"You’re the Top"—Cole Porter (1934)

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Essay by Robert Kapilow (guest post)*

Cole Porter

Unlike so many of the great Broadway composers of the 1920s and 1930s, like George Gershwin and Irving Berlin, Cole Porter did not grow up penniless and Jewish on the streets of New York but, rather, rich and Baptist in that fertile breeding ground of great musical theater composers—Peru, Indiana. His grandfather, J.O. Cole, was one of the wealthiest men in Indiana, and Porter was raised in a world of extraordinary affluence and privilege. His mother, Kate, groomed him for success from the earliest age, actually changing his birth date from 1891 to 1893 so he would seem to be even more of a child prodigy. He was sent east to school in order to become the lawyer his grandfather wished. First, to the Worcester Academy, and then Yale where he was an enormous success which meant that he wrote the school’s most enduring football song with the first of his sophisticated, erudite lyrics—“Bull Dog, Bull Dog, Bow Wow Wow, Eli Yale.”

After graduating from Yale, Porter spent one miserable year at Harvard Law School, switched briefly to the music department, and then headed straight to Broadway. However, his first full Broadway production, “See America First,” was a complete flop, closing after just two weeks, and this was followed by a string of other failures. Unable to handle all of this rejection, he banished himself to Paris living off his inheritance and later the money of his fabulously wealthy wife, Linda. He was in Europe for most of the 1920s. Porter finally got up the courage to return to America in 1928 and reintroduced himself to Broadway with the musical “Paris” featuring the song “Let’s Do It (Let’s fall in Love).” The show was an enormous hit, and Porter never turned back. Ultimately, he composed over 800 songs for 26 Broadway shows and 18 Hollywood films and lived a society life of staggering success, wealth, and luxury until his death in 1964.

However, beneath this glittering surface, there was a shadow side that the public knew almost nothing about but that contributed enormously to his music. Though he was married for 34 years to a woman once described as the most beautiful woman in the world, it was a marriage of convenience. Porter was a closeted homosexual involved in countless infatuations and affairs with men throughout his marriage, even after a tragic riding accident and its resulting 30 operations which left him crippled and in pain for the last 27 years of his life. The sexuality, innuendo, and titillation that made his lyrics so popular grew out of a personal subtext that, once
understood, gives the words of many of his most famous songs a completely different meaning. The tension between his socially perfect public persona and his socially unacceptable homosexual private life and the difficulties it caused for his marriage were not topics Porter talked about, but their effects can be felt in nearly all his music and lyrics.

However, in the end it is music and lyrics, not Porter’s private life, that are at the heart of Porter’s greatness, and “You’re the Top” from his 1934 musical “Anything Goes” is surely one of his greatest songs. According to a “New Yorker” writer, Margaret Harriman, “You’re the Top” was composed in Paris “during a supper at Boeuf sur le Toit when Cole and Mrs. Alistair Mackintosh entertained themselves by making up a list of superlatives that rhymed…. Porter considered the song, ‘just a trick’ and thought people would soon be bored by it.” Rather than being bored by it, though, people joined in and “newspapers continued to report that the game around town in the winter of 1934-35 was writing new verses to ‘You’re the Top,’ sometimes lewd ones.” In fact, at the height of the song’s popularity, Porter received nearly 300 parodies a month in the mail. Interestingly enough, Ethel Merman, for whom Cole wrote the song, said it “brought audiences to their feet because it was a new kind of love song. There had never been a song like it before. A complete original.” And though we tend to think of the song primarily for its wit, it was, indeed, a new kind of love song.

In the show, “You’re the Top” is sung by Billy Crocker (originally William Gaxton), a young Wall Street broker, and Reno Sweeney (originally Ethel Merman), an evangelist turned nightclub singer who obviously has feelings for him. In a sense, the duet is an ultra-sophisticated, upscale version of Irving Berlin’s “Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better,” but here the one-upmanship is on a fantastically literate, linguistic level. For Porter, love isn’t expressed by trite, formulaic declarations—“your eyes are like stars etc.”--but by ever more spectacularly ingenious superlatives.

