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South Dakota State University

Cole Porter: Harmonious Hedonist

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Music History/Literature

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## Cole Porter: Harmonious Hedonist

*“There’s something wild about you child, that’s so contagious. Let’s be outrageous. Let’s misbehave!”* This exclamation from Cole Porter’s hit, *Let’s Misbehave*, exhibits the facetious sensuality that was typical of Porter’s music. Well known for his witty, yet generally risqué, lyrics, Porter was a prominent composer of his time. His music, laden with double-entendres, managed to shine anywhere he composed, from the Broadway stage to the silver screen of Hollywood.

Seemingly always in the public eye, Porter somehow managed to live a double life. The 1946 biographical film “Night and Day” portrayed him as a well-to-do playboy who was tremendously popular with the ladies. In reality, this wasn’t quite accurate. Porter was a playboy, but rather with the male population, despite being married to a woman for most of his life (Markel, “Painful Life”). This private life that he kept had more of an influence on his music than anyone at the time could have possibly realized. Indeed, he had great affection for his wife, Linda, and most people assumed that his love songs were for her. But he was also a hedonist, willing to pursue pleasure almost everywhere. He gradually became less careful about his forbidden exploits and this caused tension in his marriage. His unfulfilled desires were then translated into the music that he wrote (Schleifer). Cole Porter’s complicated life is inextricable from his provocative lyrics.

Cole Albert Porter was born in Peru, Indiana on June 9, 1891. He was born as an only child into a wealthy family. His grandfather, James Omar “J.O” Cole, had made a fortune off of coal and timber. He would later use this money to send his grandson to some of the most prestigious schools such as Harvard and Yale. His mother, Kate Porter, always realized and supported his musical aptitudes (Howe). She made sure that Cole began his musical training

from an early age, having him take up violin at age six and piano at age eight. She also helped him publish his first piece at age 10. His father, Samuel Fenwick Porter, was employed as a druggist and although he was a talented singer and pianist, he was not close with his son. In fact, he was known to be an introverted man and had a very minimal influence on his son's musical career (Howe).

Per his grandfather's wishes, Porter enrolled at Yale University to study English in 1909. Allegedly, he also had a music minor. Here, he set himself apart by composing nearly 300 songs. These include many pieces for student productions, as well as fight songs. One of the most popular of these fight songs is titled "Bulldog", which is used at Yale football games to this day (Root).

Although his innate inclination towards music was apparent, his grandfather wanted him to pursue a career in law, so that is what he did. After graduating from Yale in 1913, he attended Harvard Law School. It did not take long for him to realize that he did not belong in law, and he soon after transferred to Harvard's music department. For a while, his grandfather was told that he was continuing to study law, but eventually he found out and disinherited Cole. He was not without money after this, as his mother shared half of her \$4 million inheritance with him (Lahr).

The end of his time at Harvard was the beginning of his time on Broadway. In 1916, he and a Yale classmate produced their first Broadway musical, "See America First", a story about a xenophobic senator's daughter who falls in love with an English duke. It was a horrible flop and only lasted for fourteen performances (Markel, "Porter's 124<sup>th</sup> Birthday"). Thus, Porter's debut to the big stage was a tremendous failure.

Soon after, Porter moved to Paris as the United States entered World War I. He sent home reports that he had joined the French Foreign Legion, but they were unsubstantiated

(Howe). In reality, he was hosting extravagant parties on his family's dime. Through his lavish Parisian social life, he met Linda Lee Thomas. The divorcée of American businessman, Edward Thomas, Linda was a wealthy socialite as well. The two were married on December 18, 1919 in Paris.

