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## Emmett Till's story continues to resonate in new musical, 'Till'

By: **JAY LUSTIG** | March 6, 2020

"The world is gonna remember you, Emmett Till, because I will make them remember," says Till's mother Mamie in the production of the musical "Till" that the American Theater Group is presenting, in its New Jersey premiere, at the Episcopal Church of St. Andrew and Holy Communion, through March 8.

Largely because of Mamie's efforts, the world did remember Till; his 1955 death, at the age of 14, helped to accelerate the civil rights movement. And this musical will help ensure that future generations won't forget him, either.

Emmett Till is not the easiest person to build a musical around. He did not set out to be a hero: He was a victim, really. A martyr, some might say. And he died so young — he had not even really started to take his place as a man in the world.

But Leo Schwartz (book, music and lyrics) and D.C. Cathro (book) make this musical a compelling one, and are helped out, in the Cezar Williams-directed South Orange production, by the wide-eyed charm of Marcus Beckett as Emmett, and Daisy Hobbs' powerhouse singing and emoting as Mamie.

Emmett sings of his aspirations in "I'm Gonna Build a House," Mamie of her fierce maternal love in "Cherish the Child" and of her overwhelming grief in "I Want You Back." The music, played by a four-piece band, sometimes incorporates elements of gospel music, though some of Schwartz's compositions sound more like straightforward show tunes.

Beckett and Hobbs are the only actors who play just one role; the other four play several different people. Clyde Voce has the most territory to cover, having to portray both Emmett's brutally cruel murderer, Roy Bryant, and Mamie's sweet but shy suitor, Gene Mobley.

The basic story, in case you need reminding: Till was a Chicago teen visiting relatives in the small, rural town of Money, Miss. As Schwartz and Cathro make clear, this was an environment where African-Americans were not treated as equals, and the threat of violence always loomed. Till, not being used to being in Mississippi, was not as careful as the African-Americans who lived there.

It was claimed that he flirted with a white woman in a grocery store, though many have disputed this. It will never be possible to say what happened in the store definitively. But in the musical, he touches her hand (in an innocent, offhand way) and definitely does not flirt. She thinks he may be whistling at her when he is clearly whistling at something else.

Roy hears about the incident (or non-incident, you might say) and goes nuts, and kidnaps Emmett. We don't see the lynching, but this portion of the music is harrowing, nonetheless.

Mamie famously asked for her son's coffin to be open at his funeral, so the world could see what had been done to him. And the world took notice. Sixty-five years later, his story continues to resonate: As American Theater Group producing artistic director James Vagias told the audience before the "Till" performance I attended, on Feb. 26 of this year the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act.

*The American Theater Group presents "Till" at St. Andrew and Holy Communion Episcopal Church in South Orange through March 8; visit [americantheatergroup.org](https://www.americantheatergroup.org/) (<https://www.americantheatergroup.org/>).*

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