

Cole Porter



The Man Who Banished “Moon-June”

BY FRANCIS SILL WICKWARE

■ ON THE NIGHT of December 30, 1948, a New York theater audience rapturously applauded the opening of a musical show called *Kiss Me Kate*, and next morning the critics flashed the good news to a whole generation of song-lovers: Cole Porter is back in the groove again. After nine years of comparative eclipse, the diminutive author of such popular classics as “Night and Day,” “Begin the Beguine,” “You’re the Top,” “Just One of Those Things” and a dozen or so more, again has turned out a score which ranks with his memorable performances of the '20s and '30s.

Now 56, Cole Porter has been writing songs since he was 10 years old, and has done the scores for some 20 Broadway and Hollywood musicals, including *Gay Divorcée*, *Born to Dance*, *The New Yorkers*, *Fifty Million Frenchmen*, *Anything Goes* and *Red, Hot, and Blue*. His last show before *Kiss Me Kate* was an extravaganza called *Around the World in 80 Days*, produced by Orson Welles. Porter cheerfully admits that this was a flop, but says he had a lot of fun working on it. Recently two Porter musical pictures have been playing—*Mexican Hayride* with Abbott and Costello, and *The Pirate*, with Gene Kelly and Judy Garland.

Whenever a Porter show or film opens, his wife, Linda Lee Porter, presents him with a gold cigarette case, and Porter by now has a drawer full of them. It might be added that he also has practically everything else, and any resemblance between Cole Porter and the average songwriter is purely

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coincidental. For most, the business of trying to make a living with popular tunes is full of hunger and humiliation, of gin-fueled sessions in cold rooms with tuneless pianos, of begging for hearings with song publishers, singers and orchestra leaders. Porter never has had the slightest contact with this sordid *milieu*. Not only was his career fantastically successful almost from the start, but he came into millions at an early age, married more millions later on and never needed to set down a bar of music in his life, except that he enjoys songwriting more than anything else.

This felicitous background helped Porter develop a carefree attitude which flavors most of his work. True, the Porter songs do not have the solemn and important ring of an "Ol' Man River" by Kern, a "Rhapsody in Blue" by Gershwin, or a "God Bless America" by Berlin, but as one reviewer said of the score of *Kiss Me Kate*: "His lyrics are so deft, so witty and so ingeniously constructed that by comparison most others sound like the work of retarded schoolboys." Porter certainly is no stranger to the sentimental ballad, but he usually has a twist which removes the saccharine from any lyric. For example, his "Let's Do It" starts out in a purely sentimental vein: about little blue birds that sing "Spring," little blue bells that ring "Ding" and comparable activities of humans—all of which, the verse declares, add up to a mandate from nature to fall in love.

Then, in the chorus of "Let's Do It," the mood abruptly changes. "It" is defined as something that is done by Japs, Lapps, impecunious Argentines and (in Boston) even beans. Fish do it, too. As proof, the song offers—shad roe. "It" is a hit all over the world—from Amsterdam to Siam. Look, for example, at Siamese Twins!

The complete original lyric of "Let's Do It" never has been sung on the radio, and quite a few Porter songs have been heavily censored or suppressed altogether by

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moral arbiters of the networks. The song "Love for Sale" is one of his prime favorites, and he always has felt aggrieved that censors here and in England banned the lyric, which deals delicately but unmistakably with prostitution. The line about the pants on a Roxy usher was deleted from "You're the Top," and in "I Get a Kick Out of You" the blue pencil was run through the seemingly homely assurance that cocaine gives no kick—that, in fact, a single sniff is a terrific bore.

As for the *Kiss Me Kate* score, two of his best songs will require extensive fumigation before they are fit for the microphones and juke boxes. One is "Too Darn Hot." It's bound to live up to its title, at least where censors are concerned.

Another, "Always True to You," takes a notably broad-minded view of female promiscuity: the vocalist is always true to her darlin', in her fashion—but her "fashion" is not necessarily in fashion in all circles.

CENSORABLE OR NO, Porter's songs are always profitable, and it's a dull year when his earnings (as distinguished from his income) fail to reach the \$100,000 mark. He collects fees of \$25,000 or \$30,000 for scoring a Broadway show and several times as much for doing a movie. In addition, he draws royalties on sheet music and record sales, and also receives handsome payments from ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) for public performances of his work. Porter now has created such a backlog of so-called "standard" numbers played over and over, year after year, that his incidental royalties would give him an excellent living indefinitely even if he retired tomorrow.

