

Lyrically Inclined  
Polk Laffoon IV  
The Literary Club  
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You can't be much surprised to hear  
I think you're sweller than swell,  
But granting all your virtues, dear,  
You've certain failings as well.  
You don't sing enough, you don't dance enough,  
You don't drink the great wines of France enough!  
You're not wild enough,  
You're not gay enough,  
You don't let me lead you astray enough.  
You don't live enough, you don't dare enough,  
You don't give enough,  
You don't care enough,  
You don't make my sad life sunny enough.  
Yet, sweetheart, funny enough –

I've got you on my mind . . .

Those lines, the verse to a not particularly well-known Cole Porter song, from a not particularly memorable 1932 Broadway musical – “Gay Divorce,” starring Fred Astaire and Claire Booth Luce – capture much of what I love about the Great American Songbook. The meter, the rhymes, the repetitions,

their whole *attitude* – strike a chord. I remember lyrics like this the way some of my friends recall baseball box scores; they just seep in. But I grew up with the standards all around. My parents and their friends sang them at the piano. LPs of new Broadway musicals came quickly into our house.

Of all the songs I learned, none had more appeal than Cole Porter's. The sly rhymes, the images of longing and lust, the high life celebrated – the words were mesmerizing; the melodies made them soar. I listened to endless recordings. I pinked them out on the piano. I learned their provenance. With the passage of years, I have found other musical enthusiasms, the Beatles, BeeGees, even Grand Opera. But my love of Porter stands.

Yet today, I wonder: Is that love still shared? My children don't know his songs – and wouldn't spark to them if they did. You don't hear them on the radio. As recently as the late '70s, you would hear them on stations playing a format called "The Music of Your Life." No more. The people who listened are gone.

In 1960, when Yale University conferred an honorary degree on Porter, the speaker predicted that his songs would last forever. Five decades of cultural upheaval later, I'm not so sure. The life and times of a Cole Porter, and the world he inhabited – which is much of what his songs are about – is almost unimaginable. But it's worth recalling. Rich in talent, in entertainment and extravagant lifestyles, that world was an indelible

part of the popular arts that, in their time, defined much of what America was all about.

First the man, and the contradictions: He was born rich, almost next door, in Peru, Indiana. His grandfather had made a fortune in real estate, lumber and mining. Cole never had to work a day, and as his life unfolded, he often didn't. But when he did – and he did increasingly as he became more successful – he worked compulsively. “The secret of those marvelously gay and seemingly effortless songs was a prodigious and unending industry,” reported collaborator Moss Hart. “He worked round the clock.”

Cole Porter wrote some of the greatest love songs ever penned. He married Linda Lee Thomas, widely reputed – in a day when the press attempted such lists – to be “one of the ten most beautiful women in the world.” At the same time, he could not hide his homosexuality. In 1927, when he was 36 years old, he was asked to leave Venice after police raided the Palazzo Rezzonico and found a slew of handsome Italian boys cavorting in Linda's fancy clothes for Cole and his friends. Furtive sex with men he found cruising, or men he paid for, was chronic. This composer of great love songs had no interest in physical love with a woman.

In 1935, the great New York Times theater critic, Brooks Atkinson, wrote in his review of the Cole Porter/Moss Hart musical, *Jubilee*, “While the emotions of ‘I Get a Kick Out of You’ were less exalted than Shelley's ‘To a Skylark,’ the style was equally perfect.”

Seventy-six years later, the American Poets Project, published by the Library of America and dedicated, as the afterward notes, “to preserving America’s best and most significant writing,” issued a small volume of Cole Porter’s “selected lyrics,” placing him right up there with Walt Whitman and Amy Lowell.

Some get a kick from cocaine.  
I’m sure that if I took even one sniff  
That would bore me terrific’ly too  
Yet I get a kick out of you.

Was Atkinson onto something? Did the American Poets Project vindicate him? If poetry is in the ear of the beholder, I’m in their camps.

Cole Porter’s odyssey was larger than life. I said he was rich (a word, by the way, that he didn’t like). His wife was richer. Together, in the 1920s and 30s, they moved easily and regularly between Venice and Paris, New York and Beverly Hills, and later, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Their house in Paris, at 13 Rue Monsieur, was legendary for its taste and style, the platinum wallpaper, the zebra-skin rug, and the parties. It was here that Linda arranged for the first lessons in the Charleston to be given in Paris.

