



John Philip Sousa Biography

John Philip Sousa was born Nov. 6, 1854, at 636 G Street, SE, Washington, D.C., near the Marine Barracks where his father, Antonio, was a musician in the Marine Band. He received his grammar school education in Washington and for several of his school years enrolled in a private conservatory of music operated by John Esputa, Jr. There he studied piano and most of the orchestral instruments, but his first love was the violin. He gained great proficiency on the violin, and at the age of 13 he was almost persuaded to join a circus band. However, his father intervened and enlisted him as an apprentice musician in the Marine Band. Except for a period of six months, Sousa remained in the band until he was 20. In addition to his musical training in the Marine Band, he studied music theory and composition with George Felix Benkert, a noted Washington orchestra leader and teacher.

After his discharge from the Marine Corps, Sousa remained in Washington for a time, conducting and playing the violin. He toured with several traveling theater orchestras and moved to Philadelphia in 1876. There he worked as a composer, arranger, and proofreader for publishing houses. Sousa was fascinated by the operetta form and toured with a company producing the musical *Our Flirtation*, for which he wrote the incidental music and the march. While on tour in St. Louis, he received a telegram offering him the leadership of the Marine Band in Washington. He accepted and reported for duty on Oct. 1, 1880, becoming the band's 17th Leader.

The Marine Band was Sousa's first experience conducting a military band, and he approached musical matters unlike most of his predecessors. He replaced much of the music in the library with symphonic transcriptions and changed the instrumentation to meet his needs. Rehearsals became exceptionally strict, and he shaped his musicians into the country's premier military band. Marine Band concerts began to attract discriminating audiences, and the band's reputation began to spread widely.

Sousa first received acclaim in military band circles with the writing of his march "The Gladiator" in 1886. From that time on he received ever-increasing attention and respect as a composer. In 1888, he wrote "Semper Fidelis." Dedicated to "the officers and men of the Marine Corps," it is traditionally known as the "official" march of the Marine Corps.

In 1889, Sousa wrote the "Washington Post" march to promote an essay contest sponsored by the newspaper; the march was soon adapted and identified with the new dance called the two-step. The "Washington Post" became the most popular tune in America and Europe, and critical response was overwhelming. A British band journalist remarked that since Johann Strauss, Jr., was called the "Waltz King" that American bandmaster Sousa should be called the "March King." With this, Sousa's regal title was coined and has remained ever since.

Under Sousa the Marine Band also made its first recordings. The phonograph was a relatively new invention, and the Columbia Phonograph Company sought an ensemble to record. The Marine Band was chosen, and 60 cylinders were released in the fall of 1890. By 1897, more than 400 different titles were available for sale, placing Sousa's marches among the first and most popular pieces ever recorded, and the Marine Band one of the world's first "recording stars."

The immense popularity of the Marine Band made Sousa anxious to take his Marine Band on tour, and in 1891 President Benjamin Harrison gave official sanction for the first Marine Band tour, a tradition which has continued annually since that time, except in times of war and global pandemic. After the second Marine Band tour in 1892, Sousa was approached by his manager, David Blakely, to organize his own civilian concert band, and on July 30 of that year, John Philip Sousa resigned as Director of the Marine Band. At his farewell concert on the White House lawn, Sousa was presented with a handsome engraved baton by members of the Marine Band as a token of their respect and esteem. This baton was returned to the Marine Band by Sousa's daughters,

Jane Priscilla Sousa and Helen Sousa Abert, in 1953. The Sousa baton is now traditionally passed to the new Director of the Marine Band during change of command ceremonies.

In his 12 years as Leader of the Marine Band, he served under five Presidents, and the experience he gained with the Marine Band would be applied to his civilian band for the next 39 years. With his own band, Sousa's fame and reputation would grow to even greater heights.

Sousa's last appearance before "The President's Own" was on the occasion of the Carabao Wallow of 1932 in Washington. Sousa, as a distinguished guest, rose from the speaker's table, took the baton from Director Captain Taylor Branson, and led the orchestra through the stirring strains of "Hands Across the Sea." John Philip Sousa died on March 6, 1932, at Reading, Pa., where he was scheduled to conduct the Ringgold Band. His body was brought to his native Washington to lie in state in the Band Hall at Marine Barracks. Four days later, two companies of Marines and Sailors, the Marine Band, and honorary pall-bearers from the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps headed the funeral cortege from the Marine Barracks to Congressional Cemetery.

His music was not the only memorial to John Philip Sousa. In his native city on Dec. 9, 1939, the new Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge across the Anacostia River was dedicated to the memory of the great American composer and bandmaster. More recently, Sousa was enshrined in the Hall of Fame for Great Americans in a ceremony at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1976.

In a fitting tribute to its 17th Leader, in 1974 the Marine Band rededicated its historic band hall at Marine Barracks as "John Philip Sousa Band Hall." The bell from the S.S. John Philip Sousa, a World War II Liberty ship, is there. On Nov. 6, 2004, "The March King's" 150th birthday, "The President's Own" and 33rd Commandant of the Marine Corps General Michael W. Hagee dedicated the new band hall at Marine Barracks Annex John Philip Sousa Hall. "The President's Own" concluded his sesquicentennial year on Nov. 5, 2005, by unveiling an eight-foot bronze statue of Sousa outside the band hall. The statue, funded by the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation, private donor Mickey Gordon, and the John Philip Sousa Foundation, is the only one of its kind. Sculpted by artist Terry Jones, the statue is an enduring testament to the composer's contributions to the Marine Band.

Unequaled by his predecessors, John Philip Sousa is responsible for bringing the United States Marine Band to an unprecedented level of excellence: a standard upheld by every Marine Band Director since. But perhaps the most significant tribute to Sousa's influence on American culture, "The Stars and Stripes Forever" was designated as the national march of the United States on Dec. 11, 1987. A White House memorandum states the march has become "an integral part of the celebration of American life."