

“You’re the Top”—Cole Porter (1934)

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Cary O’Dell



Cole Porter



“You’re the Top” label



*“Anything Goes”
movie poster, 1936*

Listening to any Cole Porter song is to be immediately transported—back to the 1920’s or ‘30’s, a time of high style, of swank parties held in an art deco penthouses where ladies (in ermine and pearls, of course), and dapper gents in crisp black and white tuxes gathered ‘round baby grand pianos to listen to a tune as they also enjoyed a brandy, a cigarette or two and stared out at the Manhattan skyline.

Such is the power of Porter and his evocative, often highly visual, often time-centric music.

Though Porter could create a catchy melody like no other, for most listeners what usually lingers about his songs are his inventive rhymes and wordplays, for it is that, more than anything, which immediately identifies a Cole Porter original. Porter was especially adept at the “list” song—a tune whose lyrics is comprised wholly or mostly of a list of items.

In his lyric writing, Porter’s couplets are at once distinct and playful i.e. rhyming “Aunt Blanche” with “avalanche,” “rest” with “unexpressed.” He is also not above inventing words or twisting pronunciations to suit his scheme. Consider his altering of Noel Coward’s name to “Noel Ca-ad” for his song “The Lady is a Tramp” or coining the word “de-lovely” for his song of the same name. And who else but Porter could get away with using a “word” like “blendship” to rhyme with “friendship” or fashioning “okay” into “o’k” (pronounced “oak”) (the latter also for “Lady is a Tramp”)? In some ways, Porter is a precursor to some of the original and modern auteurs of rap with their history of loose rhymes and inventive usage of language.

Legend has it that Cole Porter wrote “You’re the Top”—or most of it—while on a cruise on the Rhine River. He polled his fellow passengers to tell him what they considered most important in life. From their assorted, eclectic answers, Porter fashioned the song, a duet, a sort of call-and-response, in which two characters attempt to one-up each other with creative compliments. By the end of the song—roughly 10 verses—an astonishing 37 persons, places or things have been mentioned, making it one of Porter’s most densely populated “list” songs. A sample:

You're the top!
You're the Coliseum.
You're the top!
You're the Louvre Museum.
You're a melody from a symphony by Strauss
You're a Bendel bonnet,

A Shakespeare's sonnet,
You're Mickey Mouse....

Today, over 70 years since the song was first written, many of the song's references are aggressively obscure. What's a Vincent Youmans? A Zuider Zee? A Roxy usher? In the intervening years, more than one person has been driven to the worldwide web to post a directory of some of the songs more cryptic compliments. Today as well many of these superlatives don't quite seem all that complimentary at all. Was there really a time when it was good to be compared to Mickey Mouse, cellophane and camembert cheese?

The first time "You're the Top" was heard by audiences it was part of the Broadway show "Anything Goes." That musical bowed on the boards for the first time in 1934 and starred Ethel Merman and Victor Moore. Along with "You're the Top," the show also introduced Porter's title tune and his "Let's Misbehave," "It's De-Lovely," and "I Get a Kick Out of You." (The latter memorably revived in Mel Brooks' 1974 comedy masterpiece "Blazing Saddles.")

On film, on record or on stage, "You're the Top" has been sung by a stunning assortment of singers and stars, sometimes with a tweak of the lyrics to fit a particular scene or era. For example, Anita O'Day altered many of the lyrics to pay tribute to some of her favorite fellow jazz musicians in her recording of it. Someone—perhaps even Porter himself or, according to some rumors, Irving Berlin—once offered up a suggestive/obscene version of its lyrics. Some of those revised lyrics that are printable: "You're a gin and tonic/You're a high colonic."

Some of the artists who have covered "You're the Top" in one version or another include: Ella Fitzgerald (on her legendary "Cole Porter Songbook" LP); Ethel Merman and Bing Crosby; Louis Armstrong; Barbara Streisand; Diana Rigg (in the film "Evil Under the Sun"); the aforementioned Anita O'Day; Dionne Warwick; and anyone who's ever sashayed the leading roles in a production of "Anything Goes" including Ethel Merman and Bing Crosby in the 1936 film of the show. As well as Cary Grant and Ginny Sims in "Night and Day," a 1946 biopic of Cole Porter. And Heinz Ketchup once used it in a Canadian TV commercial.

Often many versions of the song omit its opening verse (as well as other verses) which sets the stage for the back-and-forth string of flattery. It goes:

At words poetic, I'm so pathetic
That I always have found it best,
Instead of getting 'em off my chest,
To let 'em rest unexpressed,
I hate parading my serenading
As I'll probably miss a bar,
But if this ditty is not so pretty
At least it'll tell you
How great you are.

The version of "You're the Top" (first verse in tact) that was named to the National Registry in 2006 is Porter's own October 26, 1934 recording of it. This "horse's mouth" recording is one of eight sides he did in the 1930's for Victor Records, the only commercial recordings he ever made.

Consisting of only Porter and his piano--and even omitting some of his own lyrics--Porter's rendition nevertheless retains the song's end-of-prohibition, nothing-but-good-times ahead, New Deal feel that it has come to be synonymous with. Having a composer sing his or her own work offers a glimpse into both composer and song that is seldom if ever available via the interpretations of others. Porter's treatment exhibits a likable singing voice and animated piano playing. He seems especially to emphasize some of the song's more transitional elements, the

sections where the speaker downplays himself in order to build up his partner: “I’m a toy balloon, that’s fated soon to *pop*/But, baby, if I’m the bottom/You’re the *top*.”

Along with becoming one of America’s best-loved, best-known, and most resurrected songs, “You’re the Top” is also one of music’s best examples of a “list” song, songs whose lyrics rely heavily (if not wholly) on an agenda of like-minded items. Some other examples: “The Name Game” Stephen Sondheim’s survivor anthem “I’m Still Here”; the Righteous Brothers’s “Rock and Roll Heaven”; Billy Joel’s history lesson “We Didn’t Start the Fire”; REM’s apocalyptic “It’s the End of the World As We Know It” and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s sweetly memorable “My Favorite Things.” More recently, the authors of the Broadway musical “Grey Gardens” added to this list with their tune for two, “Two Peas in a Pod.”

A great list song, a chic ‘30s souvenir, and a snapshot of an era, Cole Porter’s “You’re the Top” is all of these things. And, yet, for all its era-specific, now abstruse references, “You’re the Top” remains remarkably timeless, still catchy and satisfying, still sing-able, a testament to great music craftsmanship and superb song-smithing.

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