

Uncovering Cole

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In 1936, America was in the throes of a Great Depression, and *Red Hot and Blue* was the name of a new musical by Cole Porter, starring Ethel Merman and Jimmy Durante. By 1990, after a decade of Reaganomics, Americans were far less likely to call economic hardship “depression,” and *Red Hot and Blue* itself had acquired a different ring—when it became the title of a double album produced by Chrysalis Records. Featuring twenty-two classic Cole Porter songs performed by pop stars with styles ranging from rock to hip hop, the title (now respelled *Red Hot + Blue*) also included a ninety-minute TV special, a home video, a T-shirt design, and a charitable trust. As conceived by John Carlin, a New York art critic and entertainment lawyer, the whole money-making venture had an ulterior purpose, reflecting a more contemporary take on a composer whose personal life, as Carlin writes, “was complicated by having to hide his homosexuality.”¹ The new *Red Hot + Blue* not only pulled Porter from the closet, but made him a figure for a larger cause. The stars performing in this modern musical revue paid their tribute to a deceased gay composer in order to raise money for AIDS research.

In this tribute, however, the huge musical debt is paid back with interest. The prominent plus sign in the Chrysalis title appears, then, to stand for the positive side of the project, for everything donated by a group of modern musicians too young

1. Liner notes to *Red Hot + Blue* (Chrysalis F2 21799). Carlin’s considerably less articulate co-producer (London film maker Leigh Blake) has this to say: “We want to dress the word AIDS in a beautiful frame to help erase the stigma associated with the phrase.” In Alan Light, “*Red Hot & Blue: AIDS Benefit*,” *Rolling Stone*, 18 October 1990, 22.

ever to have known Porter, who was himself born too early to have been plagued by AIDS. The skewed equation suggests, in fact, one way to understand the cover version itself. Musicians from another time and place will always add something to an old song, if only by extending its life through exposure to a different audience. But behind this very notion of positive exposure lurks another, more menacing sense of the “plus” of *Red Hot + Blue*: it also signals the test result for a virus whose presence has essentially redefined what it means to be an artist in the 1990s. As Carlin writes, “the music in this album revives Porter’s work, virtually for the first time in the Rock era, . . . because it contains a message we need to be reminded of in these difficult times.” The message turns out to be nothing short of a program for restyled love—what Carlin calls “romance with intelligence.” Appropriated in the name of AIDS, Porter’s intelligent love songs become something else again, in Carlin’s words, “a wonderful series of Anthems for life in the Nineties.”

This act of restyling Porter according to a contemporary sensibility, restoring his topicality, obviously reflects something of the ethos of Peter Sellars’s Mozart and Mark Morris’s Purcell. The new production, especially with its flashy music videos, provides an entirely new forum for hearing and interpreting Porter’s music. But *Red Hot + Blue* takes the production one step further, for the songs themselves have undergone a profound transformation, dressed up with new melodies, harmonies, rhythms, voices, and, in some cases, even new lyrics. The performers on the anthology, in other words, “cover” Cole Porter more comprehensively than either Sellars or Morris, who, concentrating on the stage, prefer to leave music alone. Indeed, the twenty-two songs on the Chrysalis album reflect such an overwhelming diversity of musical treatments—with performances running the gamut from the faithful to the unrecognizable—that the whole project could serve as a sort of practical treatise on the different strategies for covering a pop song.

A few of the more extreme approaches are worth mentioning. Most alarming, perhaps, is the performance of Tom Waits, who launches what one Rolling Stone critic has described as “a typically demented attack” on Porter’s tune “It’s All Right with Me.”² Multiple tracks of phlegmatic breathing provide a monstrous background for the whine of a vintage Chamberlin and for Waits’s own *faux* blues delivery. He growls the opening lines with so much gravel that the words are barely comprehensible (“It’s the wrong time and the wrong place / ’ though your face is charming it’s the wrong face / it’s not her face, but such a lovely face / that it’s all right with me.”) It is a disorienting musical treatment that serves, almost perversely, to underscore the meaning of Porter’s verses. In a song about the inevitability of romantic infidelities, the colossally unfaithful cover version fits the bill. Yet, long after the song is over, what I recall are the words not of the first but of the second verse, which hang over Waits’s performance like a warning: “It’s the wrong song, in the wrong style.”