PORTER THE MAN is an engaging rather than an imposing figure. He stands only a shade taller than five feet six inches, weighs less than 150 pounds and, with brown hair, brown eyes and an infectious smile,

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looks rather like a well-fed Peter Pan. His favorite costume is a light gray suit with white carnation *boutonniere*, soft white shirt and dark tie. He is a very moderate drinker, but something of an epicure at table. He almost never picks up a novel. Irving Berlin is his favorite composer, and he collects the paintings of Grant Wood and Paul Cadmus. The most conspicuous thing about Porter at first meeting is a decided limp which requires the assistance of a stout black cane and has kept him in a wheel chair for weeks at a time. This is the still troublesome aftermath of a bad horseback riding accident in 1937, when Porter suffered compound fractures of both legs. He spent many months in a hospital and had multiple operations, with an amputation threatened for a while. He escaped this, but circulatory complications have made him a semi-invalid for considerable periods during the last few years.

When he signs his name, Porter hunches around into a peculiar position and seems to be writing upside down. His songwriting method is much the same. He starts with a title line, then fishes for a "climax" line and, with a thesaurus and a set of rhyming dictionaries, proceeds with his verbal architecture until the lyric is finished. Very occasionally, a Porter song seems to write itself with no effort on the master's part, but as a rule each casual-sounding lyric represents long, painstaking struggle to find the *mot juste*. Porter turns out no incidental music: only complete show scores. This involves much more than merely writing hummable tunes and literate verses. Each song must be tailor-made for a specific spot in the show, must be integrated with the action and help carry it forward and, whenever possible, must be designed to favor the vocal tricks and limitations of the soloist. Porter is especially proficient at building numbers for Ethel Merman, who has—according to Arturo Toscanini as well as Cole Porter—"the truest voice in

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the world.”

ASKED ABOUT HIS melodies, Porter gives unsatisfactory answers. “I don’t know where they come from,” he says. “They just run through my head. The best inspiration I know of is a signed contract in my pocket.” Traveling also seems to inspire Porter, and some of his best tunes have originated in faraway, exotic places. “Night and Day,” for example, was suggested by the thin wail of a Mohammedan priest calling the faithful to prayers from a tower in Morocco. “Begin the Beguine” was taken almost note by note from a native dance Porter once witnessed in an outlandish place called the Lesser Sunda Islands, east of the Netherlands Indies. Possibly because the song made him a respectable fortune, Porter is fond of repeating “Lesser Sunda Islands” to himself and says it’s a wonderful way of putting himself to sleep.

IT IS AXIOMATIC in the songwriting business that at least every other citizen fancies himself as a natural-born composer, lyricist or both, and Porter’s daily mail invariably contains a batch of letters from strangers who would dearly love to be Cole Porter. “Dear Mr. Porter,” these communications are likely to begin. “I am sending you a copy of a song I have just written and want your opinion on it.”

Porter is somewhat apologetic about the fact that he never sees any of these songs, because he can’t afford to. They are intercepted by his secretary, who immediately returns them with a chilly form letter which says: “Your communication and contents addressed to Mr. Cole Porter have not been seen by him. Cordially . . .” This is not due to snobbishness on Porter’s part, but to a necessary caution which all prominent songwriters must adopt to ward off plagiarism suits. A Cleveland woman once accused Porter “and a man named Noel Coward” of stealing her songs and show ideas “by psychical thought waves,” while another female cop-

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ied a song from the dreadful *Rosalie* score* and threatened suit if he didn't reimburse her with a fat check immediately.

Even if Porter read all the stray manuscripts sent him, he would find it impossible to tell the authors how to become Cole Porter, although he might compose a form letter with helpful hints. Among the directions in this would be the following:

1. Have an authentic genius for words and music.

2. Play jazz piano as well as Eddie Duchin or Mel Powell.

3. Always have lots of money.

4. Go everywhere, see and do everything. Make friends with folksy people like Elsa Maxwell and the Prince of Wales.

5. Go to Yale and write two immortal football songs: "Bingo" and "Bulldog." Then go to Harvard.

Cole Porter conceivably might add a sixth suggestion: "Be born in Peru, Indiana; grow up on a rich fruit farm; have a maternal grandfather worth \$7,000,000; inherit most of it." Porter wrote his first song in 1902, the year when 30,000 people were killed by a volcano explosion on the island of Martinique. The composition was "The Song of the Birds," dedicated to his mother, Kate Porter. He was painfully scraping out cadenzas on the violin at this period, but he took up the piano when he went away to prep school at Worcester Academy. Later on, at Yale, he had to stop going to parties because people liked his style so much that they kept him at the piano all night.

