



Porter, Cole (1891-1964)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Cole Porter in 1942.
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For more than thirty years, Cole Porter was as well known for the (often scandalously) witty and urbane music that he crafted for Broadway musicals and Hollywood films, as for being one of the leaders of international cafe society. Because he feared that the music-buying public would not take seriously love songs written by a homosexual, he lived the paradoxical life of an openly closeted gay man.

Married to socialite Linda Lee Thomas, one of the most beautiful women of her generation (but variously reported as from eight to fourteen years Porter's senior), he publicly maintained a heterosexual facade while privately indulging in weekend all-male gatherings that included chorus boys, wartime servicemen, and Hollywood bit players, in addition to conducting intense, short-lived love affairs with Ballets Russes designer Boris Kochno, architect Eddy Tauch, dancer-choreographer Nelson Barclift, and actor Robert Bray, among others.

Thus, even while giving, as the author of some of the most popular love songs of the day, deeply memorable voice to his culture's romantic longing, Porter was repeatedly forced to obscure his own.

Porter's Life

Porter was born June 9, 1891, the only child of three to survive infancy. His maternal grandfather was the wealthiest man in Peru, Indiana, which both fostered in Porter a sense of entitlement and guaranteed his financial independence in early adulthood. At age fourteen he was sent east to boarding school, and from there to Yale University, where he distinguished himself in the Glee Club and dramatic society.

In 1917 Porter escaped the embarrassing failure of his first professionally staged musical revue, *See America First*, by departing for Paris, purportedly to volunteer as a wartime ambulance driver. He quickly fell in with the smart set, marrying the beautiful and socially well-connected divorcee Linda Lee Thomas in 1919. He remained at the center of international society for the rest of his life.

Porter's love of travel and of urban life is suggested by the titles of many of his songs ("You Don't Know Patee," "I Love Paris," "I Happen to Like New York," "Take Me Back to Manhattan," "Please Don't Monkey with Broadway," "A Stroll on the Plaza Sant'Ana," "Martinique," "Come to the Supermarket in Old Peking," and "Siberia," not to mention the witty rondel of Italian cities mentioned in "We Open in Venice").

Porter's life was severely circumscribed in 1937, however, by a horseback riding accident that crushed both his legs; a resulting bone marrow infection only complicated his recovery. Despite an eventual 34 operations, he suffered severe pain much of the remainder of his life, walking only with the help of a cane or crutches, and requiring permanent assistance. One leg was eventually amputated, which caused him--following the deaths of his mother and wife--to sink into a depression exacerbated by alcoholism.

He died on October 15, 1964, following an emergency surgery, when the attending physician, unfamiliar

with Porter's personal circumstances, mistook the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal for Parkinson's disease and failed to prescribe a necessary medication.

Porter's Plays and Films

For nearly thirty years--from his first success with *Paris* (1928) until his last show, *Silk Stockings* (1955)--Porter was one of the most successful composer-lyricists on Broadway. The greatest stars of his generation, and not a few of the next--among them, Franny Brice, Fred Astaire, Ethel Merman, Jimmy Durante, Clifton Webb, Gertrude Lawrence, Mary Martin, Sophie Tucker, Beatrice Lillie, Bert Lahr, and Gwen Verdon--scored personal triumphs in his plays and/or in the films subsequently made of many of them.

Those films adaptations include *Fifty Million Frenchmen* (1929), *The New Yorkers* (1930), *The Gay Divorcee* (1932), *Anything Goes* (1934), *Jubilee* (1935), *Red, Hot, and Blue* (1936), *Leave It to Me* (1938), *DuBarry Was a Lady* (1939), *Panama Hattie* (1940), *Something for the Boys* (1942), *Mexican Hayride* (1944), *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), *Out of This World* (1950), and *Can-Can* (1953).

In addition, Porter wrote original scores for such Hollywood successes as *The Pirate* (1947), in which Gene Kelly and Judy Garland introduced "Be a Clown"; and *High Society* (1956), in which Bing Crosby crooned "True Love" to Grace Kelly.

As a result, Porter's name became synonymous with songs that were as linguistically sophisticated as they were musically rich. Indeed, discussing the popular songs that tuned his own ear as he was growing up in the 1930s and 1940s, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Ned Rorem praised Porter's songs for being "equal in vocal arch and harmonic ingenuity to the songs of Monteverdi and Schumann."

Challenging Accepted Social Values

Despite the heterosexual facade he carefully maintained in public, Porter delighted in challenging accepted social values and moral opinions. The haunting ballad "Love for Sale" was banned from radio play because it offered a sympathetic, rather than a properly censorious, appreciation of a prostitute's life. Conversely, "Miss Otis Regrets" narrates the tragic misalliance contracted by a southern town's best mannered lady.