They spent summers in Venice, in rented palazzos with visiting friends like Fanny Brice, Elsa Maxwell, Monty Woolley, and . . . I have pictures: Lela Emery. They traveled endlessly, to Rome, to Morocco, to Rio, up the Nile, across Siberia, through the Dutch East Indies.

("Begin the Beguine" was inspired by a native dance on Samoa). In Japan, in 1930, when Japanese train service proved inadequate to Cole's wishes, he hired an entire private train to escort his party to its destination.

Ever in the company of other talented and wealthy people, ever in the sights of a celebrity-hungry press, they were poster children for Depression-era glamour, the few without a care. Yet just when he seemed most untouchable, a riding accident crushed Cole Porter's two legs and consigned him to a regimen of pain and pain-killers that not even 35 operations could relieve. Only his genius was intact. And his fortitude in pursuing that genius, despite every physical obstacle, was an inspiration.

Cole Porter did not come quickly to success, nor did he sustain it without revisiting mediocrity more than once. He was 37 before his first enduring hit, "Let's Do It," titillated audiences with its racy invitation to a certain kind of fun:

Birds do it, bees do it,  
Even educated fleas do it.  
Let's do it. Let's fall in love.

It was six more years until he had an over-the-top hit show, *Anything Goes*, which introduced five of his most enduring standards. Then a dry spell in the early to mid-40s left him almost without support. In 1948, when the producers of *Kiss Me Kate* were looking for backers, they had to find seventy-two angels to secure the

required \$180,000, but no one was optimistic. “Kiss Me Kate” of course, went on to win the first Tony ever awarded for a Broadway musical and still today is recognized as one of the great works of this peculiarly American art form.

While never a prodigy, Cole Porter was, from the age of six, a willing enough student of the piano, a reluctant student of the violin, and the obsessive focus of his mother, Kate. Recognizing early that he was witty, and that he had some proclivity for music, she pushed him. In 1901, at age 10, he wrote a one-song operetta, *The Song of the Birds*, and dedicated it to Kate. From that time on, until she died at 90, she never stopped promoting his musical career. J.O. Cole, the crusty grandfather who felt his only grandson should go into the family business and foster its fortune, balked many times, but to no avail. Kate got her way, and eventually, Cole got J.O.’s money.

His flair for lyrics, clearly innate, also had nurturing. Cole’s father, a druggist named Sam, liked poetry and read aloud to him. At Worchester Academy in Massachusetts, he was introduced to the poetry of the ancients. The teacher went on to persuade Cole that only he could match the rhythm of *his* words to *his* music. A less exalted, but meaningful, influence were the spicy magazines he purchased from candy vendors on the train between Peru and Marion, Indiana – 30 miles away – where his mother insisted that he take the hated violin lessons. Years later, he said, their

provocative subjects found their way into his lyrics. Here, from 1939, from a song called “But in the Morning, No,” are two out of many verses:

Are you fond of swimming, dear?  
Kindly tell me, if so.  
Yes, I’m fond of swimming, dear,  
But in the morning, no.  
Do you use the breast stroke, dear?  
Kindly tell me if so.  
Yes I use the breast stroke, dear,  
But in the morning, no, no – no, no,  
No, no, no, no, no!

At Yale, as an undergraduate, Cole wrote two football songs “Bulldog” and “Bingo Eli Yale,” that are still sung today. In his junior and senior years, he took basic harmony, music history and applied piano. He wrote musical entertainment and ribald verse non-stop to amuse friends. Upon graduation, he was voted the most entertaining in his class of nearly 300 – and the most eccentric.

In 1919, at Linda’s urging, Cole attended classes in composition, counterpoint, orchestration and harmony at the renowned Schola Cantorum in Paris. While these may have succeeded, as one biographer suggests, in “solidifying Cole’s already substantial musical education,” they probably didn’t advance it. The school was too traditional. As he later told Theater Arts

Magazine, the rhythms of contemporary life were what interested him; he wanted to “escape the stiff four-measure pattern of the then-reigning popular song.” He left the Schola Cantorum, and set out to write what pleased him, primarily to amuse himself and his friends.

For Linda, however, that was not going to be sufficient. To understand why, we need to focus for a moment on her.

