

# NOT LIKE THE REST OF US: A HOOSIER NAMED COLE PORTER

By Cathy Day

## **How I Discovered Cole Porter**

When I was twenty-one years old, I broke one of Indiana's commandments: *Thou shall not leave*. And I broke it by going to the one place Hoosiers fear most: New York City. It was 1990, and one day, I walked into a Tower Records store. I came across a CD called *Red, Hot + Blue*, a tribute to someone named Cole Porter to benefit AIDS research, and it contained songs by some of my favorite artists at that time (Sinead O'Connor, U2, Annie Lennox). So I bought it. I opened up the jewel case to read the liner notes, and right there, "Cole Porter was born in Peru, Indiana..." I was dumbfounded, because, you see, I'm also from Peru, Indiana, and at that time, I had no idea who Cole Porter was, nor that he was a fellow Peruvian.

I bought the CD, of course, and as soon as I played it, I recognized the songs. "Night and Day" and "Begin the Beguine." I'd heard them all my life in movies and television shows, in commercials, on the radio in the doctor's office. Even if you don't know who exactly Cole Porter is, you know those songs.

## **Six Reasons Why I Didn't Discover Him Sooner**

1. I come from a non-musical, working-class family that listened to Kenny Rogers, not Cole Porter.

2. It was 1990. There was no Internet yet. I couldn't Google anything.
3. I didn't know what NPR was.
4. Cole wasn't on the "Welcome to Peru" sign.
5. Back then, we celebrated our town's circus history (of which I've written, in *The Circus in Winter*) with museum exhibits and a festival, but we didn't do the same with our Cole Porter history.
6. I often rode my bike past the Cole family plot at Mount Hope Cemetery, but there was no marker, no sign to let you know: Here Lies Someone Famous.

### **A Conversation with My Grandma**

When I got back from New York, I went to see my maternal grandmother, a member of the local historical society. I asked: "Why don't we celebrate Cole Porter more?"

She said, "Well, because he left."

What she meant: *Why should we celebrate him if he thought he was better than us?*

What I wanted to say: *But he was better than us!*

Instead, I said, "He had to leave, Grandma. He wrote Broadway musicals."

She said, "Well, it's also because he was different."

What she might have meant by different: homosexual, high falutin', pretentious, East Coasty, snobby, strange, European, hoity toity.

What I wanted to say: *I'm different, too. And different isn't a bad thing, Grandma. It's a good thing.*

But I didn't say that, because I knew she'd say: *Cathy, you're not different.*

*You're a nice girl from Indiana. Don't be getting too big for your britches.*

### **What Is a Hoosier?**

Back in 1900, Hoosier writer Booth Tarkington published *The Gentleman from Indiana*. The protagonist John Harkless says of Hoosiers: “I always had a dim sort of feeling that the people out in these parts knew more—had more sense and were less artificial, I mean—and were kinder and tried less to be somebody else, than almost any other people anywhere.”

Well, is this statement true? I left Indiana in 1990, and for the next twenty years, I lived all over the country—New York, Alabama, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, New Jersey. And then in 2010, I moved back home again to Indiana, where (supposedly) people are kind and sincere and have good sense. I still can’t tell you whether that’s true, but I can tell you that the people of Indiana *believe* that it’s true.

### **Disclaimer So That Everyone in Peru Won’t Hate Me**

Not long after I had that conversation with my grandma, Peru started celebrating its Cole Porter history. You see, June 9, 1991 was the 100th anniversary of his birth, and his fans from all over the world wanted to make a pilgrimage to the place where he was born and where he is buried. They called the city and asked what we had planned to celebrate our native son. So: we planned something. This is how the first Cole Porter Festival came to be, and since then, there’s been a much bigger Cole Porter presence in Peru. His name is on the welcome sign. There’s a sizeable Cole Porter exhibit at the local museum, including one of his Cadillacs. There’s a sign at Mount Hope Cemetery to help you find his grave, in case you want to leave some flowers. You can spend the night in the room where he was born (although it really could use a new coat of paint). And do you know why you can do all that? Because they found a meth lab in his neglected childhood home, and a bunch of nice townspeople spent a year restoring it into a bed and breakfast. The mayor said the house went “from meth to magic.” I can tell you thousands of things that suck about Indiana, but for every bad thing, I can also tell you something good.

## Things I've Heard Hoosiers Say about Cole Porter

“His music has nothing to do with Indiana. It’s like he’s ashamed of us.”

“He never came back because he thought he was too good for this place.”

“He wasn’t like the rest of us.”

“I know he visited his mom a lot, and he had a standing order at Arnold’s Candies, and yeah, he’s buried here, but he’s not really from here, you know what I mean?”