Such infidelity marks the singing of other performers on the disc. Indeed, Salif Keita’s “Begin the Beguine” seems so wrong at first that one has difficulty discerning which Porter song he is attempting to cover. The West African pop star transforms the song beyond recognition, altering its formerly nostalgic affect quite literally by translating the tune into an exuberant Afro-pop dialect. Even the English lyrics are rendered in an African language (I presume, from Keita’s native Mali). And, as Porter’s genteel dance orchestration is exchanged for a souped-up, African big band, one form of dancing turns into another: the slow, sensual tug of the original beguine rhythm becomes a spirited, full-bodied romp. It is an impression gratifyingly realized on the video, with its huge cast of traditionally clad dancers. The sheer quantity of aerobic sweat they generate washes away the memory of the original two-step and all its tropical humidity, offering an idea of what

2. See Light, “Red Hot & Blue: AIDS Benefit,” 22.

might constitute the erotic for Porter's new audience. It would appear—from this performance, at least—that “worldbeat” functions today in much the same way as a sultry dance from the Islands moved Porter's generation, Africa having replaced the West Indies as the site of popular music's exotic “otherness.”

Closer to home, Neneh Cherry and the Jungle Brothers do their own kind of othering to Porter's tunes, with new rap versions of “I've Got You under My Skin” and “I Get a Kick out of You.” They replace virtually all of Porter's urbane lyrics with their more heavy-hitting urban rhymes. While the verbal virtuosity of rap music might suggest a kind of kinship to Porter's own wordy “list” songs—such as the infamous “Let's Do It (Let's Fall in Love)”—these pieces ultimately show the strain of the analogy. The new lyrics overwhelm the old ones to such an extent that very little remains of Porter beyond the refrain. Indeed, Cherry's straight-talk about AIDS creates such a radically new context for the song she covers that her appropriation of Porter's own rhyme “use your mentality / wake up to reality” sounds too much like a safe-sex slogan. And the refrain itself—“I've got you under my skin”—comes across as a bizarre apostrophe to a virus.³

The impression left by all these performers reflects the diversity of the album as a whole and demonstrates the extent to which all the artists on the anthology remain, first and foremost, true to themselves, maintaining their own unique styles and voices. So, one might ask, what happens to Cole Porter in the course of this so-called tribute? Do these highly personal readings perform more harm than good? Oddly enough, it is David Byrne who answers the question, in a cover version

3. *Village Voice* music critic Milo Miles, incidentally, saw fit to praise Cherry for this very transformation: “The turnabout of the title phrase in the midst of a warning about needles and AIDS,” he says, is “a hook both scary and ingenious.” Miles, “Cole Cuts: Cole Porter, Fresh for 1990,” *Village Voice*, 20 November 1990, 85.

whose refrain becomes more charged than Porter could ever have imagined it. He issues a stern command: "Don't fence me in." This song appears as the very first number on the *Red Hot + Blue* home video, as if to underscore its importance as a style manifesto, a chant for freedom of expression. It is an auspicious introduction to an anthology whose very purpose is to represent the culture of popular music in all its apparent diversity. Byrne, who next to Paul Simon could be taken for one of pop music's biggest style parasites, treats Porter's undeniably hokey verse ("O give me land, lots of land, 'neath the starry skies above...") with a Brazilian-Cajun-folk-rock instrumentation that is itself so stylistically mongrel that one might be tempted to hear the refrain as a reflection of his own musical choices—in this song as elsewhere.

But the video turns the message outward, giving the song an unexpectedly political ring. It is worth taking a second look to see just how this transformation occurs. We are confronted with hundreds of spliced faces, a sort of human ransom note in which the barrage of disconnected mouths, like letters cut from newspapers, spell out the song's demands—one word at a time. Give me land. Give me space. Give me freedom. While the stream of "talking heads" forms an obvious pun on Byrne's first major pop-music success, the composite effect is more chilling than funny. The disarticulated crowd of individuals raises the very question of identity and who gets to define it. Like the author of a ransom note, who uses collage as a means to obscure his own identity, the song's "I," presented in this manner, seems to say this: you don't know who I am, and therefore you'd better give me what I want—which may be nothing more than the freedom to go on being that person you do not recognize.

