

Background Information on

LET'S MISBEHAVE: The Music & Lyrics of Cole Porter

The Broadway Musical and Popular Music

During the first half of the 20th century popular music was synonymous with the music of Broadway. Nearly all popular tunes came out of Broadway shows and were written by the masters of show tunes: Irving Berlin, the Gershwin brothers, Rodgers & Hart...and Cole Porter. The songs that these artists wrote in the early years of the last century endure today. We call them “standards” and they are still sung and recorded and appreciated. Of these great writers, few were more prolific or have left a more enduring legacy than Cole Porter.

Cole Porter: Life & Work

Cole Porter was born to a wealthy family in Peru, Indiana on June 9, 1891. His maternal grandfather, J.O. Cole, was the patriarch and source of the family’s wealth. He was a Baptist and a conservative, a self-made man who through hard work and drive became the richest man in Indiana. He was a stern man, obsessed with making money and did not approve of artistic pursuits. It was against his wishes - but with the encouragement of Cole’s indulgent mother – that young Cole took up piano at age six, composing songs as early as age ten.

Educated at Worcester Academy, an exclusive prep school, he then went off to Yale where he began writing football fight songs, music for the Yale Glee Club as well as six full-scale musicals. After Yale, to mollify his grandfather, he went to Harvard Law School but by the second year – and unbeknownst to grandfather – he switched his studies to music. Eventually he abandoned his studies altogether and moved New York City to begin his music career.

His first Broadway show, *See America First* in 1916, was a flop. In 1917 he moved to war-time Paris, ostensibly to work with the French Foreign Legion, but instead installed himself in a luxurious Parisian apartment where he entertained lavishly and became a prominent member of the fabulous and decadent high society. In 1919, though he was frankly homosexual, he married American socialite divorcee Linda Gray. Although it was a marriage of convenience for both, the couple was truly devoted to each other and remained quite happily together until Linda’s death in 1954.

The couple eventually returned to New York City in the 1920’s and Porter began his Broadway theatre career in earnest, gradually becoming more and more of a force. His first big hit, in 1928 at the age of 36, was *Paris* which contained the song which gives our show its title – *Let’s Misbehave* – as well as another of his most enduring songs *Let’s Do It*. Cole delighted in being naughty and his sensibility suited the swinging Jazz Age of the 1920s perfectly. He often liked to push the boundaries of “good taste” but always with great style and wit. An early music teacher told Cole: “Words and music must be so inseparably wedded to each other that they are like one.” This is a lesson he very much took to heart and while most Broadway musicals were being written by song-writing *teams*, Porter always wrote both the music and lyrics himself.

By the 1930s Cole Porter was the undisputed king of Broadway, producing hit after hit, epitomized in the most successful show of the decade *Anything Goes*. A Tony-winning revival of that show is currently playing on Broadway. Each of his shows contained numerous songs that also became pop hits, many still popular today. During this period many Broadway luminaries were lured out to Hollywood and lucrative careers writing for the movies. Porter went as well and had many successful films but his heart was always on Broadway. His songs were notable for their lovely and deceptively simple melodies (he was well-trained in music theory and composition techniques) but he is most distinguished for his sophisticated, witty lyrics, abounding in wordplay, clever rhymes and often

commenting on the prominent people and events of the day. Many of his songs are fun and sassy but he also wrote many beautiful ballads and ravishing love songs.

In 1937 Cole was severely injured in a horse-riding accident which crushed both of his legs and began a lifetime in a wheelchair full of constant pain, scores of surgeries, debilitating depression and eventual amputation. But through it all he continued to work and produce hit shows and songs.

The 1940s weren't as strong for Porter but did produce his second greatest hit show *Kiss Me Kate*, a clever re-imagining of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. His last successes were *Can-Can* (1952), *Silk Stockings* (1955) and the film *High Society* in 1956.

In a luminous career that spanned five decades Cole Porter wrote dozens of successful musicals and movies and more than one thousand songs.

Notes from the Authors

Karin Bowersock (Book) ----- Cole Porter wrote brilliant songs - soulful, passionate, witty, wicked, sly, sprightly, voluptuous, delightful, haunting songs. And though many of them became radio hits and American standards, he wrote almost exclusively *for the theater*. His particular genius was creating songs that spilled from the mouths of characters who were in situations that moved them to sing--when their hearts were full, or breaking, when their ship had come in, or when their claws came out. That's why, when Patrick and I took on the immense treat of immersing ourselves in Cole Porter's music to create a new show, the obvious choice was to create characters in situations that moved them to sing, rather than just put together an anthology of songs. Enter Dorothy, Alice and Walter! Of course, the music is the star of the show, but with such music and lyrics as our inspiration, characters appeared almost effortlessly --like they were tapping me on the shoulder vying for a chance to sing those words and melodies that speak the truth of such a spectrum of emotions.

Patrick Young (Musical Arrangements) ----- I have to say, I have always been a fan of the "big" Cole Porter shows, and I had not heard much of his lesser known music. *Kiss me Kate* and *Anything Goes* have some of the catchiest songs and wittiest lyrics that I have come across in the theater world. When I approached Karin about writing a revue, it was in the hopes that we would be able to give something to our audience that they would love. We were able to accomplish this with the assistance of the Cole Porter Trust which was great in working with us to put this together. In going through the songs that Cole Porter wrote it was overwhelming with all of the choices that we had, but we did manage to put together a group of songs that will allow the audience to hear some old favorites, as well as be introduced to some very clever lesser-known works, some of which are still unpublished, and that are able to fit into the story that Karin created. I am very excited to be able to offer this show.