

## The Music of Stephen Foster

One of the earliest well-known composers of American popular music was Stephen Collins Foster, who was born on July 4, 1826. He learned to play the flute as a child, and by the time he was 18 he had published his first well-known song, which was entitled "Open Thy Lattice, Love." Stephen Foster composed music that was very sentimental and was of a style that was popular before the Civil War. He was by far the most well-known composer of this style of music, not only while he was alive, but also following his death. Most of his works were written for performance in parlors and salons. He often used themes that reflected the thoughts of those in America who had emigrated from other countries and missed their loved ones who had not come to America, or those who had feelings of lost love.



Stephen Foster

Foster's music appealed to a large number of Americans, particularly those who were neither from the sophisticated areas on the east coast, nor the rugged areas of the frontier. Songs such as "My Old Kentucky Home," "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair," and "Beautiful Dreamer" are some of his most sentimental songs.

The music of minstrel shows was another important style of music that was popular in the middle of the nineteenth century. Stephen Foster came into contact with the leader of a well-known troupe of minstrels known as the Christy Minstrels. Some of the songs that Foster wrote for the Christy Minstrels and others minstrel shows were "Old Folks at Home" (also known as "Swanee Ribber"), "Oh, Susanna," "My Old Kentucky Home," "Massa's in de Cold Ground," "Old Black Joe," and "Nellie was a Lady." The minstrel shows were usually sung by white musicians in black face (make-up that made them look black) who depicted African-Americans and utilized their dialect in songs. The first line of "Swanee Ribber" was originally written "Way down upon de Swanee Ribber." These minstrel shows continued to be popular from about 1850 through the end of the nineteenth century. After that they lost their appeal and were replaced by musical reviews, vaudeville, and early American musical theater.

Although Foster was extremely successful in terms of selling his songs to publishers and minstrel shows, he died penniless in 1864 at the age of 38. The sentimental music of Stephen Foster and his music for minstrel shows represent an important part of the beginning of American popular music. It had taken some time for Americans to achieve any kind of individuality in their music since many of the early settlers of America wanted to recreate the music of Europe. However, thanks to Stephen Foster and other composers, America began to develop its own style of music.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions for Consideration**

1. On what date was Stephen Foster born?

2. What instrument did he learn to play as a child?

3. What was the title of the first popular song that he published?

4. Most of his works were written for performance in what kind of places?

5. What was the name of the minstrel troupe for which Stephen Foster wrote music?

6. Name three songs Foster wrote for this minstrel troupe.

7. What were minstrel shows replaced by?

8. What was the first line of "Swanee Ribber"?

9. What were the themes of Foster's sentimental songs?

10. Name three of Foster's most famous sentimental songs.

11. Do any of Foster's songs sound familiar to you? If so, which ones?