

# COLE PORTER

## Gay U.S. Composer (1893-1964)



Cole 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. In 1937 Porter was crippled when his legs were crushed in a riding accident. He was in the hospital for months, struggling against mental and physical decline, though he continued to write with some success for the next several years. But the death of his beloved mother in 1952, 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. He was 73.

### Lesson Plan

#### Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: Before today what did you know about Cole Porter?
2. Read about him here <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/cole-porter>
3. Group Discussion: How did Cole Porter's privileged influential family and attendance at prestigious colleges had a profound effect on his future.
4. Extend knowledge: How did living in Europe influence Porter's work during those years and later when he returned to Broadway? Did his actions inhibit or help his work?  
<https://www.coleporter.org/bio.html>

#### Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Listen to at least five of these Cole Porter songs.  
<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=cole+porter+songs> Then choose one to describe your impression of his theme, message, lyrics or music with another group member while also making a list of words that you would use to describe that piece of music.
2. Use this link <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/cole-porter> to list three accomplishments that you will remember about Cole Porter.
3. After reading this link what are your general impressions about Porter's sexuality? <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-oct-15-ca-36688-story.html>
4. Discuss this quote found via the New World Encyclopedia "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."

#### Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Go to <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=cole+porter+songs> and listen closely to several Cole Porter pieces. His songs ran the gamut of styles and were recorded by many people. With such a broad market for his work, do you think living two lives (one as a husband and one as a closeted gay man) added to or limited his success as a musician? Explain your answer in an essay, citing examples.
2. Read <https://www.coleporter.org/bio.html>. After reading this and listening to his work, do you think Cole Porter was a talented artist or someone who was playing a grand hoax on the entertainment world? How does his life then compare to "out" artists today?
3. Porter wrote "You're the Top" while sitting with a friend writing superlatives. It turned into a best-selling song. Choose a classmate and together write the things that would be "The Top" today.

#### Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Pros and Cons: Do you think that Cole Porter would be criticized for living his closeted life today? Would his "marriage of convenience" be a plus for his career or not? Does how he lived matter to you?
2. Which national publication do you think would put Cole Porter on the cover with the caption "Yes, I'm Gay!"? What would the public reaction be? What would your reaction be? Your parents' reaction?
3. Having read the Legacy biography (above) and internet links, as well as having listened to his music, write an essay comparing Cole Porter's life to the contemporary LGBTQ musician of your choice.
4. Students in music programs in high school are sometimes the target of bullies. How could you, as a student, advocate for LGBTQ music students in your high school to prevent this from happening?