Porter and Thomas lived a blissful, if not romantic, life together. A stark contrast to her abusive previous husband, Porter provided the intimate companionship that Linda desired (Johnston). He was rather openly homosexual, so it was not a surprise to her that she couldn't fulfill his needs. Instead, they had an agreement that Porter could indulge himself in various affairs with men, with the understanding that he would remain discreet for their marriage's sake. The two were the best of friends and with the world as their stage, they managed to convince people of their romantic charade for years. They traveled Europe together, living off of their combined fortunes. They had a home in Paris, as well as renting the Palazzo Rezzonico in Venice. Extremely fascinated with the arts, Linda initially wished Porter to compose classical music (Howe). She went so far as to use her connections to have him study with Igor Stravinsky, but her attempts were unsuccessful.

Despite being busy traveling and entertaining, Porter still found ample time to write. The early years of his marriage to Linda were some of his most prolific. The two moved back to New York in the mid-twenties and Porter was able to insert himself back into the enticing Broadway scene. The Broadway musical *Paris* showcased Porter's musical genius including the hit list song "Let's Do It". Soon after this musical, his musical popularity skyrocketed, and he entered a new creative era. Some hits of the time included "Night and Day" (1932), "You're the Top" (1934), "Begin the Beguine" (1935), and "It's De-Lovely" (1936).

In 1937, a sudden tragedy shook Porter's world. An enthusiastic equestrian, he loved to ride whenever he had the time. On October 24<sup>th</sup>, he was riding when his horse spooked and stumbled. It fell directly on top of him, crushing both of his legs. This accident caused him years of agony and he underwent over thirty operations in attempts to repair the damage. Despite facing severe pain, Porter continued to compose and pushed through these new complications to simple every-day tasks. He composed some of his most memorable songs for *Kiss Me Kate* (1948) and *Can-Can* (1953) during this time. He also wrote for many movies.

Nicknamed 'Geraldine' by Porter, his right leg was described as "a hellion, a bitch, a psychopath" (Markel, "Porter's 124<sup>th</sup> Birthday"). Living up to this description, it had to be amputated mid-thigh in 1958. This loss, mixed with the sorrow of Linda's death in 1954, proved to be too much for Porter. Slowly he retreated into seclusion, comforting himself only with alcohol and painkillers. When friends probed, he told them "I am only half a man now" (Markel, "Painful Life"). He passed away in California on October 15, 1964 and was buried next to his beloved wife on the Porter family plot in Peru, Indiana.

Cole's lyrical genius is celebrated yet to this day. It is extremely possible that without his complicated relationships, he would not have had the successful melodies that he did. Indeed, his complicated life is inextricable from his provocative lyrics. He was forever curious and always wishing to pursue pleasure on a whim – a hedonist to the core. He found lifelong companionship with Linda and deep romantic love with numerous men. He loved fiercely and hurled his whole self into a profound passion for his lovers. After heartbreaks and in romantic interims, he would seek sexual gratification in the company of sailors, truck drivers, and male prostitutes. He had a hunger for life and everything it possibly had to offer him. An intentional delve into his catchy

tunes will show that he was a man crying out and wishing to be heard and seen for who he was and how he lived.

His unconventional relationship with Linda caused many emotional swells in his life. They loved each other in their own way. While most of his songs were written for shows or various male lovers, few were written with Linda in mind. His song "True Love" contains the lyrics "*While I give to you and you give to me. True love. So on and on it will always be true love.*" It isn't far-fetched to consider these words were written for his dear wife. This is the only song with lyrics that describe a blissful, easy relationship. His relationship with Linda was not always easy but it was surely less complicated than his rotation of romantic relationships with men. Linda was always with him and supported his every endeavor.

No doubt their relationship was a unique one. Not much of Linda's side of the story is known. It is reported that she became pregnant and miscarried once during their marriage, although, we do not know if it was Cole's child or if she was also having extramarital relations. The film, *De-Lovely*, portrays the pregnancy as Cole's way of appeasing Linda's desire for a more intimate husband-wife relationship. There is no definitive proof of this though. However, we do know that Cole cherished Linda and her death sent him into an unfathomable depression. She died in 1954 after finally giving into her lifelong battle with respiratory issues. After her death, Cole had a hybrid rose made and named the Linda Porter rose (Howe). He refused to enter the house where she had lived and sent servants to fetch anything that he needed.

