

Cole Porter

This lesson travels through the life, songs, and accomplishments of the famous Cole Porter. It highlights his prolific career, listing works like *Gay Divorce*, *Anything Goes*, and *Kiss Me Kate*.

Childhood

Today's lesson on **Cole Porter**, the famous American composer and lyricist, will include many things. However, one thing it will not include is the term 'struggling artist.' Unlike like so many artists, Cole Porter never struggled to make ends meet. Quite the opposite; he lived a life of privilege and luxury.

Born in 1891 to Kate Cole and Sam Porter, Cole Porter loved music from a very early age. His special areas of interest were composing music, writing song lyrics, and playing the piano. Lucky for him, his mother's family had all the money needed to feed this passion. His grandfather was one of the wealthiest men in their home state of Indiana. Grandpa Cole spared no expense when it came to his daughter Kate and his grandson Cole.

Biographies of Porter also tell us his mom had no qualms about using this money to give her boy Cole and his musical talent every advantage. In fact, some accounts include stories of his mom sponsoring school music performances with the understanding that her son would be given leading roles or solos.

College Years

The advantage of wealth followed Cole into his college years. Attending Yale University, young Cole made a name for himself perhaps more as a musician than a scholar. While there, he wrote several full-scale musicals and hundreds of songs. To this day, his song, '**Bull-Dog**' is one of Yale's most beloved fight songs!

After graduation from Yale, Cole's grandpa sent him to Harvard. Here the plan was for Cole to study law. Yes, music was an okay hobby, but Grandpa Cole had no intentions of letting his grandson be a full-time musician. Cole, on the other hand, had other plans and soon transferred from the Harvard School of Law to the Harvard School of Arts and Sciences. Tiring of studying, he eventually dropped out of the program and moved to New York City to pursue his dream of becoming a famous composer and lyricist.

Paris, Lies, & Marriage

Unfortunately for Cole, his first musical, *See America First*, flopped. Fortunately for Cole, the family money kept affording him a life of high society and luxury. Not finding the success he craved in New York, Cole bought a ticket to Europe and moved to Paris during World War I.

While in Paris, Cole continued to live a life of extravagance. These years included wild parties complete with drugs, bisexuality, and homosexuality. Of course, this is not the story Cole Porter included in letters home. Quite the contrary, Cole told his family and his friends back home that he had joined the French Foreign Legion and was serving in the war.

Keeping up the ruse of sorts, Cole married the wealthy socialite **Linda Lee Thomas** in 1919. Living a homosexual lifestyle, his marriage to Linda is believed by many to have been a social contract. She added more money to his pockets and he helped her stay in the limelight. Despite this odd arrangement, they were also dear friends.

1920s & 1930s

Having both Linda's money and his family's money, Porter was more than free to continue his musical career. During the '20s and '30s, he churned out hits like 'Let's Do It, Let's Fall in Love.' Piling on more accomplishments, Cole Porter took on Broadway. In 1932 his musical, *Gay Divorce*, starring the great Fred Astaire, delighted theater goers.

From it came the hit song, 'Night and Day.' In 1934, his musical *Anything Goes*, also charmed audiences. From this one came the huge hit, 'I Get a Kick Out of You.'

During the '30s, Porter also took on the movies. In this decade, his songs, '**Delovely**,' '**I've Got You Under My Skin**,' and the uber-famous '**In the Still of the Night**' were featured on the silver screen.

Unfortunately for the famous composer and lyricist, the '30s also carried tragedy. In 1937, Porter broke his legs in a nasty horse riding accident. Hospitalized for quite some time, he fell into depression caused by several surgeries, drug use, and extreme pain that would haunt him the rest of his life.

1940s to Death

Despite this, the '40s saw Porter give the world the famous song, 'Friendship.' It also saw him conquer Broadway once more with *Kiss Me Kate*, a takeoff on Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. From this renowned show came the famed song '**Too Darn Hot**.'

Sadly, the '50s brought more sadness. In the late 1950s, Porter's wife, Linda, died. Although their marriage had been one of friendship and not physical intimacy, Porter felt her death deeply. With her death and his continued physical pain, Porter fell deeper into depression and isolation. Succumbing to death in 1964, he left behind a catalog of songs so vast it reads like a phone book.

Lesson Summary

Born in 1891, **Cole Porter** was a famous American composer and lyricist. Born to a very wealthy family, Cole Porter's musical talent was fostered from a very young age. As a student at Yale, Porter wrote hundreds of songs including '**Bull-Dog**,' one of Yale's most beloved fight songs.

After saying goodbye to Yale, Porter went to Harvard but abandoned his studies and moved to New York City to pursue music. However, his first musical flopped. He then moved to Paris, and although he told his family he was involved in World War I, he actually spent his time socializing and writing music. In 1919, he married **Linda Lee Thomas**.

The '20s and '30s saw Porter write famous songs like 'Let's Do It, Let's Fall in Love.' He also wrote Broadway hits like *Gay Divorce* and 'I Get a Kick Out of You.'

Sadly, Porter was involved in a horse riding accident in the late '30s. He struggled with pain and depression for the rest of his life. Despite this, he went on to write many hits, including *Kiss Me Kate*, a takeoff on Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, which included '**Too Darn Hot**.'

Cole Porter died in 1964. He left behind a vast list of songs that are still renowned today.

Quiz & Worksheet - Cole Porter: Songs, Music & Accomplishments

1. In the 1930's Porter found success writing songs, like 'In the Still of the Night,' for the movies. Along with this success came great sadness, what event led him to a lifelong struggle with pain and depression?

- He and his wife were involved in a car accident that took her life caused him severe injury.
- His Broadway adaptation of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* was a flop which started rumors that his work was no longer relevant to audiences.
- He broke both of his legs in a horse riding accident which also required several surgeries.
- He was ostracized from the theatrical world because of his homosexual lifestyle.

2. Why did Porter leave Harvard?

- He was kicked out, as he was spending more energy on music than his studies.
- He graduated with a degree in music composition.
- He transferred to NYU, so he could study in New York City.
- He dropped out to move to New York City and pursue his dream of writing music and songs.

3. What was the significance of *Kiss Me, Kate*, Porter's Broadway creation from the 1940's?

- It was Porter's first movie musical, from which came the hit 'Night and Day.'
- It was his first big Broadway hit and also starred dancing great, Fred Astaire.
- It was one of Porter's only flops, after which he moved to Paris.
- It was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, and it produced the popular song 'Too Darn Hot'.

4. What was it about Cole's family that aided his pursuit of a career in music?

- His mother was a music teacher and he encouraged her children to perform in school productions.
- His grandfather was a performer, and Cole spent much of his early years with musicians and actors.
- They were wealthy and could back his musical interests as well as provide an Ivy League education.
- They lived in Paris, which gave him access to many musical and educational outlets.

5. Which of these was the first Broadway hit musical written by Cole Porter?

- Anything Goes*
- See America First*
- Gay Divorce*
- Kiss Me, Kate*