It is significant, of course, that David Byrne is the only person I *do* recognize on the video (figure 1), although a couple of the faces remind me of people I once knew. Yet even his image is obscured, overwhelmed in the sea of faces. Byrne's relative insignificance on the surface of the video is unusual, since the



Figure 1

genre ordinarily functions as a vehicle for foregrounding the performer and his song, often by placing them in new or unlikely scenarios or narrative contexts. Here Byrne seems to have largely yielded that privilege to a collective of unspecified “others” (figure 2), who are mostly white, but also black, Asian, latino, female and male, old, middle-aged, thirty-something, twenty-something or younger, with broad noses, flat noses, cute noses, dark eyes, sad eyes, heavily made-up eyes, big mouths, tiny mouths (all with good teeth of course: proves they’re American), clean shaven or bearded, sporting noserings, earrings, but no liprings, and if there are rings anywhere else, we can’t see them. There’s also a violinist and some Brazilian drummers to relieve the unremitting stream of splices—well over two hundred in a three-minute clip.

This shift from individual to collective serves to bring out two important aspects of Byrne’s musical performance. Most apparent is the mechanical nature of his rapid-fire vocal delivery, which crams sixteen syllables of verse into a single,



Figure 2

four-beat measure—even though the voice itself sounds veiled, as if mixed below the instrumental tracks. The trademark declamation quite consciously understates the solo voice within the song, reducing what Barthes might call its “grain.” By contrast, the refrain, “Don’t fence me in,” is rendered by a collective, in two-part parallel counterpoint, with a slower declamation (giving each syllable at least double the value). It is also agogically offset by a deliberate pause in the phrase rhythm, a stark silence that makes the concluding words all the more potent. The effect of the silence is so profound that, in Byrne’s version, the refrain itself has to be repeated (musical example 1).

Byrne’s performance thus erases the whimsy found in *Hollywood Canteen*, not only by eradicating all trace of twang, but, even more significantly, by avoiding any mention of the protagonist of Porter’s original song, the soon-to-be-incarcerated “Wild Cat Kelly.” The song, in this cover version,

Musical Example 1

Declamation of opening period of Byrne's "Don't Fence Me In"

<i>beats:</i>	1	2	3	4
Oh give me	land lots of	land 'neath the	star-ry skies a-	bove
	Don't	fence me	in	
Oh let me	ride through the	wide o-pen	country that I	love
	Don't	fence me	in	
Oh let me	be by my-	self in the	e - ven - ing	breeze
	Lis-ten to the	mur-mur of the	cot-ton-wood	trees
	Send me off for-	ev-er but I	ask you please	
			Don't	fence me
	in.		Don't	fence me
	in.			

has been stripped down to its refrain—indeed, to its title words—now chanted by a mob. It is the video that conveys this impression most strongly, through its treatment of the final repeating refrain, which continues as if it will never end. We finally see the collective joined together, unspliced and unsmiling, lip-synching the chorus en masse (figure 3). Through