The largest number of Porter's songs offer a knowing, witty, even comically exuberant hedonism. "Let's Do It" (the ambiguity of whose antecedent for "it" is clarified only at the end of each chorus, "Let's fall in love"), offers a Chaucerian world in which every animal species is copulating ("Birds do it, / Bees do it, / Even educated fleas do it"), rendering unnatural any human reluctance to do the same.

Similarly, advancing the argument that "bears / Have love affairs, / And even camels," the song "Let's Misbehave" concludes that since humans are "merely mammals," it is only logical that the couple likewise "misbehave."

And while human mothers may caution their daughters to preserve their virginity until marriage, the would-be seducer in "It's De-Lovely" attends to a higher maternal authority: "You can tell at a glance / What a swell night this is for romance, / You can hear dear Mother Nature murmuring low, / 'Let yourself go.'" For Porter natural law, which makes sexual *jouissance* a universal right, invariably trumps any moral law prescribing caution and abstinence.

While often risqué, Porter is never vulgar. The wit of his lyrics and the musical sophistication of his melodies prevent his songs from ever being in poor taste. Marlene Dietrich's lethargic delivery in her cabaret act of "The Laziest Girl in Town" left little doubt as to what the speaker could, should, and would indeed do if only she found the needed energy.

But in "You Do Something to Me," Porter's speaker never specifies what effect the person in question has on him, although clearly sexual arousal is one of the possibilities.

Nor does another speaker explain exactly what "Adam craved when he / With love for Eve was tortured," simply that the lover addressed in "You've Got That Thing" possesses the same undefinable attraction.

Even while delighting in the physical sensations of life--as, for example, in "I Get a Kick out of You" or "I've Got You under My Skin"--Porter prided himself on being a gentleman. And, when risking indecency, Porter invariably lapsed into French, a language so formal that it makes even the basest desire sound elegant to American ears ("Si Vous Aimez les Poitrines").

"Anything Goes," the title song of one of his most successful plays, celebrates a modern world in which individuals are free to enjoy themselves however they please: "If old hymns you like, / If bare limbs you like, / If Mae West you like, / Or me undressed you like, / Why, nobody will oppose."

Throughout his career Porter delighted in opposing anyone who dared to "oppose" another person's private pleasure. As a challenge to Prohibition, for example, he composed the "Lost Liberty Blues," a theatrically outrageous lament for the loss of personal freedoms in the United States sung by an actress dressed as the Statue of Liberty.

Pleasure overcomes puritanism in *Silk Stockings*, in which a female Soviet military officer is seduced by the sensual and romantic delights of the West. And *Can-Can*, which deals with a Paris magistrate's attempt to close the late nineteenth-century club where the scandalous title dance originated, was conceived as a comment on censorship. Its song "Live and Let Live" might well have been Porter's personal theme.

Circumventing Censorship

The master of the seemingly innocent double entendre, Porter reveled in finding ways to circumvent Hollywood's Hays Code and the censor in Boston, where many of his plays were first tried out.

For example, in *Kiss Me, Kate*, the irrepressibly promiscuous Lois explains to her boyfriend that while she is willing to date wealthy men in exchange for gifts, she is "Always True to You in My Fashion."

While she sees nothing wrong in earning "a Paris hat" by allowing "Mr. Harris, plutocrat" to "give my cheek a pat," the auditor alert to Porter's ambiguity wonders which pair of "cheeks" is being patted, making the gesture in question either a grandfatherly chuck under the chin or an energetic game of grab-ass.

Even some of Porter's performers did not fully understand the significance of the words they sang. Mary Martin was famously reported to be herself so naïve that when she introduced the following stanza in the wonderfully suggestive "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," she had no idea of its import:

If I invite
A boy, some night
To dine on my fine finnan haddie,
I just adore
His asking for more,
But my heart belongs to Daddy.

She reportedly did not understand that the meal she offers her suitor is sexual and that the reason she offers for imposing limits on their congress (because "My Daddy treat me so well") suggests that she is a kept woman.

Censors frustrated to have unintentionally let slip by one of Porter's sexual double entendres in the past could render themselves ridiculous in their zeal to suppress any potentially inflammatory meaning in a new work.

Thus, even though the song "All of You" was one of the most popular love songs of the early 1960s and had been adopted by numerous major recording stars before *Can-Can* was translated into film, Hollywood producers insisted that Porter alter the final phrase of this quatrain: "I like the looks of you, the lure of you, / I'd love to make a tour of you. / The eyes, the arms, the mouth of you, / The east, west, north, and the south of you."