She was, as I noted, uncommonly beautiful. She was so stylish that even the French looked up to her. She was the first in her crowd to tint her hair and to wear a simple black dress with one stunning piece of jewelry set against it. Years later, in the Berkshires, she owned a yellow Rolls-Royce phaeton in which her Old English sheepdog would ride shotgun next to the chauffeur; few who saw it could forget it. She was organized and disciplined, and she made punctuality a religion. She was also highly ambitious for her husband. “Through her insistence,” biographer Stephen Citron reports, “he developed the habit of writing a song – or at least a part of a song – every day of his life.”

Immensely wealthy when she met Cole, Linda had been married before, to a boozier and a playboy named Ned Thomas. After ten years of his philandering, Linda filed for divorce. His family, which owned the New York Morning Telegram, and sought to minimize the publicity, gave her a million dollars to go away. She went to Europe. There she met Cole, was entranced by his wit and talent, and soon they were spending all their time together. Eight years his senior, and presumably



heterosexual, she seemed to onlookers an unlikely partner for Cole. Sara Murphy, of "Living Well" fame (and incidentally a Wiborg from Cincinnati), said "She was dull as anything, but she was very beautiful." What seems to be the case is that Linda had had enough sex (or not) with Thomas, and was content to live platonically with Cole. Wherever they were, they kept separate quarters. Yet they were soul mates of the first rank, sharing a passion for the good life, fancy friends, travel and, most importantly, Cole's creative vision. On opening nights, throughout his career, Linda presented Cole with a bejeweled cigarette case from Cartier's in honor of each new show. It would be hard to overestimate her influence on what he accomplished.

Porter's career actually sparked on an ocean liner to the states, just before his wedding in 1919. He was going home to ask his grandfather for early access to his trust fund, so that he could bring some money of his own to the proposed match. (J.O., just so you know, said no, but Kate went behind his back, not for the first time, promising to supplement her son's allowance from her own purse.) On the ship, Cole played songs for the passengers, one of whom was a Broadway producer who liked what he heard and signed the young composer to do the score for his next revue. Out of that came a first commercial success, the now forgotten song, "An Old Fashioned Garden."

Three years later, another performance for friends, this time back in Paris, enticed another Broadway producer into signing him to do yet another review.

Although two of the songs later became successful, the show – Greenwich Village Follies – was undistinguished and Porter was discouraged. He retreated to the Continent, where lifestyle could once again take precedence over life’s work – except that Linda was watching. Her parties had a purpose; her guest lists included contacts who could be helpful to her husband.

For four years, Cole continued to refine his approach and, with the help of an agent, look for another opportunity. In 1928 it came. The musical “Paris,” starring Irene Bordoni, showcased two songs that made New York audiences rethink what a song could do. Wry, fresh, sexy, and tuneful, “Let’s Do It” and “Two Little Babes in the Wood” were like nothing that had come before. The latter, a special favorite of mine, is a riff on Hans Christian Andersen. As the singer tells it:

There’s a tale of two little orphans who were left in their  
uncle’s care,  
To be reared and ruled and properly schooled  
Till they grew to be ladies fair.  
But, oh, the luckless pair!  
For the uncle, he was a cruel trustee,  
And he longed to possess their gold;  
So he led them thence to a forest dense,  
Where he left them to die of cold.  
That, at least, is what we’re told.

The refrain goes on to talk about these “two little babes” wanting nothing so much as to be home in their two little beds, and then the second verse:

They were lying there in the freezing air,  
When fortunately there appeared  
A rich old man in a big sedan,  
And a very, very fancy beard.  
He saw those girls and cheered,  
Then he drove them down to New York town,  
Where he covered them with useful things,  
Such as bonds and stocks and Paris frocks,  
And Oriental pearls in strings,  
And a showcase full of rings.

The tale ends satisfyingly for audiences, but badly for the girls:

For they’ve too many cars, too many clothes,  
Too many parties, and too many beaux,  
They have found that the fountain of youth  
Is a mixture of gin and vermouth,

... and so forth. It really doesn’t get better than that, and if you want to hear an all-time great recording of “Two Little Babes in the Wood,” call up on I-Tunes the Harper’s Bizarre version.

Porter’s career was ablaze, and the critics fell in line. “No one else now writing words and music knows so exactly the delicate balance between sense, rhyme

and tune,” declared Charles Brackett in *The New Yorker*.“ Cole Porter “was the flaming star of the premiere of ‘Paris’” crowed Richard Watts in the Herald Tribune.