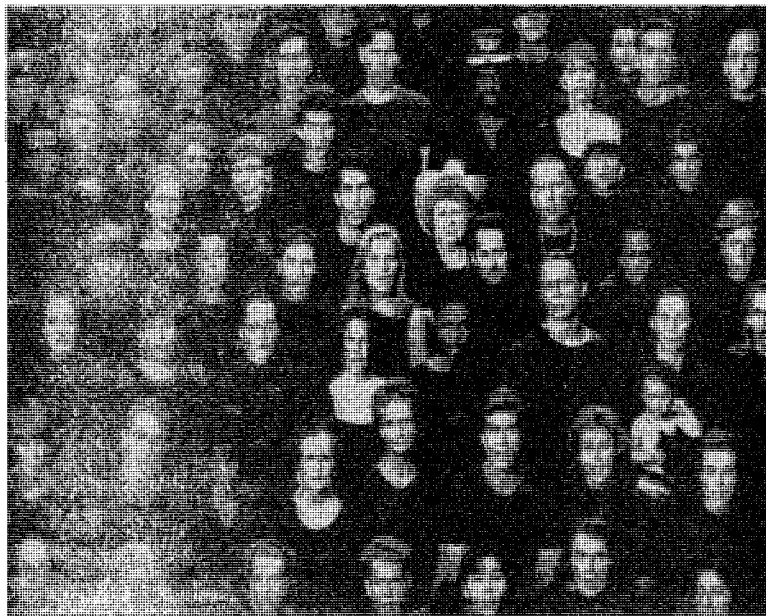


Figure 3

this sobering tableau, Byrne effectively rejects the implications of Cole Porter's silly cowboy "lark" (so silly, I am told, that Porter attempted to withdraw it from his own catalog), in favor of a new concept, at once playful and deadly serious, that stands in a tense relation to the old song.

This same sort of tense relation is apparent even in the covers that remain relatively faithful to an earlier history of performance. I will mention only one, in some ways the most interesting—Sinead O'Connor's rendering of "You Do Something To Me." The fidelity of this cover version does, so to speak, "fence in" the Irish chanteuse, whose limited range and signature breathy voice are hardly equal to the big-band tradition she invokes. And I mean tradition. For anyone who knows the recordings of the "Cole Porter Songbook" by Ella Fitzgerald on Verve (VE-2-2511), it is striking to note just how closely Sinead's version on *Red Hot + Blue* follows Ella's. Even her arranger has copied the Buddy Bregman orchestration to a T, down to the key signature. (The arrangement is so faithful that, on first hearing, I thought it was sampled.) This is, in other words, not the Sinead we know. There's no political stance, no heart-rending wail, no defaced Pope. Someone has, well, *done* something to her. On the video we see the star transformed, standing in front of an old-fashioned microphone, with no orchestra in sight, wearing a slinky, spangled gown, and—oh yes—a platinum blonde wig styled à la Veronica Lake, the *femme fatale* of the mostly forgotten motion picture *The Major and the Girl* (figure 4). She performs the song, that is, in drag. She is not the vanguard Sinead, but a poor imitation of someone "doing" a Cole Porter song.

This sense of a reconstructed persona is deliberately brought home at the end of the video, when a fast cut returns us to the "real" Sinead (bald once again), sitting in silence, with her head reverently lowered, holding a candle at some imaginary AIDS vigil (figure 5). And it appears that the more familiar persona has been restored in yet another respect. For Sinead now wears a T-shirt bearing a text by experimental artist Jenny



Figure 4

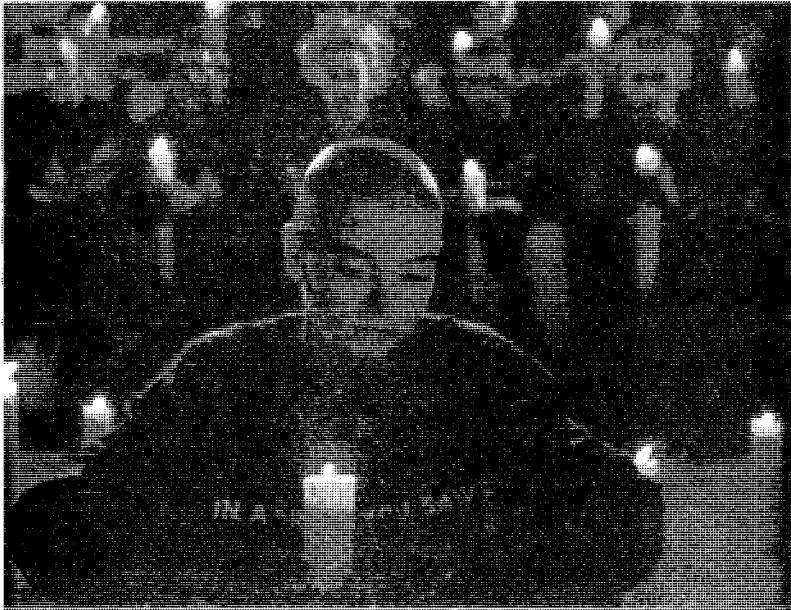


Figure 5

Holzer: "In a dream you saw a way to survive and you were full of joy" (T-shirt available for \$25.00, from an outfit called Rock Corporation, through an order form accompanying the home video). It was the same bit of text that we saw flash across the screen just seconds before the start of her video clip. The caption, in effect, frames her—and her whole performance—as a departure, nothing more than a dream. Sinéad was not really fenced in by Porter's music, the sequence seems to suggest, because she was never singing in the first place.