“I guess Cole Porter’s B-day was today. Does anyone still listen to him?”

## The Problem of Celebrating Cole Porter in Indiana

So: what happens at the Cole Porter Festival in Peru, Indiana? Performances of his music, of course, and a bus tour of all the places that inspired his songs or where he might have slept. Historians usually give lectures on “The [insert subject] of Cole Porter.” The local cinema shows one of the two movies about his life: *Night and Day* (1946) or *De-Lovely* (2004). But don’t go to Peru expecting you’ll somehow “channel” the mythic Cole Porter. You’re not going to drink a martini in a 1920’s nightclub, like in *Midnight in Paris*, eat a fancy French meal, nor attend a hedonistic pool party with a bevy of attractive young men. No sir. But you can go to the local theater group’s annual revue—Cole’s music incorporated into wildly different themes. Prehistoric Cole. Cole in Space. Country Fried Cole.

No, I’m not making this up.

Another main attraction is the antique car show. One of my prized possessions is a T-shirt that reads “2003 Cole Porter Days Car and Bike Show” in orange neon, and features a chopper and a 1950 Mercury hot rod painted with flames.

No, I’m not making this up.

And you need to know this: I love this shirt, and I love the revue. I love the question that these things raise: How do you celebrate one of the 20th century's most sophisticated artists in a place where his brand of sophistication and artistry is not generally valued?

### **Hoosiers According to the Office of Tourism**

In 2014, the Indiana Office of Tourism Development unveiled its new marketing slogan: "Honest to Goodness Indiana."

This is who we want to be, but is it who we are?

We weren't honest to goodness on August 7, 1930 in Marion, Indiana when two young African-American men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, were lynched in the town center while the town looked on. A photograph of their bodies hanging from a tree sold thousands of copies and has become iconic with lynching in America. And it didn't happen in the South. It happened here.

We weren't honest to goodness when we tolerated "sundown towns," when lots of communities in Indiana posted signs at their city limits that said, "Nigger, don't let the sun go down on you in [name of town]."

We weren't honest to goodness in March and April of 2015 when Governor Mike Pence signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which allows a business to discriminate against LGBTQ individuals if such a business believes that homosexuality is a sin.

As a friend of mine who is writing her dissertation on branding says: If you want the world to see you as loving, be loving.

### **The Problem of the ExMid**

For twenty years, I lived as an expatriate Midwesterner. I was what writer Calvin Trillin calls an "ExMid," a term he uses to denote "someone who lives on either coast or abroad but still prefers to

think of himself at least partly as a Midwesterner.” The ExMid harbors a particular fear: “The fear that his mother or aunt or cousin will be cornered by some neighbor at his hometown supermarket and informed that he has become too big for his britches.” Cole Porter was not an ExMid, but I am. Big time. In fact, I am petrified that some- one from my hometown will read this and corner my aunt at Harvey Hinklemeyers and say it’s really a shame I couldn’t find something nice to say about my hometown. (See disclaimer!)

But these questions haunt me. How do you become the person you need to become when there’s so much pressure to be “normal”? How are you sup- posed to stay down to earth and shoot for the stars? How do you live an intellectual life in a state that values folksy wisdom and bristles at big words and big ideas? How do you become extraordinary and stay ordinary?

### **Things I Have Heard Hoosiers Say about Why They Won’t Try**

“I just can’t see myself doing that.” “What would people say?”

“I don’t know how to get there.”

“I’m scared to drive on highways/fly in a plane/get on a bus.”

“My family needs me.”

“I have everything I need right here.”

“I don’t want everyone looking at me.”

“It’s too hard.”

“God is not calling me to do that.”

“Only stuck up people/gay people/weird people do that.”

“Everyone will say I’m getting above my raising.”

“If I try and fail, everyone will say I told you so.”

“If I try and do not fail, everyone will say I’m an asshole.”

## **Hoosiers According to Meredith Nicholson**

In 1918, Hoosier writer Meredith Nicholson tried to articulate our character in his book *The Valley of Democracy*. In the first chapter, titled “The Folks and their Folksiness,” he said that we are “the real bread and butter people.” In spite of every facility of communication, we are disposed to be scornful of the world’s experience because we believe it doesn’t relate to us. We believe you can learn just as much in your hometown as in China, and he said we’re prepared to prove it.

How’s that for a new marketing slogan? Hoosiers: The Real Bread and Butter People.

## **How Do You Pronounce Peru?**

I get this question a lot. I say Puh-roo, but others say Pee-roo or Pay-roo.