Over the next five years, Porter wrote the scores to as many shows, all of them forgettable by later-day measures. They were song-and-dance vehicles held together by the flimsiest of plots, as almost all musicals of that era were. In one, Ethel Merman saved the security of the army by receiving coded messages through the carborundum fillings in her teeth! That’s how bad it could get. But the songs kept coming, and their range expanded. “You Do Something to Me,” the first of the great ballads, was followed by “Love For Sale,” a prostitute’s bitter lament – which the New York World excoriated as being “in the worst possible taste” and radio executives banned from the air. Next, for “Gay Divorce,” came three numbers well known to Porter devotees, “I’ve Got You on My Mind,” “How’s Your Romance?” and “Mister and Missus Fitch,” and the classic, “Night and Day.”

Written for Fred Astaire, it featured repeated notes in a limited range to accommodate the great dancer’s only so-so voice. There is the “beat, beat, beat” of the tom-tom, the “tick, tick, tock” of the clock and the “drip, drip, drip” of raindrops, all prelude to a tightly held melody and a refrain that opens up only marginally more. Nevertheless, Astaire resisted, saying his voice would crack if he sang it. Porter insisted that he try, prompting Astaire to enlist the show’s co-producer in

asking him to throw it out. Cole held fast and, sure enough, it worked. Astaire's version became the prototype. Within two months, Eddie Duchin's recording became a best-seller. Today, "Night and Day" may be Porter's single best-known song. As late as 1993, it was still earning "a phenomenal" – according to one source – \$10,000 a year. ASCAP rated it as one of the top money-earners of all time.

In the five-year period leading up to *Anything Goes*, these few songs that I have singled out are the standards from many dozens completed and performed. Which may invite us to reflect: What a fragile undertaking it is to write songs. How many are conceived so that a few may last. Throughout his career, Cole Porter wrote some eight hundred songs. Yet the Cole Porter Song Book for piano, published in 1959, includes just 40 – arguably the best beloved. Based on my own familiarity with his work, and what I know of what cabaret singers will select, it's fair to say that probably another 60 are in a second tier – not standards of the American Songbook, but still performed and cherished by people who dote on this kind of thing. Even so, it's thin gruel. Except, maybe, by the standards of art.

*Anything Goes* opened in November 1934, to wildly enthusiastic reviews and the elevation of five of its songs to immediate stardom: "I Get a Kick Out of You," "Blow, Gabriel, Blow," "You're the Top," "All Through the Night" and the eponymous title song. With its book by Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse, revised by the

redoubtable Howard Lindsey and Russel Crouse, the goofy shipboard romance seemed somehow to capture all that was culturally askew in the '30s. As did the title song. Here's one of many verses:

If driving fast cars you like,  
If low bars you like,  
If old hymns you like,  
If bare limbs you like,  
If Mae West you like,  
Or me undressed you like,  
Why, nobody will oppose.  
When every night the set that's smart is  
Intruding in nudist parties in  
Studios,  
Anything goes.

“You're the Top” was such a celebration of all things current and classic that the New Yorker opined, “In this one song, he has summarized American civilization better than any symposium of national thinkers has ever been able to do.” The words, a joyous blend of place names, brand names, and name-dropping, of high culture and low, was, in the end, just a romping good time. Here is one of many refrains:

You're the top!  
You're a Waldorf salad.  
You're the top!  
You're a Berlin ballad.

You're a baby grand of a lady and a gent,  
You're an old Dutch master,  
You're Mrs. Astor,  
You're Pepsodent.  
You're romance,  
You're the steppes of Russia  
You're the pants on a Roxy usher.  
I'm a lazy lout that's just about to stop,  
But if, baby, I'm the bottom  
You're the top.

Porter was also famous with friends for his prurient parodies of his own songs. What follows is reported to be one of the few such items to survive.

You're the top!  
You're Miss Pinkham's tonic.  
You're the top!  
You're a high calonic.  
You're the burning heat of a bridal suite in use,  
You're the breasts of Venus,  
You're King Kong's penis,  
You're self abuse.  
You're an arch  
In the Rome collection.  
You're the starch  
In a groom's erection.  
I'm a eunuch who  
Has just been through an op,  
But if, Baby, I'm the bottom

You're the top!

In September of 1937, when Porter was at the height of his fame, he organized a riding party at the Piping Rock Club in Locust Valley. An excellent equestrian, he chose a colt known to be skittish, and in so doing, ignored a groom's advice to the contrary. Shortly after the party set out, the horse spooked. It shied, reared, and fell backward, and for whatever reasons, Cole failed to kick the stirrups free. The frightened animal tried to rise, but fell back and rolled, twice, each time crushing one of Porter's legs.