The logic adds up to a confusion that resonates with many of the performances on the anthology. The "don't-fence-me-in" attitude apparent on the album as a whole signals, I would argue, neither pure vanity on the part of the performers, nor any trumped-up notion of artistic freedom. It reflects, on the contrary, the same kind of difficulty that plagues all performances of historical repertoires: the modern pop musician, operating under completely different musical conventions, cannot hope to reproduce Porter's music with anything like true fidelity. Indeed, the cover versions may seem to go against the grain of Porter's work precisely because, in the 1990s, there is something about Porter himself that rubs the wrong way.



What is the quality that poses the biggest obstacle for the contemporary pop musician? For lack of a better word, let's call it *tone*, a musical term that in the realm of language, of course, refers to a quality of expression in speech or writing. Tone is partly a function of register—that is, of the kind of language used in specific social settings. The linguistic register we are most likely to associate with Porter is one that was frequently heard, to quote one of his own lyrics, among the "best upper sets," a register involving habits of speech that are more often indirect than direct. It might be called, for simplicity's sake, a register of "courtly love," whose charm comes, as we all know, from the lover's repeated attempts to *conceal* what he knows to

be true. No unprotected gush of feelings. No baring of souls. On the contrary, in this highly restrained register what gets the job done best is always a kind of circumlocution, a form of speech whose most exalted form we might call "wit." It is in this highly skilled type of verbal play—this pleasurable artifice—that we discover, paradoxically, the route to authentic feeling. As Porter's friend Dorothy Parker once remarked, "wit has truth in it."

Wit is, of course, the attribute ascribed more frequently to Porter than to almost any composer since Haydn. But it is also the very thing hardest to hear today, not just because Porterian wit (like all humor) is topical, but also because it depends upon a tone that no longer forms such an integral part of popular culture as it did in the 1930s and 40s. I am referring to the tone that one used to hear in the voices of most Hollywood film protagonists when, for instance, they sought to represent upper-class deportment. It is a tone that one may still occasionally hear on, say, *Masterpiece Theatre*, or—on an especially good day—at the university faculty club. But it is not so much heard anymore as read. The closest source for it among the "popular" presses would be (or was, until very recently) the *New Yorker*, which over the years sought to preserve it, if nowhere else, in the oh-so-urbane segment "The Talk of the Town," with its imperious "we," its cultivated sense of irony.

It was the *New Yorker*, in fact, that a few years ago featured one of the best reviews of the *Red Hot + Blue* album in a piece by Ethan Mordden, who approached the new performances first by placing Porter's songs, quite sensibly, in their original habitat, in the context of musical theater of the 1930s.⁴ Not surprisingly, perhaps, Mordden has little patience with the rap cuts on the anthology, which, in his view, don't do justice to Porter, not just because they play fast and loose with his poetry, but because, as he puts it, "rap isn't music." This unfortunate judgment was to be found the following week in the pages of

4. Mordden, "Rock and Cole," *New Yorker*, 28 October 1991, 110.

the *Village Voice*, that downtown rag whose politics are, in perhaps every respect, opposed to those of the *New Yorker*. The offending words had been spotted and excerpted by an anonymous compiler for the column "Media Clips." The author first parodies the magazine's cloyingly learned tone ("So here we are cruising through Ethan Mordden's overview of Cole Porter in the *New Yorker*,...learning a lot and enjoying ourselves"), and then offers this terse reply to Mordden's ultimately dismissive opinion of rap (and, gentle reader, I do quote): "Well fuck you, too, Ethan."⁵

