

**COLE PORTER: A BIOGRAPHY** by Charles Schwartz. Published by W H Allen, London, 1978. ISBN 0 491 02292 1, 365 pp.

**Reviewed by Eric Myers**

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**C**ole Porter was born June 9, 1891 in Peru, Indiana, a small town in the American mid-west. His mother, being the only daughter of a self-made millionaire, J O Cole, was well provided for, and she shamelessly spoilt her only child: as a small boy, he was raised as one of a comfortable elite, had his own shetland pony, a private tutor for French lessons, drawing classes and music instruction, while contact sports and physical activity were frowned upon. Given a close relationship with an adoring mother, and a weak ineffective father to whom he could not relate, it was not altogether surprising that he became homosexual in later life.



*Cole Porter at home in Hollywood in 1937... PHOTO COURTESY CHARLES SCHWARTZ BIOGRAPHY*

Porter's early life was typical of most privileged young men: prep school, Yale, and Harvard Law School. Throughout his years at these all-male institutions, he was uninterested in academic success and apparently more oriented to advancing himself

socially. From the age of 12, he exhibited a natural talent for writing his own songs and lyrics, which he performed at the piano for the amusement of himself and his friends, and it was undoubtedly the plaudits and positive feedback that he received during these years, which prompted him to consider a career as a professional composer of popular music.

In case you are not aware of Porter's songs, perhaps you will recall some of these: *Don't Fence Me In, All Of You, Begin The Beguine, Just One Of Those Things, From This Moment On, I Love Paris, It's All Right With Me, I've Got You Under My Skin, Easy To Love, I Concentrate On You....*

Cole Porter made his name as a composer for Broadway musicals during the 1920s, and by 1935, when he was invited to do his first film score for a Hollywood musical, had already had many huge hits to his credit: *Let's Do It, Let's Fall In Love, What Is This Thing Called Love, You Do Something To Me, Love For Sale, Night And Day, Miss Otis Regrets* and also his biggest success of the thirties, the production *Anything Goes*, which included the title song *Anything Goes*, plus *I Get A Kick Out Of You* and *You're The Top*.



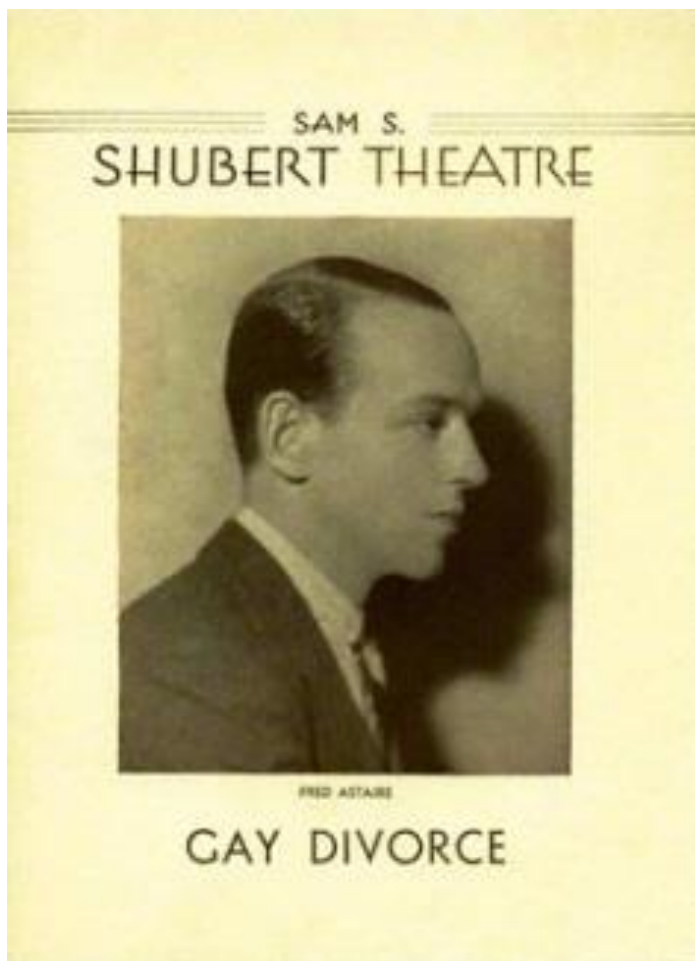
*The author Charles Schwartz, professor of music at Hunter College, New York...*

*PHOTO COURTESY CHARLES SCHWARTZ BIOGRAPHY OF COLE PORTER*

It is difficult not to consider this new book, by Charles Schwartz, professor of music at Hunter College, New York, as the definitive biography of Cole Porter. It takes the reader (sometimes at interminable length) through the various stage and film musicals that he was associated with for some 40-50 years, and it is interesting to

discover what should have been obvious — that, as a working composer, many of his best tunes had to be tailored to suit a production, or a particular singer.

His greatest hit *Night And Day* (which still earns about \$10,000 a year in ASCAP royalties) was written specifically for Fred Astaire, for the 1932 production *Gay Divorce*. While Astaire was a magnificent dancer and stage personality, his singing voice was limited in range and quality. Porter made things as easy as possible for Astaire in *Night And Day* by repeating notes in the middle register of the singer's range, where his voice was strongest, thus explaining the peculiar repetitious quality of the melody.



*Fred Astaire, pictured on the playbill for "Gay Divorce": his singing voice was limited in range and quality, so in composing "Night And Day" Porter repeated notes in the middle register of the singer's range...*

Porter's songs were innovative in many ways. For example, he got away from the traditional 32-bar structure of popular songs and, characteristically, included longer sections, so that the form of his songs were often entirely unorthodox. *In The Still Of The Night* featured a long 72-bar refrain, in four sections — the first two sections 16 bars in length, and the third an unusual 24 bars long.