In years to come, Cole liked to tell people that as he lay waiting for help, he was working on the lyrics to "At Long Last Love" – "Is it an earthquake or simply a shock? Is it the good turtle soup or merely the mock?" – but Cole always liked a good story. Throughout his life, he claimed to be two years younger than he was. He claimed he had served in the French Foreign Legion when he had not. And given that he went into shock as soon as the ambulance came, and was by turns unconscious and delirious for the next two days, it is not likely that he contemplated lyrics. What is certain is that he never again walked unaided.

The doctors wanted to amputate. Linda, with the strong backing of Kate in Peru, refused to let them. She knew how vain he was, how careful to tan himself evenly, how he never went out without a carnation in his lapel. To lose his legs, Linda felt, would be to break his spirit – with untold consequences for his music. She



was adamant. And herein lies a story, because at this time in their life together, Cole and Linda were estranged – possibly, in the view of some biographers, on a sure path to divorce.

The problem, it seems, was Hollywood. The Porters first went there for professional reasons in December 1935. Louis B. Mayer, the tyrannical head of MGM, had offered Cole \$75,000 to work on what would become his first film musical, “Born to Dance” – which in turn gave birth to two more great hits, “Easy to Love” and “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.” When that worked out well, he was asked to come back the following winter to score the film *Rosalie* for \$100,000 – good money in the midst of the Depression.

The assignment, however, was not without its rough patches. Nelson Eddy, the film’s star, objected to “In the Still of the Night” on grounds that its length and format made it difficult to sing. He wanted Cole to write something else. Cole believed in the song and took it to Mayer for arbitration. Mayer, despite his bluster, had a sentimental side, and when he heard Cole sing the song – “Do you love me, as I love you? Are you my life to be, my dream come true?” – he could not hold back tears. He told Eddy to sing it, and Eddy did.

The other challenge was the title song, “Rosalie.” According to Cole, he wrote no fewer than six versions because Mayer kept finding it too highbrow. Finally, he dashed off a seventh in frustration and told anyone who cared to listen that it was the dreariest thing he’d ever done. Nonetheless, Mayer accepted it, and so did the

public. Eventually, it sold more than 500,000 copies of sheet music. When Cole continued to berate it, Irving Berlin, counseled him: "Listen, kid, take my advice. Never hate a song that has sold half a million copies."

From the get-go, Cole loved the film colony. The weather, the people, the parties, the way he was treated – as a kind of visiting royalty – it was all good. When columnist Dorothy Kilgallen asked whether he liked the place, he said, "When I first came here they told me, 'You'll be so bored you'll die; nobody talks about anything but pictures.' After I was here a week, I discovered I didn't want to talk about anything else myself."

For Linda, who lived outside the business orbit, it was different. She didn't much like the people. Their custom of blending business and pleasure was off-putting; their propensity for alcohol was abhorrent. Too often, they were coarse as well. When one dinner got out of hand, she turned to the foul-mouthed offender, a former dancing star, and commented, "My dear, I've heard all those words before. I've even done most of them. But I'd prefer not having to dine on them."

That said, Linda could have stood it, and would have, to support Cole – if he had met her halfway. But he didn't. He lost control.

In the years between his marriage and that first year in Hollywood, Cole had kept his sexuality more or less under wraps. Only once, in 1925, had he genuinely and openly fallen for a man, a ballet enthusiast and aide-de-camp to Sergei Diaghilev named Boris Kochno. (We

know this because Kochno's letters came to light after his death, in 1990.) But the relationship sputtered after a month, and from that time on, Cole's homosexuality was mostly defined by one-night stands, cruising forays with friends, and paid sex, often brought to him by procurers. Linda looked the other way.

In Hollywood, that option was not available. There were too many hunks, too many gay actors, too much temptation for a "catch" like Cole. His very fame made him alluring. Beneath a carefully concocted façade, the film capital harbored a thriving gay culture, and it swept Cole in. Says biographer Charles Schwarz: "Between his numerous dalliances, 'fucking parties' (as he called them), and other social and sexual activities, Cole had little time for Linda."