I take this striking difference in tone, and register, between the high-minded discourse of one magazine and the double-barreled street talk of the other, as a kind of metaphor for the difference between the popular music of Porter's generation and that of our own. The difference in tone ultimately helps us to understand the difficulty of "doing" Porter's music straight, from the perspective of a performer brought up, as Carlin put it, "in the Rock era." Indeed, it is because of this difficulty that most of the singers ignore the 30s and 40s and simply "rock out," singing the old songs the only way they know how. Yet rocking out Porter means, as we have seen, irreparably changing the tone of his music, altering the subtle inflections of melody and harmony and rhyme that wink and nudge, playing suggestively with "real" feelings that cannot be stated outright. To turn a Cole Porter song into a rock song is, in other words, to blow its cover.

This is precisely what happens in the performances on *Red Hot + Blue* that neither willfully turn away from Porter nor attempt to do it straight. It is, for instance, the approach taken by U2 in their cover of "Night and Day," which so convincingly restyles the tune, dragging Porter's urbane, chromatic melodies down the social ladder into diatonic rock, that when Bono groans "I feel such a hungry yearning burning inside of me," we believe him. In fact, we could swear that he wrote the song

5. "Rockbeat: Rockclips," *Village Voice* 36 (5 November 1991): 102.

himself. Yet it is useful to recall that, in the earliest performances of this tune by Fred Astaire, the same moment—so obviously climactic for U2—sounded a good deal more decorous, and thus more ambivalent. The ambivalence seems to be consistent with the playfulness written into the composition itself. For Porter has forced the climactic line “burning inside of me” to rhyme with the ridiculous phrase “under the hide of me” (“Night and day / under the hide of me / I feel such a hungry yearning / burning inside of me”). The verbal play of the whole quatrain adds up to something more funny than serious, diminishing the apparent urgency of the lover’s confession.⁶

Even more significant, however, is the culminating line: “And its torment won’t be through, / ’til you let me spend my life making love to you / day and night, night and day.” This is the densest and most sinuously chromatic line of declamation (musical example 2). It is also the most verbally direct, a line in

Musical Example 2

which the subject of sex is finally broached. But the melody’s chromatic turns succeed in pulling the punch of the line’s love-making, turning the chiasmus at the end (“day and night, night and day”) into the focal point. The arrival of the title “hook” thus serves to diminish the force of the utterance, making us forget sex in favor of poetry. The directness of the sentiment has been largely swallowed up in the sheer density of the declamation, which shoves an unprecedented number of syllables

6. I am indebted to Alan Mason for this point, and for our many illuminating conversations about Porter. His forthcoming doctoral dissertation, “Reading the Closet: Cole Porter and His Contemporary Interpreters,” offers an ethnographic approach to Porter’s songs in the context of the San Francisco theater.

into the second half of the four-bar phrase. This musical mixed signal offers, I contend, a good example of what the witty, sophisticated Porter is all about.

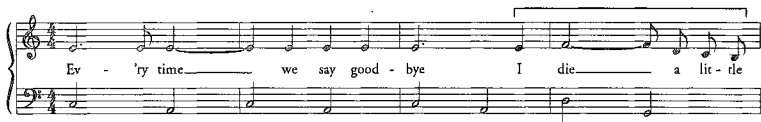
For Mordden, however, it is U2 who dig down to the music's emotional core. He was moved enough by their rendering of the song to conclude that a more authentic "Night and Day" simply could not exist. Another performance would, in his words, "pale next to U2.... A rock band won't give us exactly what Porter wrote, but it gives us what Porter *felt*."⁷ What lies behind Mordden's assumption (and quite likely our own) is the idea that the music Porter wrote always managed to cover up the feelings (we imagine) he really "felt." From the perspective of contemporary popular musicians, who prefer feelings up front, the site of a Porter song will naturally require emotional excavation, digging beneath the surface, past the wit and polish, to those deeper layers, where truth is likely to be hidden. Annie Lennox's version of "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" on *Red Hot + Blue* is so successful in this task that Mordden becomes rhapsodic: "Lennox is a Porter song.... Some might call it the album's best cut because it is the one least affected by rock. I call it one of the best recordings of a Porter song ever made, because it is not affected by anything."⁸ Lennox's performance, and the very idea of its transparency, brings me to my final point, which is the question of what the artists on *Red Hot + Blue* ultimately uncover through their modern performances.

