

COLE PORTER

Gay American Composer

(1893 – 1964)



Porter remains one of America's all-time greatest composers and songwriters – one of the few who wrote both the lyrics and the music. His hits include the musical comedies *The Gay Divorce* (1932), *Anything Goes* (1934), *Panama Hattie* (1939), *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948) and *Can-Can* (1952), and featured songs like "Night and Day", "I Get a Kick out of You", "I've Got You Under My Skin" and "Begin the Beguine." He worked with legendary stars Fred Astaire, Ethel Merman, Fanny Brice, Judy Garland, Gene Kelly, Roy Rogers, Bing Crosby, Mary Martin, and the Andrews Sisters; and is considered one of the principal contributors to the *Great American Songbook*. He married his close friend, socialite Linda Lee Thomas, in 1919 – a union that assured her social status while increasing his chances for success in his career. They lived a happy, publicly acceptable life, but Porter's reputation as a regular fixture at some of underground Hollywood's most notorious gay gatherings led to hushed rumors within upper-crust circles that threatened Thomas's social standing. They separated in the early 1930s (but did not divorce) and remained close friends for the rest of their lives. In 1937 Porter was crippled when his legs were crushed in a riding accident. He spent months in the hospital, struggling against mental and physical decline. In spite of these challenges he continued to write, with some success, for the next several years. But the death of his beloved mother in 1952, which was followed by his wife's passing in 1954, and the amputation of his right leg in 1958, took its toll. His spirit broken, reliant on alcohol and pain killers, and fighting gastric ulcers, pneumonia, and numerous compounding maladies, Porter slipped into severe depression and never wrote another song. He spent the remaining years of his life in seclusion with his long-time companion, Ray Kelly, whose children still receive half of Porter's royalties. He died of kidney failure on October 15, 1964, at age 73.

Lesson Plan

LEVEL 1: CONTRIBUTIONS APPROACH

1. Activate Prior Experience: Before today what did you know about the American composer, singer-songwriter Cole Porter?
2. Read the biographical information on the plaque text (above) then check out en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cole_Porter.
3. Group Discussion: Cole Porter came from a privileged influential family. He attended Yale and then Harvard Law School before transferring to the School of Music at Harvard. Within three years he had a Broadway show and was a married man. Discuss how these factors had a profound effect on Porter's future.
4. Extend Knowledge: How did living in Europe during his "early years" influence Porter's work when he returned to Broadway? Did this life style inhibit or help his work?

LEVEL 2: ADDITIVE APPROACH

1. Use this link www.youtube.com/watch?v=njqzv5gWt6k to listen to a classic Porter song. Afterwards, listen a few the other Porter videos that will pop up. Choose one of the songs and describe your impression of his theme, message, lyrics or music with another member of your group. Make a list of the key words you would use to describe the musical selection you choose.
2. Go to www.coleporter.com and review additional information about Cole Porter's life. List three accomplishments that you will remember about him and explain why these stood out for you.
3. Cole Porter's successful career spanned four decades. His love songs were known for their originality – especially his lyrics, which are memorable for their double meanings and coded messages. Listen again to some of Porter's songs (or find the lyrics on www.lyrics.com) and see if you can identify any phrases where Porter may have been trying to convey a hidden meaning for his gay fans.
4. Read this statement: "Even with the almost insurmountable odds stacked against him, the original mind of an artist like Porter was able to remind us of the reality of love in its many forms." Discuss what it means to you.

LEVEL 3: TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH

1. Cole Porter's first tunes were Yale school songs. After that he wrote Broadway musicals, the scores for films, and songs for individual singers. With such a broad market for his work, do you think living two lives (an open one as a husband and a secret one as a gay man) added to or limited his versatility and insight as a musician? Explain your answer.
2. After a riding accident fractured both his legs, Porter began to lose himself to depression and addiction. Why do you think this happened? How was his work affected? How was his work received by the public afterwards?
3. Many strong personalities influenced Cole Porter: his mother, his grandfather, high society acquaintances, his wife, and the men with whom he had secret affairs – all of which contributed to stress and depression which he fought to conceal. How have your family and friends influenced you? Do you know anybody who deals with stress because of his/her personal life? How can you help others struggling?
4. Porter wrote "You're the Top" while sitting with a friend writing superlatives; it turned into one of his best-selling songs. Choose a classmate to help write the things that would be considered "The Top" today. Try putting it to the tune of Porter's song.

LEVEL 4: SOCIAL ACTION APPROACH

1. Would Cole Porter be criticized for living his closeted life today? Would his "marriage of convenience" be a plus for his career? Be seen as a cop-out? Do you encourage anyone to remain closeted? Why?
2. In 1998 Time Magazine featured a cover with Ellen DeGeneres saying "Yes, I'm Gay!" Which national publication do you think would put Cole Porter on the cover with a caption like that today and what do you think the public reaction would be? Why?
3. Students in music programs in high school are sometimes the target of bullies. How could you, as a student yourself, advocate for LGBT music students in your high school and help prevent this from happening?