

Cole Porter

Essay prepared by IHS staff

"Renowned Hoosier songwriter Cole Albert Porter was born in Peru, Ind., on June 9, 1891, to Kate Cole and Samuel Fenwick Porter. His first exposure to music came from his mother, who introduced him to piano and violin. In 1905, with an appetite for writing lyric, he left the state to study at the Worcester Academy in Massachusetts.

In the fall of 1909, Porter entered Yale University. The years 1909-1913 were good ones for anyone interested in pursuing music at Yale. Early in Porter's freshman year, an editorial in the Yale Daily News called for original musical compositions. That summons may have encouraged Porter to submit his "Bingo Eli Yale" in the 1910 football song competition. "Bingo" was formally introduced by Eddie Wittstein and his orchestra at the Yale Dining Hall dinner concert on October 29, 1910. The words were printed in the News and the song was tried out at several football rallies.

Porter secured his place in Yale lore with the creation of the sports-related songs "Bull Dog" and "Ha-Dee-Dah," but his most memorable triumphs came as principal soloist in the Yale Glee Club. His singing pianologue act, with its assortment of original compositions, deft burlesque, humorous patter and topical allusions, was rendered with superb phrasing and diction. His act had all the ingredients of first-class vaudeville and was the delight of all who heard and saw it.

Perhaps Porter's most significant and lasting accomplishments during his Yale years were the musical comedy scores he wrote for his fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon. *Cora, And the Villain Still Pursued Her, The Pot of Gold, The Kaleidoscope and Paranoia* transformed musical comedy at Yale from what had been an occasional diversion into a tradition that held an honored place in the university's cultural life for many years. He developed a proficiency at writing for the theater that prepared him for what would turn out to be a forty-year career as a composer-lyricist for Broadway and Hollywood.

Following his graduation from Yale, Porter attend Harvard Law and Music schools (1913-1916). In 1919 he married the glamorous Linda Lee Thomas, but through the early 1920s, he experienced a period of disappointments. Though he continued writing, Porter could not seem to get his first "big break." Prepared to abandon songwriting altogether, Porter submitted three songs for *Out O' Luck*, a comedy-melodrama about American doughboys in France during World War I. The show's success helped Porter regain his enthusiasm for music.

In 1928, Porter's first big hit, *Paris*, debuted at Irving Berlin's Music Box Theater on Broadway. With the triumph of *Paris*, Porter's career on Broadway took off. His sophisticated, adult love songs gained him many admirers. By the end of 1929, with his acclaimed scores for *Fifty Million Frenchmen* and *Wake Up and Dream*, he had unquestionably joined the ranks of elite songwriters.

Over the next twenty-five years, Porter continued to write, including eight musicals that ran for over 400 performances each: *Du Barry Was a Lady* (1939), *Panama Hattie* (1940), *Let's Face It* (1941), *Something for the Boys* (1942), *Mexican Hayride* (1943), *Kiss Me Kate* (1948), *Can-Can* (1953) and *Silk Stockings* (1955).

The 1950s brought tragedy to Porter. His beloved mother died in 1952. Two years later his wife, Linda, succumbed to emphysema. In 1958, Porter's right leg, injured years earlier in an accident, was amputated. After that trauma he never wrote another song. He died on October 15, 1964, and is buried in the family plot at Mount Hope Cemetery in Peru, Ind.