Of course, the Lennox version does alter Porter's composition, in ways that finally affect our sense of the song's meaning. The arrangement for solo piano and singer sounds so simple that we get the feeling very little has been changed. But that's precisely the point. The cover is not "additive"; it doesn't lay on all sorts of trappings belonging to another style. It seems pure. So whatever changes it introduces become somehow more credible. One small point about Lennox's treatment of the first

7. Mordden, "Rock and Cole," 110.

8. *Ibid.*, 111.

phrase will illustrate the nature of her approach to the song as a whole. As Porter composed it, the melody seems deliberately to linger on the third degree of the scale, as if afraid to get to the point, while the bass rocks between chords I and vi, to re-contextualize that tone as both a major and minor sonority—a subtle foreshadowing of the song’s poignant punch line: “how strange the change from major to minor.” This pendulum-like swing between one chord and then the other also seems to underscore the meaning of the first words, marking time to represent the inevitability of “ev’ry time.” When the melody finally moves, it does so almost halfheartedly, forcing an obviously stronger statement (“I die a little”), and its stronger harmonic motion, into the metrically weak last quarter of the phrase, as if politely to diminish its impact (musical example 3).



Musical Example 3: Porter

Lennox’s version opens up this phrase, taking it at a tempo so slow that it can’t swing. She sounds stunned, barely able to speak. The harmonic direction of the line increases the emotional tension by replacing Porter’s static tonic harmonies with a chromatic descending bass that moves us decisively—if slowly—toward the second half of the phrase, the ii-V half-cadence, and its admission “I die a little.” The line’s trochaic declamation is also made haltingly regular, marking the changes, so that the word “die” now falls openly on a downbeat, and swells to fill two full beats (musical example 4).

Musical Example 4: Lennox

However understated her version, it pulls no emotional punches. The “real” feeling of the phrase, as she interprets it, is contained in that little death, which now is moved, so to speak, up front.

The video only strengthens the apparent emotional honesty of Lennox’s version, by making the song, in effect, the site of an utterly private narrative that is taking place inside the singer’s head. Lennox’s gaze is turned inward: fixed on an unknown spot beyond our field of vision, fixed on a screen, never fixed on us, her so-called audience (figure 6). We watch her watching, and receiving, “real” home movies, on a screen-within-a-screen, which, we may assume, contains images of Lennox herself, as well as her own brother—at least that’s what I thought (figure 7). We are free to assume anything, mind you, because we are in fact constructing the story ourselves, as home-movie voyeurs. The editing helps us along—most of the images are held long enough for a good look, most cut to