Though from the outside looking in, the Porters' marriage would seem picture-perfect, it certainly went through turmoil throughout the years of affairs and socialite speculation. While staying at their rented home in Venice, Linda realized that Boris Kochno, a Russian dancer and poet, was more than just an acquaintance of her husband (Howe). It is speculated that his song

“I’m in Love Again” is even written for him. *“Someone sad had the awful luck to meet someone bad, but the kind of bad that’s sweet. No one knows what a glimpse of paradise someone who’s naughty showed to someone who’s nice.”* These words exhibit a man who felt a type of first-crush giddiness. Porter once expressed these emotions to Kochno in a letter, “I miss you so much that I am falling apart ” he wrote.

Kochno wasn’t the only muse that Porter embraced. He also wrote “Easy to Love” for architect Ed Tauch (Pacheo). *“I know too well that I’m just wasting precious time in thinking such a thing could be that you could ever care for me. I’m sure you hate to hear that I adore you, dear.”* Tauch did not share the intense affection that Porter experienced. Choreographer, Nelson Barclift, on the other hand, was one of Porter’s great loves and had the hit song “Night and Day” written for him (Pacheo). *“Night and day, under the hide of me there’s an, oh, such a hungry yearning burning inside of me. And its torment won’t be through ‘til you let me spend my life making love to you.”* Once again, Porter is able to communicate his romantic complications through a memorable melody.

He was so skilled at creating sly wordings that the audience could interpret however they chose. In the 1920s and ‘30s, the world decided to interpret all the music Porter wrote as innately heterosexual. Though Cole was never “in the closet”, it was not widely accepted to be homosexual and this is part of the reason that he married Linda (Lahr). However, he did know that “it is bad for business if you’re writing love songs and you’re gay” as Kevin Kline, the actor who played Porter in the 2004 movie *De-Lovely*, puts it (Johnston).

Porter’s music was tremendously avant-garde in the time it was written (Howe). Some of his music was considered so risqué and appalling that it did not pass the censors and could not be played on the radio. *“Love for sale. Who will buy? Who would like to sample my supply? Who’s*



*prepared to pay the price for a trip to paradise? Love for sale.*” This song, “Love for Sale”, was written from the perspective of a prostitute and was too racy for casual listening. His song, “Let’s Misbehave”, suggests raunchy behavior and with our knowledge of his personal life, it could even be concluded that it insinuates homosexual relations. “Let’s Do It”, one of the most famous list songs, proposes that the intended listener “does it” with the vocalist (Savran 534). At first listen, it is easy to believe that it’s a witty love song but when listening closer, one would notice that it, too, is referring to a more sexual related encounter.

Cole was also affected by his family relations and his small-town roots. He was most likely the most impressive person to come out of little Peru, Indiana and for that he was delighted. He was given a bronze medal from the town to show their appreciation of his worldwide successes (Harriman). Throughout his youth, he tried to fit into the mold that his grandfather wanted for him. He was born to be a lawyer and J.O. pushed him that way by making clear that the money would keep flowing as long as Cole followed his precise plans. He began to disobey his grandfather’s wishes during his time at Harvard. He grew closer to the music and farther away from the courtroom.

Porter’s mother, Kate, always supported his musical abilities. She was a beautiful, well-educated woman who had a particular fondness for her son. She helped him publish his first song at age 10 which he dedicated to her and titled “The Song of the Birds”. Kate encouraged his change from law to music at Harvard and she financed him after his grandfather cut him off for doing so. Porter’s father, Samuel, is rarely mentioned in articles about Cole’s life. Rumored to be a gifted singer and pianist, it is strange that he did not have a close relationship with his son. He had very little influence on Cole’s music, except he may have produced Cole’s affinity for rhythm and meter since he was an amateur poet. It is speculated that Cole was closer to his

mother due to his somewhat flamboyant and feminine personality. This could have possibly been what kept his father, a farming man, at bay.

