



Writers' Theatre is proud to present these four unique artists in seventeen of Coward's finest songs. This quartet was originally united under the direction of Jim Corti for a production of *Oh Coward!*, Roderick Cook's revue of "The Master" Noël Coward's best material. Jon Faris and Doug Peck then partnered with engineers Ray Nardelli and Josh Horvath to transform Writers' Theatre's Books on Vernon space into a recording studio to capture these terrific performances. In these notes, musical director, arranger and pianist Doug Peck shares history and anecdotes for each selection.

BRIGHT YOUNG PEOPLE (1931)

This gem of a song first appeared in *Cochran's 1931 Revue* sung by Queenie Leonard, Edward Cooper and Effie Atherton. As the *Oh Coward!* cast recording is out-of-print, our recording of this particular song is the only version currently available. Similar in style to *I've Been To A Marvelous Party*, which also features a Cecil Beaton reference ("Dear Cecil arrived wearing armor, some shells and a black feather boa"), "Bright Young People" perfectly captures the energy and tone of Coward's social milieu.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW (1928) / SAIL AWAY (1950)

"A Room With A View" first appeared in *This Year Of Grace* sung by Jessie Matthews and Sonnie Hale, although it was intended for the discarded *Star Dust* the previous year. Coward composed the song on the beach of Honolulu, having "unblushingly pinched [the title] from E. M. Forster's novel." There is a famous story of critic and Algonquin Round Table member Alexander Woolcott hating Coward's performance of the song in *This Year Of Grace* so much that "one evening he sat in a stage box with a group of ramshackle companions, including Harpo Marx, and when I began to sing the verse they all, with one accord, ostentatiously opened newspapers and read them. ... [W]ith what I still consider great presence of mind, I sang the last couplet in baby talk, whereupon Woolcott gave a dreadful scream and, making sounds only too indicative of rising nausea, staggered from the box." Woolcott and Marx notwithstanding, the song

was so popular that Coward's compatriot Sandy Wilson parodied it in *The Boy Friend* with the song "Room in Bloomsbury." Musically, it is one of the first songs he wrote in the AABA form popular with American songwriters and features many examples of the augmented fifth chord that was Coward's most favored harmony.

The present recording of "Sail Away" is a conflation of the two versions of the song Coward composed. Graham Payn, the actor/singer who lived with Coward and ran his estate after The Master's death, sang the first version in *Ace of Clubs* (1950). James Hurst premiered the new version when it became the title song of *Sail Away* (1961), the show that made a star of Elaine Stritch. Written in Coward's beloved Jamaica, it is one of his most recorded songs, including versions by Judy Garland, Mabel Mercer and The Pet Shop Boys. We are proud to join that celebrated list in honoring this very special song.

UNCLE HARRY (1946)

Coward served his country in World War II by raising the spirits of the troops with his songs, including "Uncle Harry," which was subsequently interpolated into *Pacific 1860* for Graham Payn and a line of beautiful girls to sing. Coward actually had an uncle named Harry and was clearly inspired by the tropical Jamaican environment in which he wrote the song. There are very few recordings of artists other than Coward and Payn singing the song, so we are proud to present a word-complete version of this terribly funny number that lampoons colonial missionaries.

LONDON PRIDE (1940)

Coward premiered the song himself before putting it in the review *Up and Doing* in 1941. If Coward's hero Ivor Novello's "Keep The Homefires Burning" was the theme song of World War I London, then his own "London Pride" was the perfect composition for World War II. Coward composed the song during the Blitz, and it is typical of his immense patriotism that his overriding emotion was one of pride even in a time of duress. Melodically, the song is based on the traditional street cry "Won't You Buy My Sweet-Smelling Lavender," which also inspired "Who Will Buy My Sweet Red Roses" in Lionel Bart's *Oliver*. There is also a major melodic resemblance to the German national anthem "Deutschland Über Alles," a theme Coward revisited in *Conversation Piece*. The American listener will also appreciate knowing that London Pride is another name for lavender flowers.

MRS. WORTHINGTON (1935)

One of Coward's most enduring numbers, "Mrs. Worthington" was the main song Coward used to rally the troops in his wartime performances. Many British women came forward to claim that Coward wrote the song about them (and their mothers), but these stories are probably all apocryphal. The present recording takes its cue from Coward's many renditions of the song, which mostly dispense with the notated pitches, declaiming the lyrics over the accompaniment. This arrangement, which starts with a complete lack of tempo, is intended to embody the increase in rage the speakers have for Mrs. Worthington and her untalented offspring. Coward's friend and colleague Hermione Gingold wrote a retort song, "Tit for Tat" that is also worth discovering.