Fearing most the possible damage to his reputation, she tried to stop it. When she couldn't, she departed for Paris. And when, some months later, he went to rejoin her, she was unforgiving. We can surmise that it was a real breach because when the studio released *Rosalie*, in late 1937, she did not give him her customary cigarette case. The cases only resumed in the spring of 1938 -- months after the accident.

She was needed, and they both knew it. "It's too heartbreaking," she told a friend. "You don't desert a sinking ship." They set about re-making his life. He learned to live with braces, with wheelchairs, and with being carried. They put his piano on wooden blocks so that the wheelchair fit beneath it. They regretted invitations -- for years. Cole endured the many fruitless

operations only to have osteomyelitis set in, exacerbating his condition and rendering hopeless any thought of recovery. He took pain-killers constantly; he never complained. When a friend, presumably well meaning, asked him at the restaurant Le Pavillon how his legs were doing, the answer was “Fine. How are yours?”

Most significantly, in the years following the accident, he worked as hard, or possibly harder, than he ever had in his life. It was a way to be distracted and a way to feel vital. And it was a pursuit his doctors endorsed. Between the fall of 1938 and the early winter of 1944, he wrote the scores for six Broadway musicals, five of which were outstanding hits, each running more than 400 performances. The sixth, *Leave It To Me*, ran slightly fewer, but carried the distinction of introducing a young Mary Martin to the world. In the now legendary “My Heart Belongs to Daddy,” she sang:

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

It was, by every account, riveting. We can only be sorry that no video existed to record it.

We may also regret that despite Porter’s great creative outpouring at this difficult time, and despite the

box-office receipts, only a few of the songs involved ever went anywhere. Critics were quick to pounce. "Cole Porter's last few shows have been disappointing, and this one perhaps most all," read one review of 1943's *Something for the Boys*." "Mr. Porter isn't the composer he once was," chimed in another. More failures followed.

Then, in 1946, Warner Brothers released *Night and Day*, starring Cary Grant, the story of Cole Porter's life. Cole, and more reluctantly, Linda, agreed to allow it after years of overtures from the studio and, in early 1942, a call from Irving Berlin. His message: that Cole's many hit songs, even after the accident, would be inspirational to U.S. servicemen wounded in action. More than that, the Porters found the money -- \$300,000 for the rights -- appealing. Despite deep resources, they had many demands, including multiple homes and staffs, Cole's operations, a copyright infringement suit and a huge bill from the I.R.S. Finally, when the studio agreed that they could approve both the actors and the script, they gave consent.

The movie was a joke. Virtually nothing in it was accurate. Among other things, Cole was depicted as a war-hero in the French army (he actually did volunteer humanitarian work under the auspices of an American society friend), and Linda was presented as a nurse. When Porter saw the script, he said, "It ought to make a good film. None of it is true." Yet to see Cary Grant, then in his 40s, trying to pass as a Yale undergraduate, or the idealized composer writing "Night and Day" against an

inordinately loud sound track of a ticking clock, was to understand why one wag dubbed it “One of the outstanding science fiction films of the age.”

The movie was popular, but gave Porter little help professionally. At a time when Broadway musicals, including *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *Brigadoon* and *Finan’s Rainbow*, were breaking new ground – integrating songs and story in a way that obliterated the mindless revues of the past – it stamped him as old hat. He became intermittently depressed and irritable. No offers surfaced. He began to fear he was unemployable. Then Bella Spewack called.

Bella was a writer, an old hand at Broadway librettos, and she was urging Cole to consider a musical version of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The idea had come from an eccentric young stage manager, Arnold Saint Subber, and – of all things – a brilliant young costume designer, Lemuel Ayers. Through an agent, Bella had been brought on board. If she was to do it, she said, the composer would have to be Cole Porter. Cole did not agree. Shakespeare is no good commercially, he said. Too esoteric. Not my style. Bella persisted. As Porter biographer George Eells put it, “She browbeat, flattered, nettled, needled and persuaded him, and she kept telling him that the project contained the seeds of a hit . . .” Finally, he bit.

The happy outcome was one of the great scores of all time. George Eells again: “Both in words and music, Cole succeeded in integrating the sounds of Shakespeare with those of the world of Broadway – all

in a manner that is uniquely his own.” He goes on: “It is in the creation of both words and music that Cole makes his strongest claims. The wedding of the two is so perfect that no two men could hope to achieve it. To do so Cole generally first worked out the rhythmic impact of the song. Once this was clearly set, he created the lyric and then composed the tune to the lyric.”

