

# Mad About the Boys

*A dual biography of two songwriters who were gay in every sense.*

## NOEL AND COLE

*The Sophisticates.*  
By Stephen Citron.  
Illustrated. 360 pp. New York:  
Oxford University Press. \$25.

By John Mueller

**A**T first glance, Cole Porter and Noël Coward would seem to be ideal subjects for a study in parallel lives. Each is best known for an artistic point of view that is witty, wordy, cosmopolitan, sexually insinuating and splendidly insincere — though each was fully capable, as well, of deep sentiment and even of sentimentality. And each led a life that was unapologetically gay — in both senses of the word.

Yet Stephen Citron's dual biography, "Noel and Cole: The Sophisticates," suggests that these contemporaries in 20th-century theatrical history had remarkably little else in common. Porter was wealthy and had to struggle against the charge of dilettantism, while Coward was born in modest circumstances and had to struggle simply to pay the bills. Porter sometimes took substantial time off from his labors, while Coward seems to have been a workaholic. Porter was content to turn out songs, while Coward delivered scripts and scenarios as well (and in great abundance). Porter was not much of a performer, while Coward clearly needed applause and had a long and distinguished career as actor, singer, cabaret entertainer and director. And Porter's sex life apparently spun around an extended sequence of brief, loveless flings, while Coward characteristically established relationships that lasted for years.

Accordingly, Mr. Citron's book, which interlaces 10 chapters on each man, can be read with very little loss of coherence as two separate biographies, simply by skipping alternate chapters. Indeed, except for some very general comments at the beginning and end of the book, Mr. Citron, a composer and the author of "Songwriting," does little to tie the two lives together. Even though Porter and Coward knew each other quite well and admired each other's work, he does not tell us much of this relationship, and he fails even to make clear when or how the two first met.

As biography, the book breaks little new ground. It is mostly of the "and then he wrote" school, and it is often rather glib. Mr. Citron says that a stomach ulcer Porter suffered in 1957 was "the result of many years of heavy drinking," yet he had scarcely mentioned any drinking problem previously. He casually observes that Coward was deeply affected by the assassination of John F. Kennedy because of his closeness to the President and his wife, but the existence of this relationship comes as a surprise to the reader. Mr. Citron is also sometimes careless about facts: there are at least six errors in the two and a half pages devoted to Porter's 1932 musical play, "Gay Divorce," and the film that came of it.

In general, the chapters on Coward are livelier and more arresting than those on Porter, because they include generous and well-chosen quotations from Coward's various autobiographical writings. There is, for example, his complaint about a director who, since he was a dancer and choreographer, "has a dread of repose." Or his wry observation that press descriptions of one of his plays as "tenuous, thin, brittle, gossamer, iridescent and delight-

John Mueller teaches dance history and political science at the University of Rochester. He is the author of "Astaire Dancing" and "Retreat From Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War."



FROM "NOEL AND COLE: THE SOPHISTICATES"  
Cole Porter, left, and Noël Coward.

fully daring" would suggest to the public "cocktails, evening dress, repartee and irreverent allusions to copulation, thereby causing a gratifying number of respectable people to queue up at the box office."

The book contains some occasional knee-jerk psychobabble: the homosexuality of its subjects is said to derive from their upbringing in families with strong mothers and weak fathers (something that was far more true for Porter than for Coward), a background that is somberly characterized as "a classically twisted psychological situation." Mr. Citron interestingly observes that both men established deeply affectionate and dependent, if platonic, relationships with women — Porter with his wife, Linda, and Coward with the actress Gertrude Lawrence and others. But the book never really explores this similarity or its implications.

More important, Mr. Citron sometimes displays a curious insensitivity to the theatrical contribution of his subjects. He repeatedly suggests that it was only after "Oklahoma!" in 1943 that songs in a Broadway musical were required to "carry the show forward." Yet his own book clearly demonstrates that both Porter and Coward had been composing such songs more than a decade before that supposedly landmark musical was produced.

A songwriter himself, Mr. Citron devotes much of the book, including a long appendix, to an analysis of some of the songs Porter and Coward produced during their long and prolific careers. Some of these analyses are questionable. He repeats an old story about "Night and Day" (a spectacular example, incidentally, of a song that carried a show forward long before Rodgers and Hammerstein was ever invented), suggesting that Porter intentionally made the song easy to sing by placing most of its notes in midrange. But the fact is that "Night and Day" has an unusually wide range and climaxes with a set of urgent held notes placed at the very highest part of that range. And much of his analysis relies, often unnecessarily, on such technical jargon as "tessitura," "melisma" and "hemiola" (though a glossary of terms is conveniently provided).

Nonetheless, Mr. Citron's analyses, though not as trenchant and evocative as those in Alec Wilder's "American Popular Song," are often apt, and they constitute the most useful contribution of the book. They can be rather lifeless on the printed page, but if read while listening to recordings of the songs in question — the book, unfortunately, does not include a suggested discography — they can sometimes illuminate and enhance appreciation for the brilliant songs Mr. Citron so sensibly celebrates. □

# The New York Times BOOK REVIEW

June 6, 1993  
Section 7 Copyright © 1993 The New York Times

1024