

COLE PORTER IN PARIS / FEATHERTOP

COLE PORTER IN PARIS

Cole Porter in Paris was an NBC TV/Bell System Family Theatre musical special that aired on January 17, 1973. The producers assembled an all-star cast including Diahann Carroll, Perry Como, Louis Jourdan, Connie Stevens, with special performances by Charles Aznavour and Twiggy, and the dance trio comprised of choreographer Alan Johnson, Graciela Daniele, and Barbara Alston. Shot on soundstages and various locations, including, of course Paris.

The impressive creative team included directors Walter C. Miller and Martin Charnin, with settings by Don Shirley, Jr., costumes by Theoni V. Aldredge, musical direction by Elliot Lawrence, and arrangements by Nick Perito. In the end, it was a rather typical special of that era – nothing too creative, an eclectic cast, without much point at all. *The New York Times* began its review with, “Television’s absurdity can almost be charming – sometimes.” The review went on to opine, “And then, not too surprisingly, two-thirds of the program had absolutely nothing to do with Paris.” But the reviewer did go on to praise Diahann Carroll, the sets and costumes and ended the review with, “For all its more curious aspects, the hour had its respectable quotient of pleasantness.”

It would not be too far into the future when this type of TV spectacular would go the way of the dodo bird, and for all the kitschy qualities of some of them, looking back at them they have a wacky charm to them and maybe someday nostalgia will kick in and some enterprising person will do one and the genre will come back.

FEATHERTOP

There was a time when TV presented musicals especially written for the medium with regularity, written by the likes of Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Stephen Sondheim, Livingston and Evans, Bock and Harnick, Jule Styne and Comden and Green, Bob Merrill, and many others.

Feathertop, based on the story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, aired on October 19, 1961 as a one-hour special on the ABC Network. The adaptation and teleplay was by John Marsh, and the music by Mary Rodgers, who’d had a big success with *Once Upon a Mattress*, which had proved her to be a chip off the old Richard Rodgers, her father. The lyrics were by an up-and-comer named Martin Charnin, the same Martin Charnin that would produce *Cole Porter in Paris*, but more importantly the same Martin Charnin who would do the lyrics for and direct a little show called *Annie*.

The producer and choreographer was TV staple Tony Charmoli, the director was Dean Whitmore, and a stellar cast was assembled, including the wonderful Jane Powell, TV’s Wyatt Earp, Hugh O’Brian, Cathleen Nesbitt, Hans Conried, and in support, Jackie Joseph, Shirley Mills, Pat Lloyd, and Anthony (Scooter) Teague. The setting was changed from Hawthorne’s Salem, Massachusetts to the more colorful New Orleans. The musical fantasy scored with critics. *The New York Times* said, “A lovely touch of theatre was brought to television Thursday night... a musical fantasy of beguiling and tuneful gentleness that illumed Channel 7 with a glow of charming make believe for very nearly a full hour.” *The New York World Telegram* raved, “A bright, original musical comedy bursting forth from that tired, blinking little screen.”

Sadly, most of these shows and specials are lost to the public, although thankfully some of them have been saved by the Paley Center for Media. But amazingly, a few did promotional recordings that were used for advertising the show, not for sale to the public. And so we have these two delights for your listening pleasure.

— Bruce Kimmel