In 1924, music critic Gilbert Seldes deemed Cole Porter the likely successor to Irving Berlin, “if he ever chooses to stop.” Equally comfortable with blues, ragtime and operatic melodies, Seldes claimed, Porter added “astonishing,” sophisticated, satirical lyrics.

Porter, of course, became one of the greatest American songwriters of the 20th-century. His boatload of iconic songs include “Night and Day,” “Anything Goes,” “You’re the Top” and “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.”

In “The Letters of Cole Porter,” Cliff Eisen, a professor of music history at King’s College London, and Dominic McHugh, a reader in musicology at the University of Sheffield, make available an extensive collection of his correspondence, much of it published for the first time. Because Porter’s letters were brief (and the Cole Porter Trust held back material from the mid-1940s until his death in 1964), Mr. Eisen and Mr. McHugh have added primary sources (diaries, newspaper articles and reviews) and a narrative that fills in the gaps and sets the context.

Mr. Eisen and Mr. McHugh have given themselves a difficult task. A wealthy, well-traveled, high-liver, and a closeted homosexual, Cole Porter was not self-reflective. “I’ve been accused most of my life of being remote,” he acknowledged in an interview with a reporter for The New York Times. The letters reveal Porter as a hard-working professional (who suffered chronic pain after he was thrown from a horse in 1937), and a charming host, eager to spend time with his many friends, to whom he always sent his love. He often seems superficial and self-absorbed, lonely when alone, and, perhaps, repressed.

Mr. Eisen and Mr. McHugh maintain, for example, that Porter was a voracious reader. Porter’s letters, however, are silent about what he thinks about the books he’s read. Other than a passing reference to his preference for Republicans, Porter is silent about American culture and politics. The volume documents Cole Porter’s passionate affair with Boris Kochno, the lover of Sergei Diaghilev,
founder of the Ballets Russes, in 1925, but sheds no further light on his homosexuality.

According to the editors, Cole Porter’s “depth of feeling” for Linda Thomas Porter, his wife, “is striking.” It is difficult, however, to find it in his correspondence. “Linda has improved lately, but not in her essential illness,” Porter informed Sam Stark in 1949, and then added, “I hate to think of you feeling miserable, all the time at Laguna. Why don’t you make sense and move back to a desert climate?” “My Linda has been seriously ill for eight months” Porter told Ethel Merman. “But if anything can make her well again, it is your broadcast every Sunday night at 9:30.”

Fortunately, “The Letters of Cole Porter” are filled with insights about the craft of songwriting and the business of show business in Hollywood and on Broadway. Mr. Eisen and Mr. McHugh list the new lyrics P.G. Wodehouse wrote for “You’re the Top” for the London production of “Anything Goes.” They tell the story of the “fabricated flap” over the origins of “Don’t Fence Me In” and the incident that gave Porter the phrase “de-lovely.” The editors include Porter’s extensive (and hilarious) journal entries, documenting his “story” conferences with MGM executives about “Born to Dance.” And a fascinating exchange between Porter and Abe Burrows about how his songs should “fit” into the musical “Can-Can.”

As he entered a prolonged illness in the late 1950s, Porter stopped writing. Madeline Smith, his intensely loyal secretary, kept up his correspondence. An impacted hip fracture, an infection, and the amputation of his leg, Ms. Smith reported, were “the beginning of the end.” Through it all, however, he remained “marvelous — very talkative.” On Oct. 16, 1964, she sent telegrams to “let your good friends know” Cole Porter had died at St. John’s Hospital in Santa Monica, Calif. The funeral was held in his hometown, Peru, Ind., attended (as his will stipulated) only by “relatives and close friends.”

Ms. Smith was surely right to point out that Porter’s death marked “the end of an Era.” It is less clear, even to readers of this lengthy volume, whether the great songwriter would have appreciated her postscript: “Three great and good men have left the Waldorf [where they all maintained apartments] now: General MacArthur, Cole Porter, and Herbert Hoover.”

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