Porter's music was matchless not only in the lascivious lyrics, but also in the meter, modalities, and styles that they were written in (Forte 625). He wrote melodies specifically for the personality of the soloist who was promised to sing them. For instance, "I Get a Kick Out of You" was written for the acclaimed musical theatre belter, Ethel Merman. Porter highlighted the notes A-flat, B-flat, and C-natural to fit most naturally into Merman's range. He was a master of writing for specific voices – realizing their strengths and overexaggerating them (Harriman).

He also threw all tradition to the wind and wrote pieces how he wanted them. He made his choruses as long as he felt they should be with some extending all the way through sixty-four bars. He took whatever was occurring around him and used it as material for his next song. He rarely composed while deliberating over a keyboard (Howe). Instead, he took the sights, sounds, and smells that he encountered on his travels and turned them into his own type of magic. "Begin the Beguine" was written in a West Indies dance rhythm and entices the listener to picture his- or herself on a tropical getaway with swaying palms (Harriman). Porter wrote it while on a 1935 cruise between Fiji and Indonesia with his dear Linda. "*Oh yes, let them begin the beguine, make them play til the stars that were there before return above you... Til you whisper to me once more, 'Darling, I love you!' And we suddenly know, what heaven we're in, when they begin the beguine*". Many people had not ever heard this style of music before Porter presented it to them.

Porter never had to write to maintain his wealth. He simply wrote for his own personal joy and to have something to entertain his friends at parties. He shrugged off classical training and wrote based on the rhythms he heard in his head. When friends asked about his fear of lucrative success, Cole responded "Supposed I had to settle down on Broadway for three months

just when I was planning to go to Antibes” (Howe). He loved to travel on a whim whichever way the wind blew him, and he dreaded having to be tied to one place for an extended amount of time. This is the reason he and Linda had homes in New York, Paris, California, and Venice. Perhaps the reason that his librettos have endured time so well is that they weren’t written on a schedule. Porter never rushed a lyric before it was ready or tried to appease his audience. He wrote them from the core of his personality and in a style relatable to all audiences.

Porter also used the inspiration from his life events and the dazzling parties that he attended (Lahr). He would often seem uninterested, as though he had removed himself from the room completely (Harriman). Eventually, he would mentally reemerge with the perfect lyric that he had been searching so hard to find. He would take inspiration from a small snippet that someone had said, or conversations that he engaged in. His list song, “You’re the Top”, is said to have been written this way.

It is also noteworthy to explore the huge impact that his physical health had on his music as well. His drawn-out struggle with his implications from the equestrian accident of 1937 had a varied effect on his music. His horse had rolled over both of his legs, fracturing both of his thighbones and eventually causing osteomyelitis (Markel, “Painful Life”). This infection of the bone was one of the most difficult to treat and doctors spent years trying to ease the damage. Always the romantic, Porter was even composing lyrics in his head while he lay waiting for someone to come help him (Howe). He wrote the song “At Long Last Love” while in excruciating pain. *“Is it an earthquake or simply a shock? Is it the good turtle soup or merely the mock? Is it a cocktail, this feeling of joy? Or is what I feel the real McCoy?”*

Despite the numerous treacherous surgeries that he had to undergo; the initial blow of the accident seemed to have little effect on his writing habits. In fact, he wrote some of his most

recognizable pieces while he was dealing with the severe pain in his legs. He composed *Leave It to Me*, *Kiss Me, Kate*, and *Can-Can* all while struggling with constant soreness in his legs (Markel, "Painful Life"). He had to agonizingly relearn how to navigate the piano pedals.

