photo to Instagram of her new rose-gold Bentley, replete with a giant bow. "It's a gift for me from me," she says. The occasion? Securing the role on *The Rookie: Feds*. It's a family tradition, she explains, involving her sister, writer-actress Kellee Stewart: "We always get ourselves a gift when we start a new job."

With her lengthy and successful career, that adds up to a lot of great roles and gifts over the years. So what's left for Nash-Betts to try that she hasn't done before?

"Who's to say that I couldn't be cast in a Marvel movie as a superhero?" she suggests. "I would love to be a superhero. It's never too late. You can do anything, as long as you have breath in your body and a will in your heart." ☺

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The executive producers of *Rookie: The Feds* include: cocreators Alexi Hawley and Terence Paul Winter, Mark Gordon, Niecy Nash-Betts, Nathan Fillion, Michelle Chapman, Bill Norcross and Corey Miller. The series is a coproduction of Entertainment One and ABC Signature.



...and hosting *Don't Forget the Lyrics!*

grandmother always told me...,' and offer up little pearls of wisdom. With every take, she'll try a different flavor or a new angle. It makes your job so much easier because all you have to do is be present and listen."

Without knowing how Fillion has described her, Nash-Betts has this to say about her costar: "Nathan is one of the kindest human beings I've ever met. And that's saying something, because my mother always said, 'They don't teach kind in school.'"

Fans of the series and the burgeoning Nolan-Clark alliance can take heart knowing the characters will cross over in future episodes. Meanwhile, another storyline will explore Simone's fraught relationship with her dad, Christopher "Cutty" Clark (Frankie Faison).

"There's going to be a lot to unpack between those two," Nash-Betts says. "Simone's father was wrongfully convicted and incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit. He's the leader of the 'defund the police' movement. She's in law enforcement. That's going to cause a lot of tension because when she moves back to L.A, she lives with her dad."

Will they work it out? Viewers will have to tune in this fall, which looks to be a very busy season for Nash-Betts.