

# "The purpose of Red, Hot & Blue is to remove the stigma of AIDS."

BY ADAM BLOCK



On Dec. 1, the Cole Porter tribute/AIDS benefit broadcast *Red, Hot & Blue* will air in 20 countries and in 18 languages. In the United States, ABC will offer an abridged version of the 90-minute special, with 24 minutes

trimmed for ads. The show promises to be stunning; the cuts will be instructive. The special aims to entertain and educate. ABC is squeamish about half of that equation.

"They seem to want a Cole Porter special with just a *dab* about AIDS," one insider admits.

This monumental project began with a conversation. In April 1989, British filmmaker Leigh Blake was talking with New York critic John Carlin about their sadness at the loss of so many friends to AIDS as well as their mutual affection for the songs of Porter. The chat evolved into a project: to convince contemporary artists to reinterpret Porter's catalog and donate all proceeds to fight AIDS.

Porter was gay, and Blake notes, "His sophisticated songs are about sex, love, and experimentation—incredibly appropriate for this [project]."

Blake first took the project to David Byrne, who immediately agreed, and then to Neneh Cherry, U2, Jimmy Somerville, Sinéad O'Connor, Lisa Stansfield, k. d. lang, Erasure, and other top acts. "We felt there was a potential for generational discussions if we could attract the parents who were fans of Cole Porter and the kids who knew these artists," she says.

Blake and Carlin's next masterstroke was to ask a group of distinguished directors to produce videos. Wim Wenders, Jim Jarmusch, Jonathan Demme, Alex Cox, and Jean-Baptiste Mondino all agreed to participate.

Then they solicited images from artists Sue Coe, Gary Panter, and Jenny Holzer, who use AIDS as a subtext in their work.

Performance artist Bill Irwin agreed to do informational skits, and a line of T-shirts was designed, with Jean-Paul Gaultier and Rifat Ozbek overseeing merchandise.

Finally, Blake and Carlin emerged with 20 tunes, 18 videos, and linking footage—"something beautiful after an 18-month nightmare," Blake laughs.

There had been myriad frustrations, however. George Michael, Michael Jackson, Morrissey, Elton John, the Pet Shop Boys, and the B-52s had all declined. Prince was too busy; Boy George, too late. Madonna and Billy Idol were both slated but then had to drop out. Director Pedro Almodóvar had agreed to film David Byrne but was waylaid. Martin Scorsese never called back. David Lynch was overworked.

Guns N' Roses was one act that was never invited. "I wanted committed artists," Blake explains. "I'm not interested in having people who are homophobic in my environment or on my record. I know that some of the artists we asked couldn't fit in, but we also faced record companies that don't want their sexy rock stars associated with a sexually transmitted disease. Corporate spon-



Composer Cole Porter  
*Sophisticated songs about sex and love*

sors were even worse. They were unwilling to underwrite this despite the worldwide broadcast and massive publicity.

"The purpose of the show is to remove the stigma from AIDS—to tell people with HIV that they're not alone," she continues. "It's also a commercial to sell records. I think the album [*Red, Hot & Blue*, (Chrysalis Records)] is brilliant, but when you see the videos, those songs just fly."

ABC's broadcast will be a must-see. Who could miss k. d. lang laundering her sick lover's lingerie and then kissing the crotch—on network TV? The three most provocative videos, though, are slated to be cut.

Somerville's ethereal rendition of "From This Moment On" features boys wrestling and a glistening nude male torso and closes with a dreamy lad gazing at a dollar bill on which the phrase FIND A CURE appears. The Jungle Brothers reinvent "I Get a Kick Out of You" as a horny safe-sex rap, which boasts squirt guns jetting milk, chocolate dripping on gloved hands and latex-covered faces, flashing images of a gun in a home-boy's mouth, and the slogan "Use a Condom." Erasure's mock newscast to "Too Darn Hot" displays a litany of ACT UP slogans, which a representative of ABC's standards-and-practices department labeled "a one-sided assault on the United States government."

To see those tapes, you may have to wait for the retail release of the unabridged video, due out in April.

ABC may claim that it is simply using the special's most commercial acts, but the exclusion of the show's only two openly gay singers and its only African-American male rappers replicates the kind of exclusion that has fueled the epidemic and marginalized its sufferers. They are the videos that best abide by the ACT UP slogan KNOWLEDGE = POWER and also celebrate Porter's belief that SEX = LIFE.

Admits Blake: "This project has turned me into an AIDS activist. I've been battling bigotry and homophobia for 18 months. I'm enraged that those suffering from this epidemic haven't been greeted with open arms. For me, *Red, Hot & Blue* is a starting point—a first step. I'm already thinking about another AIDS project to do." ▼