Porter's grandfather wanted him to be a lawyer and, to humor him, young Cole enrolled in the Harvard Law School after graduating from Yale. But his exposure to the law was brief. After hearing him play the piano at a student entertainment, the dean of the law

*Porter likes practically all his songs, with this one violent exception.

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school took him aside and said: "Young man, you are wasting your time studying law. You ought to take up music." He forthwith transferred to the Harvard Music School and, in 1916, while still grappling with theory and counterpoint at Cambridge, he wrote the score for his first show. It was called *See America First*, and folded after one miserable week.

Porter was so downcast that he went abroad and made the picturesque gesture of joining the French Foreign Legion. He fought in several important engagements and after the Armistice the French Government awarded him the *Croix de Guerre*—an honor which he says he didn't deserve. "They gave it to me because I was an American volunteer," he explains.

Coming back from France, Porter crossed on the same boat with Raymond Hitchcock, the actor-producer, and agreed to score his next show—*Hitchy-Koo* of 1919. Among the songs was one called "In an Old-Fashioned Garden," which sold 2,000,000 copies and, on the basis of sheet music distribution, was the most popular number of Porter's career. In it he abandoned the rah-rah style of "Bulldog" and reverted to the gentle spirit of his first songs.

TO CELEBRATE THE *Hitchy-Koo* success (and with a lavish allowance from grandfather). Porter returned to France, and in Paris married Linda Lee Thomas, the daughter of a Kentucky banker, lately divorced from Edward Thomas, a wealthy publisher. A tall, exquisite woman who collects aquamarines and whose wardrobe betimes has placed her on the list of the 10 best-dressed women, Mrs. Porter had a taste for Continental high life, and Porter himself has never been one to resist a gay fling. Their fashionable menage on the *Rue Monsieur* (sumptuously upholstered with zebra-hide which later became the motif of New York's El Morocco) was a way station for the international cafe socialites then cavorting around the

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ample figure of Miss Elsa Maxwell, and the Porters' parties probably hadn't been equaled since the heyday of Marie Antoinette. Edward of Wales was a frequent guest, and when Lindbergh landed the *Spirit of St. Louis* at Le Bourget in 1927, Cole Porter was driven to the airport by U. S. Ambassador Herrick.

During this period, Porter somehow managed to get a good deal of work done and even scored two shows. But he never let work interfere with his peripatetic pleasures, and producers had to work with him by remote control. Still classic around Broadway was the complaint of one producer attempting to reach Porter for some revisions in a score: "I waste hundreds of dollars in cables trying to locate the guy, and where do I find him? He is faltbooting down the Rhine! First, I am sick and tired of chasing him around the world when anybody else is no farther away than Lindy's. And second, what in hell is faltbooting?"

Porter still is a hard man to keep up with. Besides the Paris house (which he would like to sell) he has permanent quarters in the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, an estate in Williamstown, Massachusetts, a home in Brentwood, California, and the old family farm in Peru, Indiana. Mrs. Kate Porter lives there about half the year, and Porter makes a point of visiting the farm on his numerous trips across the continent. In fact, Porter considers himself a loyal Hoosier, and a former governor of Indiana proclaimed May 23 (Porter's birthday) as "Cole Porter Day."

IN SPITE OF HIS background, tastes and activities, Porter curiously enough regards himself as a simple, down-to-earth sort of fellow. "I'm a middle-class man who writes for middle-class audiences," he says. He has a deep aversion to the word "sophisticated."

"Don't call me sophisticated, no matter what else you may say about me," he told one interviewer. "I'm ashamed to be connected with the word, and I've worked like a dog

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to keep all it implies out of my music. I'd rather be called a Babbitt."

Porter's friends listen to such talk as this with raised eyebrows and ascribe it to a mood of comparative seriousness which he developed during the grueling years of recovery from his riding accident—years which would have tried the spirit of any man and were especially discouraging to a person of Porter's temperament. But there are signs that this phase is over. One is the brilliant score of *Kiss Me Kate*, and another is the fact that Porter already has chartered an ocean-going yacht for a tour of the Greek islands next summer. On this trip he expects not only to revive some of the gaiety of the '20s, but also to work out an idea for a show with a Greek setting.

In a world which seems to have adopted a dirge for its theme song, Cole Porter's words and music serve as a happy reminder that it wasn't always so and perhaps won't be so forever. ■ ■



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