

Red carpet or not,  
nobody brings it like  
**BILLY PORTER**

*by* JENNIFER FERRISE  
*photographed by*  
ROBBIE FIMMANO  
*styled by* TY HUNTER  
and COLIN ANDERSON

# Billy GO.



Queera Wang  
shirt dress. Saint  
Fort Brand hat.  
Lady Grey ear cuff.  
Diaboli Kill Jewelry  
by Angie Marei  
ring (on pinkie).  
Lady Grey rings.



Alexander McQueen coat.  
Lady Grey ear cuff.  
Lillian Shalom ring.  
Beret, stylist's own.

After almost a full year in quarantine, legendary showman Billy Porter considers himself a changed man. It all started last March: As COVID-19 concerns were running high in New York City, Porter and his husband, Adam Porter-Smith, decided to temporarily relocate from Manhattan, where he's lived for 30-plus years, to Bellport, Long Island, a quaint seaside village full of artists and creative types. Porter is diabetic and therefore high-risk when it comes to the virus, so at first the move was logistical—a way to stay safe while escaping the chorus of blaring sirens outside his Harlem apartment. But then something unexpected happened: The longtime New Yorker fell in love with the small town and decided to stay for good.

Dialing in over Zoom on a wintery Friday night from his new home in the country, he looks happy and at ease, curled up on his couch in a cozy red flannel that's certainly more cottagecore than the flashy couture we're used to seeing him in. "This is the thing I didn't know I needed," Porter, now 51, says of the move. "I had no idea I was missing the woods, the

animals, the beach, and the consistent peace. For the first time, there's no noise. And because of that, there has been a healing. I decided I have to stay where the healing is."

The change of pace has given him the space to reexamine everything, from the nonstop speed at which he's been working in film, TV, and theater over the past three decades to his ever-evolving sense of style. It's also allowed him to savor the simple joys of a more domestic life, like cooking breakfast with his husband and planning movie nights. The couple even recently became dog dads to a cockapoo puppy they named Bader Lola Majors. The initials BLM are a nod to the Black Lives Matter movement, though they call her Lola, after Porter's grandmother and, of course, the beloved drag queen he played in Broadway's *Kinky Boots*.

Another perk of living outside the city? Anonymity. A few months before the big move, Porter recalls a particularly chaotic subway ride where the requests for selfies from fellow commuters ventured into uncharted territory. "I had on sunglasses, a coat, and earphones and I was on my iPad reading, but it didn't matter," he says, laughing. "I thought, 'OK. I think I've crossed over.' Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful, but there's an adjustment period with being a celebrity, or whatever this is called. Now we're tucked away in a little cul-de-sac, and there's a normalcy I've been able to carve out for myself. Do people know who I am? Yes. But they're more like, 'We don't want to bother you, but, hey, welcome to Bellport,' as opposed to, 'Oh my god, can I have a picture?'"

Part of his loss of privacy over the past few years stems from his larger-than-life Emmy-winning turn as Pray Tell in FX's ballroom-culture drama, *Pose*. The other part of it has to do with the massive following he's gained since the 2019 Oscars, when he arrived in a statement-making, gender-bending custom Christian Siriano tuxedo gown that both broke the Internet and launched him into instant fashion-icon status.

When speaking about his evolution, Porter puts things into two categories: "BO or AO," meaning before Oscars or after Oscars. The impact of the look on his career was no accident. Porter knew he was about to step onto one of the world's biggest stages and was ready to seize the moment. "I thought back to when my friend Idina Menzel was at the Oscars [in 2014] to sing 'Let It Go,' from *Frozen*, and John Travolta mispronounced her name onstage," he says. "I literally said out loud, 'She's going to be a household name in less than 24 hours.' And she was. As funny as it may sound, I'm a businessman, and wearing that [Oscars] dress was a business decision, in a sense. People were like, 'Oh, he's just trying to get attention.' Well, yeah, I'm in show business! It's part of my job. Otherwise, I don't eat."



Fendi jacket, trousers, and shirt.  
Lady Grey ear cuff.  
Sunni Sunni boots.

Location: Porters on the Lane, Bellport, N.Y.



Balmain blazer, top, and pants. Lady Grey ear cuff. Alan Crocetti rings. United Nude boots.



Palomo Spain jacket and pants. Star Wars x Gigi Burris hat. Alan Crocetti ear cuff. Lillian Shalom rings. Sweater, Porter's own. Location: Steel & Velvet Barbershop, Bellport, N.Y.

**GROOMING NOTE**  
Prep and hydrate skin with SkinCeuticals Daily Moisture (\$63; [skinceuticals.com](http://skinceuticals.com)).

PORT ROTARY BUS



Louis Vuitton coat, shirt, and trousers. Esenshel hat. Lady Grey ear cuff. Diaboli Kill Jewelry by Angie Marei ring (right hand). Lillian Shalom rings. Sunni Sunni mules.



Christopher John Rogers shirt, dress, and pants. Lady Grey ear cuff. Lillian Shalom ring (right hand). Diaboli Kill Jewelry by Angie Marei ring. United Nude boots. Grooming: La Sonya Gunter. Production: Jenny Landey Productions & Locations.

## “I was told that my queerness would be a liability in this business. And it was for decades—until it wasn’t.”

Porter’s other hope was that the look would inspire a long-overdue conversation about genderless fashion. “I used to get frustrated that women could wear whatever they wanted and men had to show up in the same penguin suit,” he says. “The reason why women wearing pants is considered OK by society’s standards is because it comes from the patriarchy. The patriarchy is male, so suits are strong, and anything feminine is weak. I was sick of that discussion, and I knew my platform allowed me to challenge it.”

While the look went viral and applause emojis showered Porter’s feed in an outpouring of love, there were also a lot of close-minded comments hurled his way. A particularly frustrating moment happened in January 2020, when he was invited to appear on Public Television’s *Sesame Street* wearing his Siriano gown. After the show shared Instagram photos of Porter on set, Jason Rapert, a Republican Arkansas state senator, wrote a Facebook post slamming PBS for using

taxpayer dollars to promote a “radical LGBTQ+ agenda,” adding that he could pass a bill to “cut off all funding” to the network. A petition to remove Porter’s appearance on the show from pro-life group LifePetitions also began to circulate, alleging that *Sesame Street* was trying to “sexualize children using drag queens” by featuring Porter in his gown.

“It was based on this idea that I’m coming to get their children because of the way I dress,” says Porter, shaking his head. “What is that? I’m over here minding my own business. So why is it triggering you? At that moment, I was grateful that I am a man of a certain age, because when you become a certain age, zero f—s are given. I don’t now, nor will I ever, adjudicate my life or my humanity in [other people’s] sound bites or responses on social media. Simultaneously, it still hurts to have people come after me for nothing.”

Porter looks at his sartorial choices as another form of his artistry, much like any song he performs or character he embodies. “It’s how I express myself,” he says. “When Lady Gaga dresses up and performs a song on TV as if she’s a man [Jo Calderone at the 2011 MTV VMAs], no one bats an eye. They receive her as an artist who’s playing with different silhouettes and ideas. Same with David Bowie. When white and straight people do it, they’re (CONTINUED ON PAGE 114)

