

## John Philip Sousa (1854-1932)



### FAST FACTS

- Known as “The March King”
- Played many different instruments, but his dad forced him to join the Marines
- Became conductor of “The President’s Own” Marine Band
- Wrote 136 marches and 15 operettas
- Toured Europe many times with his band

Born: 1854 (Washington, DC)

Died: 1932 (Reading, PA)

John Philip Sousa was a famous American composer and conductor who became known as the “March King” for the amount of patriotic and inspiring pieces he wrote for professional bands. Sousa began studying and playing piano, stringed instruments, woodwinds, and brass. When he tried to join a circus band at age 13, however, his father forced him to join the Marines. Sousa was only with the Marines eight years before he was discharged so he could perform violin professionally. He also began conducting theater orchestras at this time. Inspired by this kind of music, he began to write operettas (light-hearted shows much like musical theater of today).

For 12 years, Sousa was appointed conductor of “The President’s Own”, which is the official music organization of the U.S. Marines. Sousa served five different presidents while he was the conductor of “The President’s Own”: presidents Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Cleveland, and Harrison. He composed pieces for the band that gave people a sense of excitement and pride, called “marches”. In 1889, Sousa composed *The Washington Post* march, for which he received international fame. After the band took two separate tours, Sousa resigned to start his own community band. His band performed in New Jersey, but also performed at the World’s Columbian Exposition, also known as The Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Katherine Lee Bates, who wrote the lyrics for *America, the Beautiful* also attended this Chicago World’s Fair.

A few years later, Sousa’s manager suddenly died while Sousa and his wife were in Europe. Their return trip home sailing across the Atlantic Ocean inspired the music for Sousa’s most famous march, *The Stars and Stripes Forever*. In the following years, Sousa’s band toured Europe three times, and completed a world tour, in which they performed in Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Fiji, Great Britain, and Hawaii, among others. Some of Sousa’s operettas were performed throughout New England while Sousa and his band toured. After World War I, Sousa began to speak out about music education and the rights of composers. He also completed a book called *A Manual for Trumpet and Drum*, in which he described methods and techniques for playing trumpet and drum. Sousa conducted his last rehearsal of *Stars and Stripes Forever* in Pennsylvania in 1932. He died the next day, and was buried in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

### Let’s Listen!



- See “The President’s Own” Marine Band perform *The Stars and Stripes Forever*: [click here](#).
- Listen to Sousa’s *The Liberty Bell* march: [click here](#).
- Click here for PBS’s selected recordings of popular Sousa pieces: [click here](#).