

Cole Porter: The Words-and-Music Man of America

Cole Porter once said that he would give his soul to be a 'serious composer'. Yet reading his biography, it is hard to believe that he could ever have become anything other than what the *New York World Telegram* called him: 'the bold, bad, let's call it sophisticated, words-and-music man of America', with hundreds of songs, twenty Broadway musicals and a series of Hollywood hits to his name.

Cole Porter was born and bred in Peru – Indiana, one of the few places in America where you could see if the corn really was as high as an elephant's eye, because as well as corn it had a circus which gave Cole a first taste of show business. From his mother Katie's family – the Coles – he inherited wealth; from his father, Sam Porter, his musical gifts and appreciation of poetry. Composing his first song at the age of ten, he was never far from a piano. During the summer holidays he learned to work a crowd by playing on board a paddle steamer.

When Cole went East to boarding school, and then on to Yale and Harvard, he took his piano with him. So too later when he volunteered as an ambulance driver in France during the First World War. At the end of the war he stayed on, a member of the American diaspora in Paris, to continue his musical education and to enjoy the high life with his elegant, long-suffering wife, Linda Lee Thomas.

In his battles of will with his mother's father, J. O. Cole, the grandpater familias, who opposed his plans for a career in music, he learned defiance. In his personal war on puritanism, Porter honed his talent for poking fun at the Establishment, before in due course joining it. Spiced with the names of the rich and famous, his lyrics conjure a world of opulence which he himself lived out. The Broadway opening of his musical *Anything Goes* far exceeded in luxury and razzmatazz anything either Hollywood or Bollywood has to offer. Yet some of his lyrics hint at hedonism's discontents.

What made Cole Porter virtually unrivalled even among the gifted generation of his near-contemporaries – Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin and Noël Coward – was the equal sophistication of his lyrics and his music. If irreverent charm was his calling card, then in his lyrics it was informed by his leprechaun wit, and in the music, by his sure command of harmony and modulation, of clean and sometimes muscular melodic lines as well as rhythmic variety. His verse is indebted both to the English Romantics and the American vernacular, while his musical antecedents include Schumann and Tchaikovsky, but also brass bands and Gilbert & Sullivan.

From 1937 until his death in 1964 at the age of 73, Cole Porter had to live with the consequences of a riding accident that had broken both his legs. He showed the stoicism of his own creation, Miss Otis, who does not allow her impending demise to prevent her from 'doing the right thing'. Triumphs such as *Night and Day* and *Kiss Me, Kate* alternated with tragedy, against the underlay of increasingly chronic pain, alcoholism, promiscuity and loneliness. Yet no-one acquainted with the music which he regarded as 'gifts for my friends' will be able to deny Cole Porter's genius for friendship.

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The information for these notes came from:

William McBrien (1998) *Cole Porter*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.