Nelson Eddy, who had to sing it in the movie version of *Rosalie* (1937) complained that the song was too difficult, and asked the composer to write another. Porter, who

had great faith in the song, took up the matter with the head of MGM, Louis B Mayer. The story goes that Mayer, one of the toughest men in the film industry, broke down and wept after Porter, at the piano, played and sang *In The Still Of The Night!* Therefore, there was little question of retaining the song, and Nelson Eddy agreed to sing it.



*Nelson Eddy (above) complained that “In The Still Of The Night” was too difficult to sing, but had to sing it after Porter sang it for the head of MGM, Louis B Mayer...*

The lyrics of Porter's songs were distinctive, too. According to Schwartz they "were models of ingenuity and sophistication. They set new standards of invention and craftsmanship". The author dissects many of the Porter songs showing the

composer's use of clever, rhyming patterns and alliteration, and speaks highly of "the special brand of genius that set Cole's lyrics apart from those of his competition . . ."

**Sexual innuendo:** There was another quality, however, which made Porter's lyrics quite unique — they were often saucy and heavily laced with sexual innuendo. (In fact, *Love For Sale*, when it was recorded in 1930, was banned from being played on radio, and many of his other songs caused raised eyebrows). Schwartz points out that Porter's impudent and suggestive lyrics were not unnatural, in view of his private love of smutty gossip and sexual allusions. "What's the latest dirt?" was one of his favourite catch-phrases, which he greeted friends with throughout his life.

In 1919 Porter married the beautiful and wealthy American divorcee Linda Lee Thomas — reputedly one of the outstanding beauties of her time — an extraordinary woman who mixed with nobility and royalty, and numbered amongst her friends men like George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, Winston Churchill and Bernard Berenson.



*The beautiful and wealthy American divorcee Linda Lee Thomas, pictured in 1919, the year she and Porter married... PHOTO COURTESY CHARLES SCHWARTZ BIOGRAPHY*

Despite Porter's homosexuality, the marriage was a successful one, and they were greatly devoted to each other. Linda had rejected the aggressive, macho personality of her first husband, and now found fulfilment with a very different kind of man, who was eight years younger than herself. Above all, Cole was taken with Linda's grand style of life — she inhabited a world of lavish estates, chauffeur-driven cars, battalions of servants, and travelled often to the world's exotic places.

The Porters became "the talk, perhaps the envy of the international set," writes Schwartz, notwithstanding Porter's peculiar habit of suddenly turning on his heels and leaving a room whenever the company became tedious — a habit which apparently disconcerted all but his most admiring and understanding friends.

Interestingly, the Porters were close to the famous party-organiser Elsa Maxwell, described rather unkindly by the author as "... a lesbian, squat, jowly, masculine-looking, exceedingly plain: a bundle of blubber..." Despite an initial dislike for Cole, Elsa became an ardent champion of his music, and did much to advance his cause amongst the wealthy and powerful.



*Porter with the famous party-organiser Elsa Maxwell, described rather unkindly by the author as "a bundle of blubber" ... PHOTO COURTESY CHARLES SCHWARTZ BIOGRAPHY*

**Homosexuality:** Material on Cole Porter's secret homosexual life must have been difficult for Professor Schwartz to unearth. Certainly the evidence he produces is shadowy, but it appears that, once Porter moved to California in the mid-1930s and began writing scores for successful Hollywood musicals, he was able to participate fully in the activities of the film colony's considerable homosexual contingent.

We learn that Porter "had practically his pick of the Hollywood gays", and frequently rewarded young men whom he liked with gifts, money and, in some cases, an automobile or some other expensive luxury. It is interesting to note that Porter apparently had a relationship at one time with "Black-Jack" Bouvier, who was a

contemporary of his at Yale. "I'm just mad about Jack," Cole told friends. The affair apparently petered out, but Bouvier, of course, was later the father of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.



*Porter apparently had a relationship at one time with "Black-Jack" Bouvier who was a contemporary of his at Yale. Bouvier (right) is pictured above with his daughter Jacqueline aged 17, in 1947... PHOTO COURTESY CHARLES SCHWARTZ BIOGRAPHY*

During the years that Cole Porter was writing for musicals, American popular music, and the large New York music publishing houses, were invariably dominated by New York-based men of Jewish immigrant stock — Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin et al. During the mid-1920s Porter became very sensitive to the fact that the greatest hit songs up till that time had invariably been written by Jewish composers and revealed to Richard Rodgers in 1926 that he had decided to, as he put it, "write Jewish tunes".

It was apparent that Porter was not joking. Rodgers believed that the minor-key melodies of songs like *Night And Day*, *Begin The Beguine*, *My Heart Belongs To Daddy*, and *I Love Paris* were "unmistakably eastern Mediterranean".



*Composer Richard Rodgers (left) pictured here with lyricist Lorenz Hart: Rodgers believed that Porter's minor-key melodies of songs like "Night And Day", "Begin The Beguine", "My Heart Belongs To Daddy", and "I Love Paris" were "unmistakably eastern Mediterranean"...*

"It is surely one of the ironies of the musical theatre," said Rodgers, "that despite the abundance of Jewish composers, the one who has written the most enduring 'Jewish' music should be an Episcopalian millionaire who was born on a farm [sic] in Peru, Indiana."

Anyone interested in the evolution of the "musical" — that institution which, in its heyday in the 1930s, dominated show business (and still does, to some extent, today) — will find this book a marvellous repository of relevant information.

Also, there is a full and detailed index and three appendices which will be indispensable for students of Cole Porter: the first lists fully all the productions with which Porter was associated; the second lists nearly 1,000 of his songs in alphabetical order; and the third is a Cole Porter Discography.