Perhaps Porter's success during these years were really due to the fact that Linda returned to the United States to be by his side. Before this, she had been living in their Paris home, irritated with Cole's conspicuous affairs in Hollywood (Howe). It is rumored that she was even contemplating divorce during this time. Back by his side, Linda advocated for Cole with his doctors and argued against amputating his legs (even though his right had to be amputated towards the end of his life). Their disputes ended after his accident and they returned to their idyllic friendship. The Porters were more united during his injuries than ever before. Listening to his songs written at the time, you would never believe that he had been going through surgeries where doctors had to rebreak his bones, splice the Achilles' tendons, and remove 8 inches of tibia bones to create a bone graft (Markel). Eventually, his condition deteriorated so much that he had to be carried into and out of shows by his valet. Somehow, even this public show of inadequacy did not dull the shine of Porter's spirit.

Considering that Cole's writing completely ended after the amputation of his right leg, it is phenomenal for all of us that Linda fought the doctors on amputation when the incident first occurred. Had she not been adamant about him keeping both of his legs, it is very possible that we would not have half of the amazing Cole Porter songs that we know and hold so dear today. Without the lyrics that came after the accident, we would not have as complete an appreciation of the man behind the clever words.

It is also important to note that while Porter's emotional affairs did not seem to end (he was still writing to Nelson Barclift about his injuries) his physical ones most likely did (Markel,

“Painful Life”). Even the slightest touch of a sheet on his legs caused severe pain so it is doubtful that he could endure lovemaking. This, mixed with his recovered relationship with Linda, could explain why his lyrics are so ferociously impassioned during this time. He missed the freedom of being able to travel on a moment's impulse and being confident in his own abilities. *“I love Paris in the winter, when it drizzles. I love Paris in the summer, when it sizzles. I love Paris ev'ry moment of the year. I love Paris.”* Instead of drowning in self-pity, Cole decided to take his frustration and turn it into something for all to enjoy. This optimism is probably what kept him living life to the fullest in the midst of constant discomfort. He found another way to prove once again that he was a born hedonist and refused to accept anything less than the best of the world. He remembered his pleasure by putting it down on paper and complementing it with a melody.

Everything in Cole Porter's life influenced his lyrics. His complicated life is inextricable from his provocative lyrics and without his sexual nature, his songs would not cause the controversy that they have. The very essence of Porter is the expression of love, lust, and playful teasing. Not only are his words witty, they are passionate. He wrote for lovers and Linda alike, and he was expert at communicating his genuine feelings through composition.

Cole was also unique in the fact that he did not compose to become wealthy (Lahr). He already had unimaginable wealth and, while he did have a great desire to remain inside of the socialite circles, he did not necessarily want the fame that his music brought. He often wrote just to express himself or to entertain party guests. His friends even had to plead with him to publish some of his pieces that he wrote on a whim. The very core of him loved travel. He never wanted to be tied down. He feared this would constrict him, which would make him unhappy beyond belief. He could not even fathom the thought of being at someone else's' beck and call.

Producers even spoke poorly of Porter's inability to be reached. Porter felt it was best for him to remain independent.

Had Porter lived today, his music could have been more bluntly sexual. The music in today's society rarely has to mask erotic lyrics behind a façade of 'love'. When Cole was writing in the 1920's and 1930's, he would have been considered even more inappropriate had he flat out said what he was constantly insinuating. Even the way that his music was written was considered to be too scandalous for the radio by the censors (Howe). Had they known the whole truth behind the lyrics, they would have possibly sworn Porter off altogether.

His life would also be different today because he would have been able to openly settle down with one of his male lovers if he wished to do so. He wouldn't have to hide his sexual desires behind the smokescreen of a heterosexual marriage. His music could have been dramatically different if he had done this. Perhaps he would've written more about perfect, harmonious love rather than the tumultuous affairs that he participated in. We wouldn't have the catchy, clever ditties that we love so much.

Porter was a man ahead of his time. He was forward thinking and creative due to his complicated situation. All of the events of his life created a man who was situated uniquely in history, and it gave him a wealth of material from which to craft songs. Now that we have a more comprehensive understanding of who he was, we can appreciate his music on another level. His yearnings come through the stereo, nearly one hundred years later, with as much fervor as he felt the day he was writing them. And for that we will forever be indebted to Mr. Cole Porter.

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