"South," they were certain, was a covert reference to the beloved's genitalia and, thus, suggested cunnilingus or fellatio. Ironically, their anxiety may have been fully justified, the upbeat tempo of the song having prevented the majority of its performers and listeners from recognizing Porter's devilry.

As Ethan Mordden observes, "What makes Porter the utter one is his disdain for the received values, the morality of a national culture. He didn't care, and he didn't care who knew it. Yet he was working in a medium most intent on preserving those values. It makes for an interesting set of internal contradictions."

Queering the Popular American Song

More than any other composer of his century, Porter "queered" the popular American song, introducing non-normative values and risqué double entendres into what was one of the most pedestrian and hackneyed of cultural forms. This was true, in large part, because Porter's own philosophy of love was non-normative. Most importantly, he was willing to accept sex, with all its vagaries, as the essential component of romance.

In "Night and Day," for example, the exclamation "oh" disrupts the long line "There's an, oh, such a hungry yearning burning inside of me," miming musically how passion involuntarily shatters the speaker's composure. And while the speaker of "What Is This Thing Called Love?" can easily dismiss love as "a funny thing," he also admits how, inexplicably, it has been able to "make a fool of me."

For Porter love is a mysterious attraction, invariably sexual, which bewilders and unsettles the speaker. It is so illogical that in "It's All Right with Me" the speaker accepts what can only be termed "compensation sex":

It's the wrong time and the wrong place,
Though your face is charming, it's the wrong face,
It's not her face but such a charming face
That it's all right with me.

The speaker, devastated by the failure of another relationship, should by his own admission be impervious to this sudden attraction to somebody new; the attraction, however, is so powerful that it reverses the values of "right" and "wrong."

Contrary to the assertions of the more idealistic Rodgers and Hammerstein, love for Porter is gloriously amoral, and it is hypocritical to pretend otherwise.

Celebrating Betrayal and Disappointment

Having founded love on the ephemeral experience of sexual attraction, Porter was willing, not simply to accept, but even to celebrate, betrayal and disappointment. In *Kiss Me, Kate*, Lilli (who is still in love with her wayward ex-husband) sings the emotionally dark lines "So taunt me and hurt me, / Deceive me, desert me" just before her voice soars in exultation: "I'm yours till I die, / So in love with you, my love, am I."

Similarly, despite having crafted the image of an insouciant man-about-town, Porter wrote a surprising number of songs about the inability to protect oneself from heartache.

In "Down in the Depths (on the Ninetieth Floor)," for example, the speaker complains of her inability to transcend emotional pain even though she is immured in the "regal eagle nest" of her Manhattan penthouse. The sophisticated urban life of the speaker is no compensation for the sorrows of disappointment in love but, as the juxtaposition of height and depth in the refrain suggests, the speaker's pose of stylish aloofness is the only way to combat depression in Porter's world.

Porter wrote of both painful sexual yearning and heartache in a mannered, sophisticated way. Little wonder that Fred Astaire, who could dance seduction with an equally mannered elegance, was Porter's favored interpreter.

Porter's World of Style and Wit

For radio listeners and movie- and theater-goers in Depression- and Eisenhower-era America, Porter's name was synonymous with "fashionable" and "debonair," summoning images of art deco sleekness, tuxedoed elegance, and chilled martinis served on the Lido.

In his songs Porter fashioned a world of style, wit, and refinement that seemed to exist in inverse proportion to the reduction-to-least-common-denominator democratic emphases of the period's political demagoguery.

In contrast to the quotidian world, Porter's was a world composed of superlatives ("You're the Top"), a world as mysterious as the chords of "In the Still of the Night," and one as surprising and intoxicating as "a sip of sparkling Burgundy brew" ("You Go to My Head").

Through his music, as well as through his much photographed and reported-upon social life, he offered middle-class America the thrill of something so sophisticated as to be faintly scandalous and, so, all the more fascinating.

The "Otherness" that he represented was understood by the shrewd to include homosexuality.

Playwright and scenarist Leonard Spielglass recalls that even while homosexuality was disparaged among the population at large, Porter's behavior placed him in "the most exclusive club in New York. That's terribly important to realize--that it was a club into which . . . [the average person] couldn't get I mean, no ordinary certified public accountant could get in the Larry Hart, . . . [Noël Coward], George Cukor world. That was the world That was Cole Porter On the one hand you said, 'They were homosexual--oh, my, isn't that terrible!' On the other hand you said, 'My God, the other night I was at dinner with Cole Porter!'"

Porter's greatest achievement may have been to make straight, middle-class America secretly crave what it publicly despised.

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