The song begins with an incredibly witty verse or introduction, and the opening lyric is a classic example of Porter’s unique highbrow/lowbrow synthesis. Highbrow, high-toned diction blended with lowbrow colloquialisms and slangy contractions. In normal English, the lyric might begin, “When I try to speak in poetry, I fail.” Instead, it begins with high-toned diction, “At words poetic,” followed by “I’m so pathetic” (lowbrow) “that I always have found it best.” Then virtuoso inner rhymes combined with slangy contractions. “Instead of getting ‘em off my chest, to let ‘em rest, unexpressed.”

This kind of highbrow/lowbrow synthesis runs throughout the song’s chorus as well, which boasts a dazzling array of 1930’s cultural references. Highbrow references, like the Coliseum, the Louvre Museum, a melody from a symphony by Strauss, a Bendel bonnet, and a Shakespeare sonnet lead to the lowbrow punch-line: “You’re Mickey Mouse.” As the song continues, the insider references and witty rhymes keep coming at a dizzying pace: The National Gallery/Greta Garbo’s salary, the steppes of Russia/ the pants of a Roxy usher, Napoleon Brandy/ the nose of Jimmy Durante, and a Dutch Master, Mrs. Aster, and Pepsodent!

The overall form of the chorus--two 16-bar phrases--is relatively straightforward, as dazzingly clever wordplay is clearly the song’s focus. However, the music brilliantly supports the lyrics and brings them to life. The exuberant leap up in the piano part that precedes each new vocal
entry acts like a springboard to catapult each lyric into being, and constant syncopations both propel the music forward and give it a vernacular feel that perfectly matches the text.

Each half of the song leads to a final image—a punch line—which gets an extra kick through Porter’s use of a triple syncopation. In addition, the end of the first half of the song, “You’re Mickey Mouse,” is not only syncopated but leaps to the highest note of the song as well (on “Mick-” of “Mick-y”) turning it into a kind of musical exclamation point. Similarly, the second half of the song ends with its own kind of punch line. After an entire verse of positive superlatives describing Reno, “You’re a...”, Porter switches to “I’m a...” and negative imagery. “I’m a worthless cheque, a total wreck, a flop.” He then invents a completely new, wonderfully self-deprecating ending to finish the song, “But if Baby I’m the bottom, You’re the Top.” And this ending completely encapsulates the meaning of the text in the music by having the final note of the song, “You’re the Top,” at the top of the range of the singer and the song. It literally is the top.

“Anything Goes” had its hugely successful opening at the Alvin Theatre on November 21, 1934, and between October 1934 and January 1935 Porter recorded eight commercial sides for RCA Victor records. Though he spent a huge portion of his life at the piano playing and demonstrating his songs, this was almost always done in intimate, upper-class settings for friends or acquaintances. Because of his enormous wealth he had no need to earn money as a performer, and his public performances were rare. The eight Victor sides were the only commercial recordings he made during his lifetime. Other than anecdotal testimony, a radio transcription, and three sets of demo recordings from “Jubilee,” “Can-Can,” and “Adios, Argentina,” these Victor recordings are the only evidence we have of Porter’s style as a performer, and they offer remarkable insights into how he wished his music to be interpreted.