In *Kiss Me, Kate*, he pulls out all the stops, appropriating Shakespeare’s lines for his own, riffing on Strauss waltzes, evoking the warm sounds of Italy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century instead of England in the 16<sup>th</sup>. While every tune and every lyric offers something memorable, his spoof of the bard, as sung by two lovable hoods in “Brush Up Your Shakespeare,” may stand out:

Just declaim a few lines from “Othella”  
And they’ll think you’re a hell of a fella.  
If your blonde won’t respond when you flatter ‘er  
Tell her what Tony told Cleopaterer,  
If she fights when her clothes you are mussing,  
What are clothes? “Much Ado about Nussing.”  
Brush up your Shakespeare, and they’ll all kowtow.

Cole Porter lived another 16 years after his triumph. He had two more solid successes in New York, *Can-Can* and *Silk Stockings*, and one in Hollywood – the magnificent *High Society* with Grace Kelly, Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby. But with some notable exceptions, they were not good times. His mother died in 1952, and

Linda followed two years later after a long and debilitating history of emphysema. Cole was devastated by her passing and, contrary to her stated wishes, had her buried in Peru, where she lies next to him today.

Increasingly isolated, he was nervous in try-outs, irritable with friends, manic about punctuality and needlessly anxious about money. The last show he ever wrote, *Aladdin*, was for a 1958 CBS special; it contained eight songs, none of which were considered especially good, although “Come to the Supermarket in Old Peking,” I think, is greatly underrated – you can hear why on the first Barbara Streisand album. That same year, a month before *Aladdin* aired, Cole went into the hospital with an ulcerated intestine. His right leg, too, was ulcerated, and out of fear that his entire system would be contaminated, the doctors decided to amputate.

It was a blow from which he never recovered. He retreated to the Waldorf Towers and, on weekends, to Williamstown, but his ability to enjoy friends – and their ability to enjoy him – was almost extinguished.

“A Salute to Cole Porter,” a benefit held at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1960, went on without him. That same spring, he did not go to New Haven to receive his honorary degree; the Yale officials came to him. Two years later, in an off-Broadway theater at a midnight performance of an *Anything Goes* revival, 300 friends and well-wishers came together to wish him a happy seventieth birthday. But he wasn’t there. None of his biographers disputes that by now he was looking



forward to his death. Sixteen months later he got his wish.

In closing, let me say that recently, I asked Roger Grodsky, the music director of the musical theater department at UC's College Conservatory, whether he feels Cole Porter's songs are still viable. I knew Roger had chosen *Out of this World*, a Porter failure from 1950, to perform in next spring's Broadway Redux series. In this forum, the school revives now-forgotten shows in which it finds merit. I was curious why he chose *Out of this World*.

His answer was that in the jazz and vocal world, Cole is still highly performed, and certainly anyone who is interested in Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughn would be more than aware of his music. He continued, "That includes kids. However, believe it or not, I usually do NOT let the students perform his material in my class. This always shocks people because he is considered part of the classic musical theater tradition. I find that the emotions in his songs are difficult for young people to relate to and to convey to an audience. Even songs that you think would work, like 'I Get a Kick Out of You,' give them trouble, so I found that it was just easier to ban them outright.

"And that is one of the reasons I chose *Out of this World*. I miss doing his songs! Also, it doesn't have most of the problems mentioned above. It has many beautiful and hilarious songs that are mostly straightforward and

carry the plot (such as it is) along. The biggest problem is actually the book, which is very weak.”

Of course I was pleased to hear that Cole Porter is alive and well. I was even more pleased to hear Roger’s view on the subtleties of singing his work. When the singer doesn’t *feel* the words of a Cole Porter song, its impact crumbles.

Cole knew. Always demanding of singers, arrangers and conductors, he insisted on getting the effects he wanted. One night at 3 a.m., Mary Martin was awakened in her hotel room to be told “I didn’t hear the word ‘maul’ tonight. “ It belonged in the verse to “My Heart Belongs to Daddy.” As in:

I used to fall  
In love with all  
Those boys who maul  
Refined Ladies  
But now I tell  
Each Young gazelle  
To go to Hell –  
I mean, Hades.

Many years later, he sent Frank Sinatra a telegram asking why Sinatra sang his songs if he didn’t like the way they were written. Cole was one of a kind, and his songs – every one of them – bore his unique patina. Aren’t we lucky?

I look forward to seeing *Out of this World*.