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MUSIC: THIS WEEK

## MUSIC: THIS WEEK; He's a Little Bit Broadway, He's a Little Bit R & B

By BARRY SINGER

BILLY PORTER bridges a musical divide that few singers cross over anymore.

On and Off Broadway he is a vocal star, with a celestial upper register that has stopped shows like "Five Guys Named Moe," "Smokey Joe's Cafe" and, most recently, the 20th-anniversary "Dreamgirls" concert at the Ford Center for the Performing Arts. He has also forged a pop singing career, including a well-received solo album, "Untitled," in the mold of Maxwell and Luther Vandross, and a memorable turn as Little Richard in the CBS mini-series "Shake, Rattle and Roll."

This dual identity will be on display when Lincoln Center's American Songbook series begins its sixth season on Thursday with "At the Corner of Broadway and Soul -- An Evening With Billy Porter" in the Stanley M. Kaplan Penthouse.

"I'm one of only a few Broadway performers in the last 30 years to actually have an R & B album, for real," Mr. Porter said recently. Why try to do both? "Because I can't ignore who I am. It's a struggle, though, a constant, everyday fight."

Born in Pittsburgh, Mr. Porter, 34, grew up "in the church." Bused into an all-white middle school, he discovered musical theater because of an after-school program: "I didn't know what a musical was, but I thought, well, it could be a chance for me to sing. Literally, the day before it started, my grandmother took me to see 'The Wiz' for my birthday, and I fell in love."

In 1992, Mr. Porter won the \$100,000 grand prize on the television series "Star Search." Already working on Broadway in the original cast of "Miss Saigon," he now found himself opening for Aretha Franklin in concert. His album followed in 1997.

"When I was doing my record," he said, "the label didn't want me to talk about my theater background. I open up my mouth to sing sometimes in the theater and I hear, 'Oh, you're singing too black.' Well, no I'm not. I just don't sound like Bernadette Peters."

At Lincoln Center, a third of Mr. Porter's program will be gospel-based. A third will be music that he has written himself. And a third will be the work of new American theater composers like Adam Guettel and Ricky Ian Gordon, for whom he has long been something of a muse.

"My biggest fear is being misunderstood in two worlds," Mr. Porter said. "But I guess that's also my story." BARRY SINGER

Photo: Billy Porter worries about being too Broadway for the pop world, and vice-versa.