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MUSIC

He's the top

Cole Porter festival comes to Eugene

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

The city of Eugene is known as a world of Birkenstocks and tie-dye. But for two weeks this summer, it hosts an event that evokes a world of sable coats and tuxedo tails. From Aug. 1 to 13, the Oregon Festival of American Music presents *Cole Porter: Night and Day*, an apt name for a collection of musical experiences that explore the wide range of the composer's artistry.

The only child of a shy druggist and dazzling debutante from Peru, Ind., Porter was named after his mother, whose surname was Cole. His mother recognized and encouraged his talents from a young age. An excellent student, he wrote the music and lyrics for his first operetta when he was just 10. Of course, the fact that Kate falsified school records when he was 14 to make him two years younger helped him seem "extra bright for his age."

It was at the prestigious Worcester Academy boarding school that Porter met the greatest influence on his musical career, Dr. Abercrombie, who taught him that "words and music must be so inseparably wedded to each other that they are like one."

After Worcester, Porter went to Yale, where he wrote a staggering 300 songs, including the still-famous "Bulldog" fight song. When it was time to choose a graduate school, however, his domineering grandfather, the wealthiest man in Indiana, insisted that he study law instead of music. To ensure the checks kept coming, the pampered Porter agreed and attended Harvard Law, but he switched to music during his second year without telling his grandfather.

Upon graduating, Porter set his sights on Broadway and made his debut at the age of 25 with *See America First*, which flopped after just 15 performances. One critic called it a "high-class college show." Demoralized, Porter fled to Paris, where he immediately embraced the free-wheeling lifestyle of a libertine. However, since Grandpa Cole was still paying the bills, Porter created a pretense of respectability, even going so far as to make up tales about his military involvement with the French army and French Foreign Legion. He maintained the ruse (including fake war injuries) for the rest of his life and, apparently, had quite a chuckle when his war stories were acted out by the elegant Cary Grant in the 1946 biopic *Night and Day*. (In actuality, Porter's nights and days were filled with parties, gay sex, cross-dressing and an abundance of recreational drugs.)

In 1919, Porter met and married Linda Lee

Thomas, an older, wealthy divorcée who was considered among the most beautiful women in the world. Thomas' first husband had been abusive, so she welcomed the friendship and companionship that Porter offered. Porter, of course, appreciated her income, which allowed them to travel in the loftiest social circles. Even though Thomas knew Porter was gay, they set up a lavish apartment where they entertained wildly and remained married for 35 sexless years until her death in 1954.

By the middle of the Roaring '20s, Porter decided to take another shot at the Great White Way. He and his wife moved to New York, where his second musical opened in 1928. *Paris* featured one of Porter's most memorable tunes, "Let's Do It (Let's Fall in Love)," and established his reputation for witty, urbane and highly suggestive lyrics. The next year, another musical opened, this one featuring "You Do Something to Me" and "You've Got That Thing." Porter's distinctive blend of sophisticated lyrics, clever rhymes and a little naughtiness was firmly cemented.

A contemporary of George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and Jerome Kern, Porter broke from the simple sentimentality that dominated Tin Pan Alley at the time, and he was the first New York songwriter who was not afraid to write about sex. The public responded enthusiastically.

In the 1930s, Porter produced eight hits for the stage, including *Anything Goes*. Considered the prototypical Cole Porter show, *Anything Goes* was the first starring role for the young Broadway belter Ethel Merman and is the one Porter show from this era that has endured. More than 70 years later, the musical still delights with its screwball comedy plot and timeless hits like "You're the Top," "I Get a Kick Out of You" and the title song.

When Hollywood beckoned, Porter headed west and continued his string of successes.

Hollywood was Porter's kind of town. With lots of money and beautiful men everywhere, he became more open about his sexual life, which irritated his wife, who was concerned for his reputation and her own social status.

But his life was upended in 1937 when, while out riding, his horse reared and fell, crushing both of his legs. For a man as obsessed with looks and sexual conquests as Porter was, the results were devastating. Despite months in the hospital and 30 surgeries, his mental and



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physical health deteriorated.

Fortunately, his creative powers remained better than ever. His remedy to the pain was to lose himself in his work, and in 1948 he created one of his greatest stage successes, *Kiss Me Kate*, which ran for more than 1,000 performances.

Considered his masterpiece, *Kiss Me Kate* proved Porter could write an "integrated" musical in the post-Rodgers & Hammerstein style. Using William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* as the starting point, Porter cleverly incorporated his sophisticated style by devising a love story within the love story. He followed *Kate* with *Can-Can*, *Silk Stockings* and the film *High Society* starring Grace Kelly, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra.

Porter died in 1964, but his songs continue to thrill audiences and challenge artists of all kinds. His blend of high culture and mass appeal lends itself to a variety of interpretations, and *Cole Porter: Night and Day*, the 14th summer offering by the Oregon Festival of American Music, will showcase many of them.

The festival kicks off with a gala concert featuring renowned jazz pianist/composer Dick Hyman and vocalist Ann Hampton Callaway (who wrote and sang the title song for TV's *The Nanny*). There's also a solo concert by classical singer and two-time Grammy Award winner Sylvia McNair, and a concert version of *Kiss Me Kate*. Perhaps the highlight of the festival is *Anything Goes*, starring Portland musical theater favorite Susannah Mars Johnson and featuring local gay performer/director Ron Daum.

With 10 concerts, five musical theater performances, three youth concerts, five classic films, seven public talks and assorted other events planned, Eugene is the place for American music lovers this summer. **JM**

For a complete schedule of events for COLE PORTER: NIGHT AND DAY visit www.ofam.org.

Cole Porter may be the top, but FLOYD SKLAVER is a bottom.



Ann Hampton Callaway (left) and Sylvia McNair are among the performers scheduled for *Cole Porter: Night and Day* from Aug. 1 to 13 in Eugene.