Porter recorded “You’re the Top” on October 26, 1934 along with “Thank You So Much, Missus Lowsborough-Goodby,” and the recording was released as Victor 24766.1

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1 On November 27, he recorded “Anything Goes” and “Two Little Babes in the Wood” (Victor 24825), and on January 3, 1935 “Be Like the Bluebird,” “I’m a Gigolo” (Victor 24843), “The Physician” and “The Cocotte” (Victor 24859). These have all been reissued on Let’s Misbehave! A Cole Porter Collection, 1927-1940 (Naxos 8-120533, 2001, CD). For more information on these recordings and an overall discussion of Porter as a performer, see Eric Davis, “I Hate Parading My Serenading”: The Historical Record of Porter as a Performer in A Cole Porter Companion ed. Don M. Randel, Matthew Shaftel, and Susan Forscher Weiss, University of Illinois Press, 2016
Though songwriters who write both their own music and lyrics, sing, and play the piano are common today, this was extremely rare during Porter’s time, and some critics point to him as the inventor of the singer-pianist-songwriter form. Irving Berlin, for example, wrote his own music and lyrics and was a communicative singer, but he was a poor pianist able to play only in a single key. Harold Arlen was a fine pianist and excellent singer, but he wrote only music and not lyrics. Porter was not a virtuoso pianist like Gershwin, nor was he a professional singer, but his performances were a perfect aesthetic match for his compositions. They were sophisticated, witty, elegant, and passionate in a refined way; and his recording of “You’re the Top” is a superb example of Porter at his best.

Given the centrality of the song’s brilliant lyrics, it shouldn’t be surprising that every element of Porter’s performance focuses on communicating these lyrics in the most effective way possible. According to witness accounts, Porter would sit at rehearsals and blow a whistle every time he couldn’t hear a lyric, and there would certainly be no need for whistle blowing with this recording. Porter’s diction is spectacularly clear, and every syllable is pronounced with crisply perfect, upper-class elocution. He sings nearly every rhythm exactly as printed in the score, and when he does slightly vary a rhythm--often adding an extra syncopation or anticipating a downbeat--it is solely to make the lyric’s meaning clearer or to conform to its rhythmic scansion. Three tiny examples will illustrate the overall approach. In the score, the music for the opening of verse 1:

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You're the top! You're the Coliseum,
You're the top! You're the Louvr’ Museum
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is the same as for verse 2:

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You're the top! You're Mahatma Ghandi,
You're the top! You're Napoleon brandy
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But though Porter sings the printed rhythm on “Coliseum” in Verse 1, for “Mahatma Ghandi” in Verse 2 he adds a lively extra syncopation on “-ma-Gha” to better match the rhythmic scansion.
He then does the opposite for “Louvr’ Mu-se-um,” (Verse 1) vs. “Napoleon Brandy” (Verse 2) removing a syncopation and wittily lengthening “brandy” for emphasis.

But the most striking and effective vocal variation is the one that ends every verse and ultimately the song itself. As I mentioned earlier, the punch line of the entire song is its final line, “But if, Baby, I’m the bottom, You’re the top!” The printed version is already wonderfully syncopated and uses the same rhythm in both measures. But on the recording, Porter invents a new vocal version, beginning the first measure with a rest instead of a note. He then syncopates every note in the measure while singing a completely different rhythm in the second measure. A rhythm that saves the three notes of “You’re the top” till the last possible moment to make a perfect ending.

Though it sounds as if Porter simply made-up this new rhythm spontaneously, he repeats it identically each time creating a fantastically swinging ending to every verse and ultimately the song as a whole. The effect is made even more striking by the alternating-hands, driving 16th-note piano part Porter plays underneath which exists nowhere in the printed sheet music. This ending is a perfect example of how everything in Porter’s piano accompaniment, like everything in his vocal performance, is designed to enhance the impact of the text. Though his playing is largely unobtrusive and sounds effortless, it continually punctuates the music in ways that throw the text into relief. He adds lower octaves at important lyrical moments along with little idiomatic fills, embellishments, and countermelodies that once again exist nowhere in the
Porter’s piano playing doesn’t call attention to itself, but his buoyant rhythmic energy, and light touch occasionally contrasted by pointed accentuation and quick dynamic changes makes for a perfect accompaniment, both literally and aesthetically, to the song’s sophisticated lyrics. The entire performance is of a piece. It’s an elegant, unified, aesthetic whole made possible by Porter’s unique talents as singer, composer, lyricist, and pianist.