People also ask me why Indiana has so many towns named for foreign places, but that are mispronounced: Brazz-ill instead of Bruh-zil; Monti-sello instead of -cello, Ver-sails instead of Ver-sigh, Lebbin-in instead of Lebbin-on. For a long time, I said we just didn’t know how to pronounce them correctly, but now I think that we *did* know, but that we mispronounced them on purpose because if we said *Ver-sigh*, people might think we were putting on airs.

## **Folks and Their Folksiness**

I don’t think Indiana is honest to goodness. Sometimes, I think it’s the angriest place I’ve ever lived—and I’ve lived in a lot of places.

Indiana can be a real bully, and we all know that bullies hurt because they themselves hurt. They’re unhappy, so they want you to be unhappy, too. And why is Indiana unhappy? Because deep down, we believe that—by virtue of having never left or having ended up here or having returned—we have somehow failed. I worry about that a lot, actually. And even if you don’t believe that you’ve

failed, you still worry that's how you look in the eyes of others— like someone who couldn't do better.

What keeps me from feeling like I failed is the fact that I left. That I chose to come back. It's the people who never left who tell themselves they are the real bread and butter people. And then they meet someone who makes them uncomfortable, someone who makes them aware of how much they've sacrificed to folks and their goddamn folksiness. That's where all the trouble begins.

### **Hoosiers According to Theodore Dreiser**

In *An Indiana Boyhood*, Dreiser wrote: “The very soil smacked of American idealism and faith, a fixedness in sentimental and purely imaginative American tradition in which I alas could not share. This profound faith in God, in goodness, in virtue and duty that I saw here in no way squared with the craft, the cruelty, the brutality, and the envy that I saw everywhere else. These parents were gracious and God fearing but to me they seemed asleep. They did not know life—could not. These boys and girls, as I soon found, respected love and marriage and duty and other things which the idealistic American still clings to. Outside was all this other life that I had seen of which apparently these people knew nothing. They were as if suspended in dreams.”

How's that for a marketing slogan? Indiana: Join Us in Our Bubble.

### **A Story about Bullying**

These days, I'm working on a new novel about Cole Porter and his wife Linda. A few years ago, I got a fellowship from the Houghton Library at Harvard University to study Linda Porter's personal scrapbooks. I was at a tea party for the visiting fellows, talking with a reference librarian when another fellow, a woman from California, came up and introduced herself. I told her that I taught at

Ball State in Muncie, Indiana. And then I waited for it, and sure enough, she obliged. She cocked her head and said, “Indiana. Tell me, why do people live there?”

This is what bullies do, of course. They’re at a party, feeling insecure, so they make you feel insecure, too.

Sure, okay, but I was also battling rube-a-phobia, a profound fear that I’d say or do something stupid in the company of these eminent scholars that would demonstrate that I had no business being in that room and they’d take away my coveted Harvard library card.

So I took a deep breath and said, “People live there because they work there or they’re born there or they come back there. Cole Porter was born in Indiana.”

“He was?” she said, surprised. “Yeah, in my hometown. Peru.”

The reference librarian standing next to me said, “You’re from Peru? I was born in Marion.” Turned out he majored in English at Purdue, and we continued talking and eventually the lady from California drifted away.

### **Another Story about Bullying**

But the worst part wasn’t what that lady said to me in Cambridge, MA, but what someone else said when I returned home to Indiana.

I was scheduled to speak at an event, and one of the hosts, an Indiana native, kept introducing me to others like this: *Cathy Day, who just got back from Hab-vahd, who probably thinks we’re small potatoes compared to Hab-vahd, and I’ll bet the coffee is so much better at Hab-vahd, isn’t it Cathy? Ha ha! You know I’m teasing, right?*

All day, this person shamed me like this. And so, even though I was at that event to talk about researching my book, I never mentioned Harvard. Not once.

## The Most Hoosier Song Cole Porter Wrote

If by “Hoosier,” you mean honest to goodness, sentimental and nostalgic, then by all means, it’s “Old Fashioned Garden” or “Don’t Fence Me In,” but if you mean something else, then I say it’s the little-known ditty “Experiment,” written in 1933 for the musical *Nymph Errant*. A professor gives some final advice to his graduating students about what to do in the face of “philistine defiance.”

*Experiment. Be curious,*

*Though interfering friends may frown. Get furious*

*At each attempt to hold you down.*

*If this advice you always employ*

*The future can offer you infinite joy*

*And merriment*

*Experiment*

*And you’ll see.*

Playwright Ben Hecht said, “Old songs are more than tunes. They are little houses in which our hearts once lived.” Cole Porter built more than twelve hundred of those little houses, but “Experiment” is the one he built for me. And for any person—from anywhere—trying to come to terms with being different in a place where folks ask, *Why can’t you just be like everybody else?*