I TRAVEL ALONE (1934)

Coward's longtime assistant and friend, Cole Lesley, referred to "I Travel Alone," which was never part of any show, as "one of the most indicative, self-revealing songs [he] ever wrote." It is one of Coward's most harmonically interesting songs, while the lyric is deceptively simple. The three-part harmony and solo piano break in Doug Peck's arrangement seek to amplify the emotional experience of this singular number.

MAD DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN (1931)

After allowing Beatrice Lillie to premiere the song in *The Third Little Show*, Coward unleashed his own verbal prowess on the number in *Words and Music* the following year. The Master often proudly stated, "I wrestled in my mind with the complicated rhythms and rhymes of the song until finally it was complete, without even the aid of pencil and paper. I sang it triumphantly and unaccompanied to my travelling companion [from Hanoi to Saigon] on the veranda of a small jungle guesthouse. Not only Jeffrey, but the gecko lizards and the tree frogs gave every vocal indication of enthusiasm." Coward also loved to relate the story of Winston Churchill and Theodore Roosevelt debating whether "In Bangkok at twelve o'clock they foam at the mouth and run" ended the first or second refrain. Of course, Coward often flipped the verses in his own recordings, so in a way, both great men were correct. In 1968, when Coward visited Hong Kong, he got to fire off the "Noonday Gun" he refers to in the song. It is fascinating to study Coward's own renditions of the song over a thirty-year period, in which the tempo steadily increased and extra measures and rests were eliminated. Cole Porter told Coward that Noël's performance was "the only time [I] ever heard anyone sing a song

straight through in one breath.” It is in that spirit, and after months of practice, that Rob Lindley performs this signature number.

THREE WHITE FEATHERS (1932)

Premiered in *Words and Music* by Doris Hare, this saucy number gained popularity when Beatrice Lillie first performed it in *Set To Music* in 1939. Those two artists and Barbara Cason (the original female star of *Oh Coward!*) recorded the only previous renditions of the song, so we are particularly proud to capture Kate Fry’s cheeky, jazz-tinged performance. American listeners may find it helpful to know that three brass balls were traditionally hung outside pawnshops to indicate their services. Also, the pitches indicated for “I can’t help feeling” and “We lived at Ealing” are identical to the first five notes of Al Dubin and Harry Warren’s “The Gold Diggers’ Song” (“We’re in the money”). While there is no proof that Coward was quoting that song, the allusion is certainly evocative.

YOU WERE THERE (1936)

Noël Coward and Gertrude Lawrence first sang this ravishing song in *Shadow Play*, one of the one-acts from *Tonight at 8:30*. While many of Coward’s other ballads are wistful or emotionally guarded in some way, this lyric is open-heartedly optimistic and gratefully positive about love. Perhaps this is why it is musically most similar to the standards of the great American songwriters, although always with signature Coward harmonies and turns-of-phrase. It is a wonder that more singers, particularly jazz artists, haven’t followed Laurence Harvey, Bobby Short, Irene Kral and Steve Ross in recording this gorgeous tune. We are proud to add John Sanders’ lush reading to that list.

A BAR ON THE PICCOLA MARINA (1954)

Often called “Mrs. Wentworth-Brewster” after its zesty heroine, this song was introduced by Coward at the Café de Paris and subsequently performed many times by Beatrice Lillie. In his published complete *Lyrics*, Coward preserved the original “English” words as well as the version “sung at Las Vegas.” The present recording mainly captures the American version, with a few lines from the original (“And then in the middle of the funeral wake, with her mouth full of excellent Madeira cake...”). Coward was reportedly disappointed when the Italian publisher Ricordi demanded 25% of the song’s royalties for his thematic quote of the Neapolitan song “Funiculì, Funiculà” by Peppino Turco and Luigi Denza (“Day in, day out, she would gad about...”). The final punch line (“and most of them have a great deal more to offer than Papa”) is a perfect example of a Coward punch line that gets funnier the more you hear it.

IF LOVE WERE ALL (1929)

This signature song was first sung in *Bitter Sweet* by Ivy St. Helier, and was the last song Coward ever sang in public at London's Claridge's Hotel in 1972. The lyric "the most I've had is just a talent to amuse" became a sort of autobiographical calling card for Coward, and "a talent to amuse" is printed on his tombstone. The list of great ladies who have recorded the song is quite long, including Mabel Mercer, Judy Garland, Shirley Bassey, Irene Kral, Rosemary Ashe, Lesley Garrett, Twiggy, Carmen McRae (the only singer to do an up-tempo version) and Elaine Stritch. In the present recording, Kate Fry and Doug Peck have focused on the intimacy and simple honesty of this gorgeous melody.

