

Composers of Great Band Works
by Dr. Brian Harris, Bandroom.com Publications

John Philip Sousa (1854 - 1932)



Lifeline

- born in Washington, D.C.
- was the third of ten children.
- started music instruction around the age of 7.
- his parents were both immigrants to the United States.
- his father served as a musician in the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Marine Band.
- at the age of 13, Sousa decided to run away from home and join a circus band. When his father found out, he took him to Marine Headquarters and enlisted him as a “boy” (apprentice) in the Marine band. This arrangement, father and son serving together, lasted for nearly seven years.
- by age 20, Sousa was playing violin professionally and began a career as a successful musical theater producer and conductor.
- at age 25, he became conductor of the Marine Band, a position he held for the next 12 years.
- resigned from the Marine Band in 1892 to form his own civilian band (“Sousa’s Band”) which enjoyed tremendous popularity for the next 39 years.
- Sousa’s Band toured nationally every year, made four European tours, and completed one world tour in 1910-11.
- the band was commercially profitable, making John Philip a millionaire and attracting some of the best orchestral players in the country.
- when the Depression hit in 1931, the band was no longer viable, and so disbanded.
- one year later, he died of a heart attack (aged 76).



Anecdotes and Trivia

- had perfect pitch.
- was called Philip by family and closest friends.
- his principal instrument was violin.
- never attended college or high school
- had three children (one son and two daughters).
- disdained recorded music and coined the term “canned music.”
- wrote 136 marches (accounting for less than half of his total creative output).
- considered *Semper Fidelis* to be his best march.
- composed *The Stars and Stripes Forever* at age 42, while returning to the US from Europe.
- the last work he conducted was *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, less than 12 hours before his death.
- his funeral was broadcast by CBS.

Suggested Readings

John Philip Sousa, *American Phenomenon* by Paul E. Bierley (1973)

Perspectives on John Philip Sousa, edited by Jon Newsom (1983)

Marching Along by John Philip Sousa (autobiography, 1928)

The Works of John Philip Sousa by Paul E. Bierley (1984).