

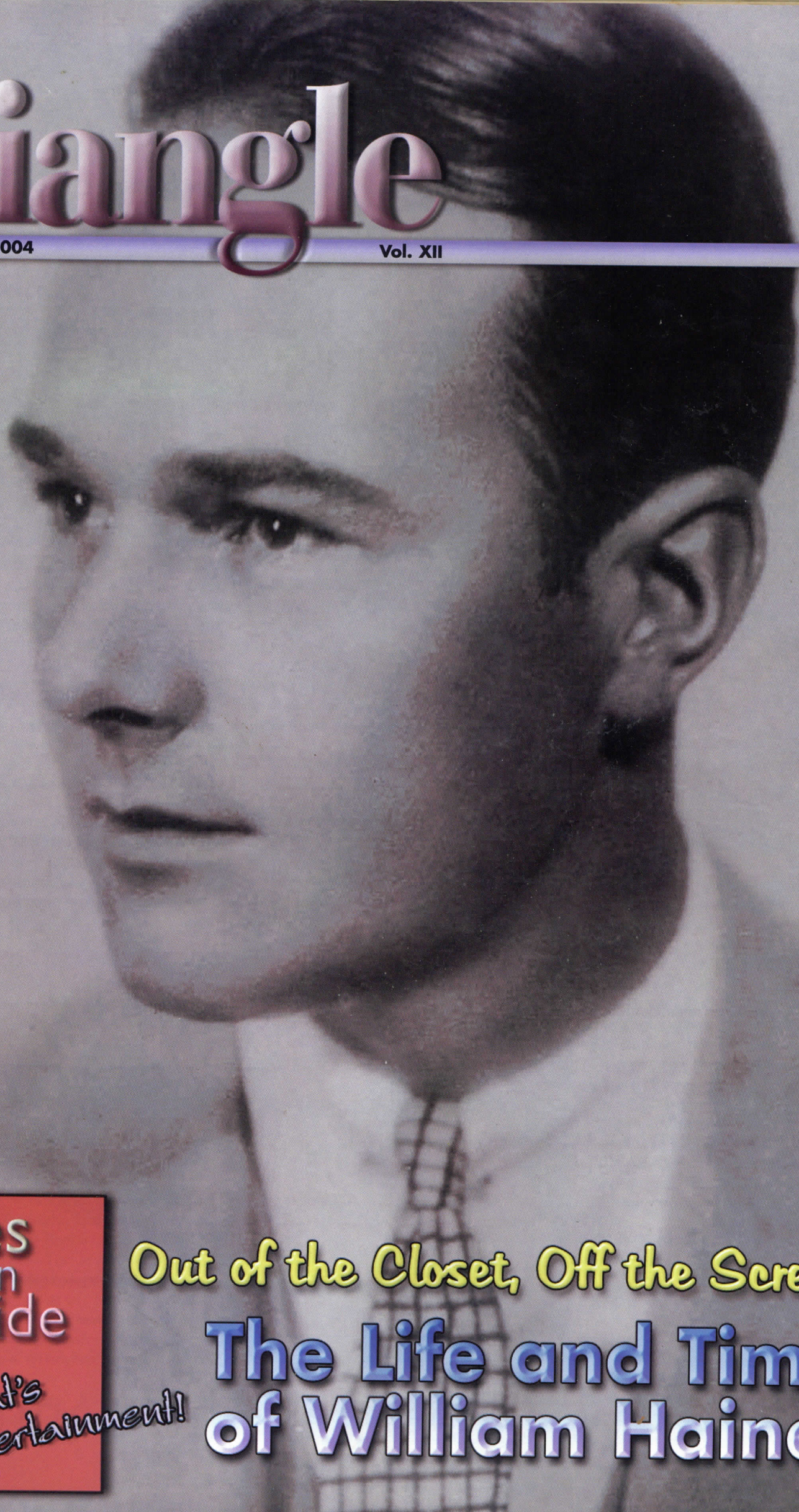
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Issue



Profiles
in
Pride
That's
Entertainment!

Out of the Closet, Off the Screen:

The Life and Times
of William Haines



The Films were Silent, the Star was Not

**Texas Triangle's Profiles in Pride 2004:
That's Entertainment film
series continues with
'The Life and Times of William Haines'**

By Brent Brumley

Imagine today if Brad wasn't married to Jennifer but instead fell in love with a male understudy on one of his films. After a period of time in this same-sex relationship, Steven Spielberg calls the handsome hunk into his office and threatens with an ultimatum, "Either drop the boyfriend and marry a girl, or forever lose your acting career."

Would our modern day stud risk losing fame and fortune in order to live openly and honestly with the love of his life? It seems far-fetched but that's exactly the choice William Haines was faced with seventy years ago and in the end, he chose the boy.

the days when silent films ruled theaters around the country, William Haines was the Brad Pitt of the industry. He had it all, including riches and fame. He was considered the top box office draw of his time. But what Billy really had was an overwhelming amount of fearlessness and the conviction to be true to himself. So self-assured was the first openly gay member of Hollywood's elite that he said "no" to Louis B. Mayer and Joan Crawford "Christina, bring me the axe!"

William Haines was born in Staunton, Virginia on July 2, 1900 into a middle-class family. After attending a military school in Virginia, at the age of 14, he returned home. For the next few years he worked his way up the Virginia coast taking jobs in such places as a rubber factory, a powder plant, an accountant's office as a bookkeeper, and in a Wall Street stockbroker's office as



an actor on gay actors to provide an 'acceptable' public image by marrying, Billy turned down an offer of marriage from Crawford who was then still hoping to be a rising star.

