

## *Who Was Noël Coward?*

Noël Coward died fifty years ago this month. He must have been famous or at least talented because there is a theatre named after him, but who was he?

Coward was one of the true giants of entertainment; his talents included songwriting, acting, writing plays, novels, and autobiography.



He was born into “genteel poverty” at Teddington on December 16, 1899 at the zenith of the British Empire. As a child he was enlisted at the [\*Italia Conti\*](#) – then in Central London but now based at the Barbican in the City of London; its alumni include Jack Hawkins – who died the same year as Coward; and the *Carry On* actors Charles Hawtrey and Leslie Phillips.

Those still living include Naomi Campbell, Pixie Lott, and the 88 year old Nanette Newman.

Coward's acting career began young as did his songwriting. His first "completely integrated song" was a little ditty called [\*Forbidden Fruit\*](#) which he wrote in 1916, but his first published song – as lyricist – was a truly awful piece called [\*The Baseball Rag\*](#).

Coward first hit the headlines in 1924, not as an actor but as a playwright. *The Vortex* - sensational and controversial at the time - scored on both sides of the Atlantic. Based on the scandals of a dysfunctional upper class family, it was tried out at the *Everyman Theatre* in Hampstead (now a cinema) on November 25 with Coward himself as the male lead then moved to the West End, opening at the now long lost *Royalty Theatre* on his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

*The Vortex* is still performed today and recent performances can be found on YouTube, but it was lucky to escape the censor. While today depictions of cocaine use and the mouthing of the vilest obscenities are taken for granted, until 1968 the British theatre was controlled strictly by the Lord Chamberlain who could refuse to license a play or demand changes be made.

After the success of *The Vortex* came failure. *This Was A Man* was banned in Britain and was premiered in the West End only in 2017. In the United States it fared little better. The same year, Coward came down with "mental exhaustion" having been working flat out since his boyhood. He vacationed in Hawaii where he said the song [\*A Room With A View\*](#) came to him while lying on the beach, dozing. The title is taken from the 1908 novel by E.M. Forster; in turn, the Coward title of *This Was A Man* was purloined by Jeffrey Archer for one of his novels.

(Coward had in fact first visited the United States in 1921 when he sailed to New York on the *S.S. Aquitania*).

Next came *Sirocco* (which he had written in 1921). It was said to have been greeted with boos and jeers – including by the critics – but that was as bad as things would get for Coward. It was followed by the hit *This Year Of Grace*, which is technically a revue rather than a play, a format that is largely if not totally lost, at least to the professional theatre. Then came *Bitter Sweet* in 1933. (A full list of Coward's plays along with all his other works can be found on the official [Noël Coward website](#)).

Unquestionably, Coward's most charming work is *Blithe Spirit*, about a man whose second marriage is disrupted by the ghost of his first wife. It was [filmed in 1945](#) with Rex Harrison in the lead roll as the haunted husband.

In 1918, Coward had failed a medical board for active service in what was then known as the Great War, while by the outbreak of the Second World War he was nearly forty, though not only did he entertain the troops, he served as a British agent, not the James Bond type but gathering intelligence, mixing with influential people on both sides of the Atlantic and reporting back. After the War, it would be revealed that Coward's name was one of nearly three thousand on a list marked for execution should Hitler have won.

His performing in theatres of war rather than theatres of the arts earned him a mention in *Hansard*. Such performances were organised by ENSA - the Entertainments National Service Association – alluded to unflatteringly by [Roy Hudd](#) and others as Every Night Something Awful.

After the War, one Coward song was misunderstood by the gullible. That was [Don't Let's Be Beastly To The Germans](#). This was also, he said, the first time the word “bloody” had been used on record. (There is at least one alternative recording which does not include that word).

Coward's plays have tended to overshadow his songwriting talent. He wrote around fifty plays and over four hundred songs. Among his finest are *Don't Put Your Daughter On The Stage*, *Mrs. Worthington*, *Mad Dogs And Englishmen* – his signature tune, and *London Pride*, the latter written in the wake of a bombing raid on the capital. Coward has been called the first English rapper; he was inducted into the Songwriters Hall Of Fame in 1988.

After the Second World War, he enjoyed a Renaissance including a season at the *Desert Inn*, Las Vegas on “a rather excessive salary”. Although he had long appeared on the radio, he made his television debut only in 1955 in a CBS special with Mary Martin. Coward had style as well as presence, no one ever made holding a cigarette look more elegant. American's loved him, and [Coward reciprocated](#).

He became a tax exile in 1956, something numerous British rock musicians have done since, but he chose not the United States, opting for Jamaica as did the author Ian Fleming. Coward was buried there at his home, *Firefly*.

**He was knighted in the 1970 New Year's Honours List, though perhaps the greatest honour bestowed on him came after his death, a memorial at Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. His last public appearance was at a gala performance of the play *Oh Coward!* on Broadway in 1973, shortly before his death. He died March 26.**

**One other thing should be mentioned about Coward, he was homosexual. This has always been rampant in the theatre. The playwright Joe Orton revelled in his depravity, but for Coward, sexuality was a private matter, and not just because it was illegal in Britain until 1967. Although homosexuality was thought to be the kiss of death for any performer, this was not necessarily the case. In October 1953, the famous actor Sir John Gielgud was arrested for importuning in a London public toilet.**

**When he appeared in court, the authorities did their best to hush it up, but unfortunately for Gielgud, a court reporter recognised him. He was fined but obviously thought the worst was to come. Instead, he received a standing ovation the next time he appeared on the stage.**

**It may have been though that Coward was not entirely homosexual or homosexual all his life. There is some evidence that he had an affair with his very slightly older co-star Gertrude Lawrence. Certainly he did not shy away from female company. Leaving that aside, Coward would have despised today's "gay scene" the same way he despised what he called kitchen sink dramas. Today's homosexuals in and out of the entertainment world would do well to follow his example.**

**<https://theduran.com/who-was-noel-coward/>**