

★ American Art and Music Activity 14

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John Philip Sousa

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When you hear a marching band playing music at a local parade, who do you think of? If John Philip Sousa is your answer, then you are like many of us in thinking that this composer, more than any other, gave America a national musical identity.

Born on November 6, 1854, in Washington, D.C., Sousa began his musical career early in life. He started by studying the violin, but in 1867 decided to learn the trombone. At the age of 13, he joined the United States Marine Band as an apprentice. For five years he played with the band before returning to the violin as his instrument of choice. Although Sousa was only 18 years old at this time, he played in and conducted a number of theater orchestras during the next few years. This training as a conductor would serve him well later in his career. In 1876, he played in the orchestra at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.

Then, in 1880, Sousa once again joined the Marine Band, this time as its conductor. Over the next several years, Sousa improved his technique and began to compose the marches that gave him the title "The March King."

In 1892, Sousa left the United States Marine Band to begin his own band, which became the most successful band of the time in the nation. His tours throughout the United States and Europe gained him great popularity as a musical personality.

His early marches included the "Washington Post March" in 1889 and "The Liberty Bell March" in 1893. Between 1896 and 1897 Sousa composed his most famous march, the one for which he is best remembered, "The Stars and Stripes Forever."



John Philip Sousa and his Chicago Band. Inset: "The March King" about 1924

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His tours of Europe between 1900 and 1911 came to a halt when the United States entered World War I. During the war he became director of all the Navy bands, and he resumed his tours after the end of the war.

Throughout his active musical career, John Philip Sousa composed about 136

marches, 10 comic operas, 70 songs, and many other musical works. He also found time to write 132 articles and seven books, including three novels and his autobiography, *Marching Along*, published in 1928. The composer retired from making music in 1931 and died in Reading, Pennsylvania, at the age of 78.

1. What early experiences influenced Sousa to compose marches?

2. Name three marches composed by Sousa. Which is his most famous?

3. Besides marches, what other works did Sousa produce during his career?

Critical Thinking ★

4. **Predicting** For what would Sousa like to be best remembered?

5. **Evaluating Information** Why was John Philip Sousa called "The March King"? Was the title accurate?