Billy Haines had no intention of marrying Crawford because he had fallen in love with his stand-in, Jimmie Shields, and they moved in together in 1923. By 1930 Billy and Jimmie bought an antique shop and developed their interest in interior design by giving free advice to their Hollywood customers and friends.

While Billy was known then and now for his fearlessness, he was not well-known for being monogamous. In 1933 he picked up a sailor in Pershing Square in Los Angeles and took him to the YMCA where he had a room. The house detective and L.A. Vice Squad burst in and arrested and handcuffed both men. This incident combined with the newly instituted Production Code of the early '30s caused MGM boss Louis B. Mayer to give the star an ultimatum: either get married and put yourself outside the reach of the gossip columns, or you're fired. Billy replied, "I'm already married," and told L.B. to tear up his contract.

The studio chief not only terminated his contract, he also ensured that Billy could not work in the film industry again.

Undaunted, Billy and Jimmie took up interior design as a full-time business and became very successful. Their clients included Nancy Regan, Lionel Barrymore, Claudette Colbert, Joan Crawford, Marion Davies, Bette Davis, George Cukor, Carole Lombard, and Jack Warner. They also designed, Winfield House, the London home of the US ambassador Walter Anneberg.

The couple first lived in Manhattan Beach and made the area fashionable. However, in 1936 a neighbor accused them of propositioning their son. The police were involved and it was reported in the local newspapers, but the charges were dropped. This led to an attack by the White Legion (California's equivalent to the Ku Klux Klan) who beat up Billy and Jimmie. Following the conflict, the couple moved to Malibu which they would also make fashionable.

For the next 40 years the pair continued to run a successful interior design business. They were known and loved throughout LA's social circuit and were admired by many as one of the city's premier couples. So much so that Crawford once proclaimed, "...the happiest marriage I've seen in Hollywood is Billy Haines and Jimmie Shields."

Despite their long-term relationship, Billy was rumored to have had a number of flings with other men. Tradition has it that these included the director George

Cukor, screen stars Nils Asther, Lionel Barrymore, Raymond Burr, Clark Gable, and writer Christopher Isherwood.

Through it all, Billy never disguised who he was. Off screen, he was openly gay to reporters and studio chiefs alike, and at his side at all times was his lover, Jimmie. In a world where truth is often distorted, Billy Haines lived a completely authentic life. His story serves to illustrate how Hollywood's gay stars are seen in context with their times and with one another, revealing a pattern of intimidation by the studios and, ultimately, the establishment of the Hollywood closet. Alone among his contemporaries—Ramon Novarro, Cary Grant, Tyrone Power—Haines refused to play the game, and so was booted out.

Even so, the comfortable and courageous union between Billy and Jimmie lasted the couple nearly 50 years. A year into his retirement, Billy was diagnosed with lung cancer and died on December 26, 1973. Jimmie, his partner since 1926 and the love for which the actor denied so much, ended a short bereavement period by committing suicide three months later in March, 1974.

Learn more about the life, love and career of Billy and Jimmie on Monday night, June 21, at 7:30 p.m. when *The Texas Triangle* presents *Out of the Closet, Off the Screen: The Life & Times of William Haines* as part of the 2004 Profiles in Pride series.

Texas Triangle's Profiles in Pride 2004: That's Entertainment! screens each Monday in June, 7:30 p.m., simultaneously at the locations listed here. The final screening, scheduled next week for Monday, June 28, is *The Cockettes*.

AUSTIN

Metropolitan Community Church of Austin at Freedom Oaks, 8601 South First Street. Free admission! Sponsored in part by Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival (aGLIFF).

DALLAS

Oak Lawn United Methodist Church, 3014 Oak Lawn Ave. Free admission! Sponsored in part by OutTakes Dallas.

FT. WORTH

Celebration Community Church, 908 Pennsylvania. Free admission! Sponsored in part by Q Cinema.

HOUSTON

First Floor Theatre, 1415 California. Free admission! Sponsored in part by Pride Committee of Houston.

SAN ANTONIO

Sweet Bean Café, 2300 N. St. Mary's. Free admission! Sponsored in part by Diversity Center.



office boy. While in New York he became friends with Kelly who would become a Hollywood designer, and Cary Grant who would become a leading Hollywood actor. In 1920 he was spotted by a casting director for RKO and was persuaded to enter a talent competition which he won. He was put under contract as part of the MGM "New Faces" roster and sent to Hollywood where his first film role was a bit part in *Brothers Under the Skin*, (1922).

Billy's big break came in 1926 when he played "Tommy" in *Brown of Harvard*. He developed a wisecracking persona that was new to the screen and audiences loved it. Often Billy would stalk his leading lady, obnoxiously trying to get her to love him until the final reel, when she would fall in love with him.

As the Depression rocked most of America and "talk-pictures" ended the career of many a silent star, William Haines was still the king of the box office. A handsome, talented, and beloved movie idol, he spent his days working at MGM where he made more than 50 films and his nights partying with the likes of Crawford, Carole Lombard, Marion Davies, and Constance Bennett.

In the free wheeling Hollywood of the 1920s, Haines lived his life as he pleased. MGM covered any indiscretions, such as when he was arrested with one of his party-girlfriends at a speakeasy that had a gay clientele. Although the Hollywood system at the time put pressure