MAD ABOUT THE BOY (1932)

"Mad About The Boy" was introduced in *Words and Music* by Joyce Barbour, Steffi Duna, Nora Howard and Doris Hare. These four women, who played a society woman, a street walker, a schoolgirl and a Cockney maid, respectively, each took a turn describing their passion and Coward took great pains to distinguish each character musically and lyrically. Coward also wrote a fifth verse for a businessman ("When I told my wife she said 'I've never heard such nonsense in my life'"), but it was suppressed for obvious reasons. The present recording is a combination of the society woman ("I met him at a party just a couple of years ago") and the street walker ("I have to pay my rental and I can't afford to waste much time"). In typically understated fashion, Coward claimed "I have always been very attached to this number." It is one of his only songs to dwell in a minor key, which lends a blue color to the number similar to the American standards of Harold Arlen and Cole Porter. There is a very rare recording of Coward singing the song and it is believed to be the only extant example of Coward accompanying himself at the piano. "Mad About The Boy" is Coward's biggest royalty earner and most recorded song, with versions by Gertrude Lawrence, Beatrice Lillie (who singularly performed the Cockney and schoolgirl verses), Lena Horne, Dinah Shore, Cleo Laine, Julie London, Dinah Washington and Marianne Faithful, among many others. Rob Lindley's haunted performance is the only known first-person version by a male artist since The Master recorded the song in 1932.

WORLD WEARY (1928) / TWENTIETH CENTURY BLUES (1931)

Introduced by Beatrice Lillie in *This Year Of Grace*, "World Weary" was a constant fixture of Coward's cabaret acts and was filmed in *Together With Music*, his 1955 television special with Mary Martin. It is possibly the most

perfect example of Coward pairing a wry lyric with a lush melody for maximum effect.

“Twentieth Century Blues” was originally sung by Binnie Barnes in *Cavalcade* and is one of the songs most transformed in cabaret performances by Coward’s collaboration with arranger Peter Matz, who made the rhythms and harmonies even more sophisticated. This is the only Coward tune performed by both Elton John and Marianne Faithful and continues to possess great resonance even in the twenty-first century.

Both of these songs are strikingly modern in tone and attitude and audiences are always surprised to find that they are two of Coward’s earliest songs. As heard here, they make a natural medley.

I’LL FOLLOW MY SECRET HEART (1934)

Premiered by Yvonne Printemps in *Conversation Piece*, this long-lined waltz ballad is a favorite of classical singers such as Lily Pons, Joan Sutherland and Ben Heppner, although it has also received lovely versions by artists as diverse as Sting, Frank Sinatra, Julie Andrews and Carmen McRae. Coward almost abandoned *Conversation Piece* until this melody came to him late at night “in G-flat, a key I had never played in before.” A self-trained pianist, Coward claimed to be only comfortable playing in a few keys (“the sight of two sharps frightens me to death”), so perhaps his unfamiliarity with this tonality (six flats/sharps) provoked this stunningly simple tune. In between Lindley’s simply intoned verses, Peck evokes the ultra popular Coward tune “Someday I’ll Find You,” which Coward and Gertrude Lawrence first sang in *Private Lives* in 1930.

THE PARTY’S OVER NOW (1932)

Originally heard in *Words and Music*, this natural closing number was also used in *Set To Music* and almost all of Coward’s cabaret performances. The Master humbly called it “a pleasant little song without being startlingly original,” although his modesty was surely false. When simply sung, it has a much greater impact, bidding farewell to the listener in the most beautifully simple way; we find it the perfect conclusion to this album of Coward’s best words and music.

“The party’s over now, the dawn is drawing very nigh. The candles gutter, the starlight leaves the sky. It’s time for little boys and girls to hurry home to bed for there’s a new day waiting just ahead. Life is sweet, but time is fleet beneath the magic of the moon. Dancing time may seem sublime, but it is ended all too soon. The thrill is gone, to linger on would spoil it anyhow. Let’s creep away from the day, for the party’s over now.”

In compiling these notes, five sources proved supremely helpful, and they are all recommended for further reading on The Master and his music:

Citron, Stephen. *Noël & Cole: The Sophisticates*. New York: Hal Leonard, 1992.

Coward, Noël. *Sir Noël Coward: His Words and Music*. New York: Hal Leonard, 1981.

Coward, Noël. *The Lyrics of Noël Coward*. New York: Tusk/Overlook, 1965.

Payn, Graham, w/ Barry Day. *My Life With Noël Coward*. New York: Applause, 1994.

The Noël Coward Music Index,
www.Noëlcoward.net/ncmiindex/mainindex.html