Mad About the Boys

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

**NOEL AND COLE**

The Sophisticates.

By Stephen Citron.


By John Mueller

At first glance, Cole Porter and Noel 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 sincere — 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 born 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 "labor, 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 spanned 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 delightfully trivial" is a clear example of "tussituation," "melisma" and "hemiolia" (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.