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A Makeup Star Gives a Town A Fresh Face

By ISABEL C. GONZÁLEZ

WHEN Billy Brasfield was 18, he couldn't get away from his small hometown in Mississippi fast enough.

But now that he has built a career as a top makeup artist -- his rate is as high as \$5,000 a day and his clients include Katie Couric, Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks -- he can't seem to keep himself away. For at least five days each month, when he is not in New York at a magazine cover shoot, or in London on the set of a music video, or in Los Angeles preparing a star for the red carpet, Mr. Brasfield trades makeup brushes for a paintbrush and gets to work on one of the Victorian houses of the town, Aberdeen, Miss.

Since 1990, he has been buying run-down historic houses in the decidedly sleepy town of 6,400, and fixing them up to rent or sell. So far he's bought 16, making him something of a force in the real estate market of an area where there is little new home building. But Mr. Brasfield, 43, has yet to turn a profit; Billbo Cribs, the company he set up for this endeavor in February, after years of "doing it all by the seat of my pants," is \$45,000 in the red, he said.

"A business manager is looking at me going, 'What are you doing?' " he said. "But it's not about that to me, and I do believe that as sure as I am sitting here that I will come out winning."

He is trying to save Aberdeen "one house at a time," he said.

Although he goes by Billy B in the fashion industry, he is still known as Billy Brasfield here. He grew up in what he calls the "mom-and-pop shop" era, when doors were left unlocked, kids played outside without trouble and Main Street was booming. "It was a fantasy place, like Mayberry R.F.D.," he said.

But it did not feel like home to him. As a gay teenager who was hopeless at sports, he spent much of his time listening to a Chicago radio station and fantasizing about the lives of the people who called in to make requests. Then, toward the end of high school, a favorite teacher, Miss Curlee, led a school trip to New York, and he made it his business to get into Studio 54 and Xenon, clubs he knew about from television.

"Here I was, this country hillbilly, with this accent beyond belief, and there was Cheryl Tiegs in a banquette with Christopher Reeve and they were probably making so much fun of me but I ended up in their banquette all night and I got an autograph from Cheryl on a cocktail napkin where she made her 'T' like a champagne glass with bubbles and I had it for years and years but from that moment I felt valid," Mr. Brasfield said in one long rush, still breathless at the memory. "I never had felt valid in my town."

After two years of junior college, he made his way back to New York in 1983 and got a job at the cosmetics counter at Macy's. "It was learn how to do it or get fired," he said. He promptly taught himself how to apply makeup, discovering a natural talent that was eventually spotted by a Vogue editor, who introduced him to an agent. Within two or three years, his work was appearing in magazines like Glamour and Vanity Fair.

Meanwhile, Aberdeen, a once prosperous cotton port on the Tombigbee River in northeast Mississippi, about two hours south of Memphis, was in decline. Like other towns in the rural south, its economy was suffering from setbacks in the local agricultural industry, and smaller stores were being replaced by superstores. Every time he went back, he said, he saw "the town dying another several degrees more, and more businesses gone and more and more houses in disrepair, empty and uninhabited."

After his father died in 1986, and he realized that his mother was never going to leave Aberdeen, he decided that in spite of his disaffection he wanted to do something to make it a better place to live, "for the town and ultimately for her, too," he said.

Then, in 1990, when Mr. Brasfield was 27, his grandfather died and left \$30,000 to each of the three Brasfield children. Mr. Brasfield's brother bought a Rolex and his sister bought land in Tupelo. Mr. Brasfield bought his first home, a plain 1940's cottage in Aberdeen that needed few repairs, which he sold without profit. "It taught me that I could do it better the next time," he said. His next purchase, immediately after the sale, was a dilapidated cottage across the street from the first house, which he renovated and brought back to life.

Aberdeen experienced several periods of growth since the early 1800's, so the town's historical architecture ranges from antebellum to contemporary. Some 250 buildings are currently on the National Register of Historic Places, a remarkably high number for the area. According to Kathy Seymour, the president of Aberdeen's Historic Preservation Commission, many of the oldest homes are in "fairly good shape" -- at least not in danger of falling to the ground, unlike the Victorian cottages Mr. Brasfield usually buys.

"Down here we've been guilty of ignoring that type of architecture," said Jim Crosby, a retired banker and the de facto town historian, who lives in a restored 1875 Victorian that had been condemned by the city. Because the town has so many older homes, he said, houses that are only 100 years old or so have been neglected.

Even more frustrating to the preservationists is the lack of interest from many homeowners. "It's the end of the bloodline for these families, where an estate is passed down for years," Mr. Brasfield said. Because there's little opportunity for young people in the town, he said, "they leave, ending the traditions of these homes." Either that or "they just see a money pit," he continued. "They'd rather let them fall in than fix them up," said Ms. Seymour. "I don't know why."

Organized community efforts to save buildings in Aberdeen have been slow to materialize -- unlike those in larger Mississippi towns such as Natchez, where many of the homes have been restored -- so Mr. Brasfield generally picks the ones that are most in need of saving, which can be had for around \$10,000 to \$15,000.

"I'm aware that I can see a house and go back six months later and the roof will have fallen in," he said. "It happens that quickly." He spends between \$10,000 and \$25,000 restoring each house, with a local crew of about 10 to 15 workers. The renovations usually take between six months and a year to complete.

"We gut them out and rebuild them from the stairs up," said Cecil Jones, who has worked as a carpenter and roofer on all of Mr. Brasfield's houses. "We'll re-wall them, bead board them, doing it all like they were originally."

Mr. Brasfield's handiwork has earned him a reputation as something of a style guru. "You can always tell his houses," said James Harris, who has lived in one of them for 10 years and calls them "eye-catchers."

Mr. Brasfield's mother, Ruth Brasfield, is not surprised by his flair -- or his commitment.

"From a very small age he would build houses from Legos," said Mrs. Brasfield, who helps her son manage his properties. "He's been creative all his life, and when he sees something that needs to be done he just does it."

In contrast to other older homes in the town, mostly painted white, Mr. Brasfield's end up with bold color combinations, decorative shutters and window boxes. "Curb appeal is important to me," Mr. Brasfield said. "It's about adorning the street."

Others have also started investing in Aberdeen. Dwight Stevens, an antiques auctioneer, purchased four buildings on Main Street and renovated an antebellum mansion, which he uses for his auctions. Marsha Monaghan Ballard, a local real estate developer, said she has recently sold homes to couples from California, Florida and Minnesota, and that "2005 was the best year I ever had."

While there is now visible interest in Aberdeen, many people were initially skeptical about Mr. Brasfield's work.

"I didn't think he was crazy, but it seemed like a pipe dream," said his manager, Brian Walls, who is also president of Chelsea Financial Services. "When he bought four houses at one time I thought that was a little bit much, and then he went back and bought two more a few weeks later and I thought, 'This is getting a little ridiculous -- every time you go home it costs you \$20,000 to \$40,000.'" Now, Mr. Walls said, he just tries to make sure that Mr. Brasfield spends wisely and turns his properties around quickly.

"There's nothing that can't be fixed if I can afford it and it doesn't scare me," Mr. Brasfield said. "With every tiny transition that's made there's a huge high for me. Like makeup -- it's the same feeling."