One of the most striking things about the success of “Anything Goes” and “You’re the Top” is that it occurred in 1934 at the height of the worst economic depression America had ever faced. In 1933, the unemployment rate reached a record of 24.9%, and it remained above 14% for nine years from 1931-1940. Not surprisingly, the Depression had a massive impact on the entire theater industry. It became increasingly difficult to raise money for shows, and the number of productions on Broadway fell drastically from an average of almost 45 new musicals a year during the 1920s, to only 13 by 1933. Two-thirds of New York’s playhouses were shut down, and movie houses began to dominate the theater district, replacing expensive Broadway musicals with cheap talking pictures. Major theater owners like the Shuberts were nearly wiped out.

In a time of apple sellers and bread lines, one would think that a list song like “You’re the Top,” with its upper-class air and high-society allusions, would seem to be out of touch and somehow inappropriate. Yet the opposite was actually the case. In a provocative essay on lists, the novelist and philosopher William H. Gass points out that, “A list creates a site, something like a universe of discourse, a place where everything on the list can coexist, a common space.” And in a metaphorical sense, that is exactly what “You’re the Top” did. It created a place, a common space, where a Depression-era listener could become part of Porter’s high-society world. A world where everyone was perfectly dressed, had impeccable manners, and spoke in erudite rhymed couplets. Listeners were invited to share the song’s private jokes and feel flattered by its presumption of their sophistication. For three minutes and 25 seconds the realities of the Depression faded away, and you were transported to an intimate gathering at Porter’s Waldorf-Astoria apartment. An elegant party where you joined the crème-de-la-crème of upper-crust society and got to hear the most sophisticated songwriter of the time perform just for you. Thanks to this iconic recording, Porter’s party is now open to all of us. All you need to do is press play.

“You’re the Top” Music and Lyrics by Cole Porter.

VERSE 1

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.

CHORUS 1
You're the top! You're the Coliseum,
You're the top! You're the Louvr’ Museum,
You're a melody from a symphony by Strauss,
You're a Bendel bonnet, a Shakespeare sonnet,
You're Mickey Mouse.
You're the Nile, You're the Tow'r of Pisa,
You're the smile on the Mona Lisa,
I'm a worthless check, a total wreck, a flop,
But if, Baby, I'm the bottom, You're the top!

CHORUS 2

You're the top! You're Mahatma Ghandi,
You're the top! You're Napoleon brandy,
You're the purple light of a summer night in Spain,
You're the National Gall'ry, You're Garbo's sa'ry,
You're cellophane.
You're sublime, You're a turkey dinner,
You're the time of the Derby winner,
I'm a toy balloon that is fated soon to pop,
But if, Baby, I'm the bottom, You're the top!

CHORUS 3

You're the top! You're an Arrow collar,
You're the top! You're a Coolidge dollar,
You're the nimble tread of the feet of Fred Astaire,
You're an O'Neill drama, You're Whistler's mama,
You're Camembert.
You're a rose, You're Inferno's Dante,
You're the nose of the great Durante,
I'm just in the way, as the French would say “De trop, “
But if, Baby, I'm the bottom, You're the top.

CHORUS 4

You're the top! You're a Waldorf salad,
You're the top! You're a Berlin ballad,
You're the baby grand of a lady and a gent,
You're an old Dutch master, You're Mrs. Astor, You're Pepsodent!
You're romance, You're the steppes of Russia,
You're the pants on a Roxy usher,
I'm a lazy lout that's just about to stop,
But if Baby, I'm the bottom, You're the top!
Rob Kapilow is an award-winning composer, conductor, and author, and a frequent commentator for NPR and PBS. His first book, “All You Have To Do Is Listen,” won the PSP Prose Award for Best Book in Music and the Performing Arts, and his most recent book, “Listening for America: Inside the Great American Songbook from Gershwin to Sondheim,” was a finalist for the Marfield prize.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.