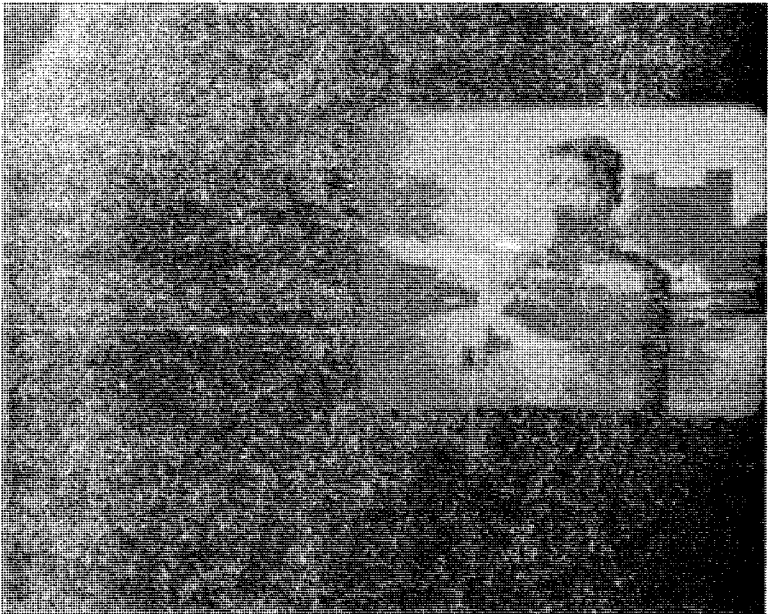


Figure 6

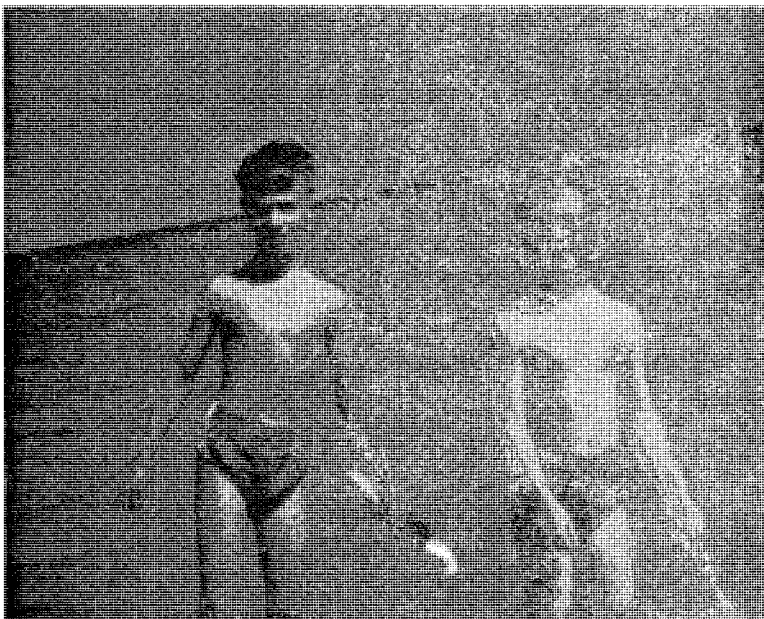


Figure 7

downbeats, or at least on important chord changes, giving us time to absorb both the musical phrase and the visual image in the same interval. The editing creates an atmosphere of reflection rather than of stimulation, quite unlike the surfeit of splices in Byrne's video—or, for that matter, most pop video. We have no more than thirty pictures to process over four minutes. The effect is of suspended time rather than of motion—in short, a space of memory or nostalgia that renders the song's theme of leave-taking all the more direct.

The home movies are the visual signs of that nostalgia. We recognize the images as belonging to a time when what we now call family values were intact. Everybody's there: Mummy, Sister, Brother. (Daddy's holding the camera, of course.) The images invite nostalgic reflection precisely because they represent a scene that we now know is irreparably damaged. They also provide, as it happens, the only color in the clip, in stark contrast to the bleached, corpse-like image of Lennox herself



Figure 8

(figure 8). The contrast of home movie to modern video seems to imagine nostalgia, then, as a hue, a kind of coloring of experience. When I learn—again from Ethan Mordden—that the scenes are not of Annie Lennox and family, but of the late Derek Jarman, the English film maker who at the time of the shooting was in fact dying of AIDS, this sense of an irrecoverable past becomes all the more poignant. It is a bleak post-modern leave-taking that is depicted. If Annie is saying “goodbye” to Derek, she does so in the future-anterior mode: his passing is experienced as something that *will have happened*. Indeed, it is the very fact of AIDS that stains the present with that sense of future loss.

Yet whether or not we know the little boy is Jarman, the fact of AIDS infects Lennox’s cover version, as it does *all* of the covers on the anthology, marking the love song itself as a site of loss. From this vantage point, Porter’s music would seem to represent a pre-lapsarian condition—a time when romance was

untainted by deadly disease. This privilege is perhaps one of the most important ingredients for the tone of a Porter song, which, while celebrating the naiveté of romantic love, offers a playfully ironic critique. It is the condition of Porter's age that these two modalities are available—and the privilege of his art to shift between them. Lennox's performance effectively strips away the irony, turning a love song into a transparent lament, a true "anthem for the nineties." And this act of *uncovering* reveals the paradox of the Porter tribute: it suggests the impossibility of Porter's music in the context of AIDS, an impossibility that, ironically enough, seems to generate a painful nostalgia for irony itself.