



# **JOHN PHILIP SOUSA**

**(1854-1932)**

**HALL OF FAME FOR GREAT AMERICANS 1976**





Sousa at 17 years of age.

**A**s every band musician knows, John Philip Sousa is "The March King." His marches are played more than any others, and are always received with great enthusiasm.

Sousa was born in Washington, D.C. on November 6, 1854, and showed musical talent at an early age. After three years of music study, he was awarded several medals for outstanding musicianship. The young Sousa studied violin, flute, cornet, baritone, trombone, and alto horn, in addition to theory and harmony. At age 13 he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps as an apprentice musician, where he was to remain for the next seven years. His performance instrument was violin; but during that time he also studied trombone, drum, fife, and clarinet in addition to harmony and counterpoint.

Sousa was only 18 when he published his first composition, entitled *Moonlight on the Potomac Waltzes*. By age 20 his formal training was coming to an end, and Sousa found his first jobs as a violinist in various theater orchestras. During a rehearsal of *H.M.S. Pinafore* in Philadelphia, Sousa met his wife-to-be, Miss Jane van Middlesworth Bellis, the daughter of a Philadelphia carpenter. They were married on December 30, 1879.

Sousa was gaining a measure of recognition by composing many operettas and piano fantasies during this time. In 1880 he was offered the position of leader of the U.S. Marine Band. He accepted and suddenly found himself conductor of a military band for the first time. During his 12 years as leader of the Marine Band, he upgraded both the caliber of the musicians and of the music they played. The Band became one of the most respected musical organizations in the country, comparable to those of long tradition in Europe.

Sousa's first widely acclaimed march, *The Gladiator* (1886), was written during this time. Other works of 1886 also helped increase Sousa's stature as a composer. *The Rifle Regiment* dates from that year and *The Presidential Polonaise* was written at President Arthur's request, before he left office. Sousa's first book, *The Trumpet and Drum*, also appeared in 1886, and consisted of eight original trumpet and drum pieces.

Sometime around 1889 Sousa gained the title of "The March King." A remark in a British band journal reached the eye of Sousa's publisher. The author of the remark said that because Johann Strauss, Jr. was called "The Waltz King," the American bandmaster Sousa should be called "The March King." Making use of this in his advertising, Sousa's publisher was responsible for the title's widespread acceptance.

Encouraged by his success in the Marine Band, Sousa left military service in 1892 to organize his own civilian band. His reputation attracted some of the finest players in America. In 1900 he toured Europe, bringing American music to many European countries for the first time. Three more European tours followed in 1901, 1903, and 1905. In 1920-1922 he completed a triumphal world tour.

Sousa composed the immortal work, *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, in 1896 while aboard ship returning to the United States from Europe. Of the 136 marches that he wrote, *The Stars and Stripes Forever* is the most popular. However, there are 15 other Sousa marches that also appear among the "100 Most Popular Marches" as determined by hundreds of band directors:

**Bicentennial**  
**El Capitan**  
**Fairest of the Fair**  
**The Gladiator**  
**Hands Across the Sea**

**High School Cadets**  
**King Cotton**  
**Liberty Bell**  
**Manhattan Beach**  
**On Parade**

**Sabre and Spurs**  
**Semper Fidelis**  
**The Thunderer**  
**U.S. Field Artillery**  
**Washington Post**

These are but a few of the famous Sousa marches.



Sousa's band at the Pittsburgh Exposition, Sept. 22, 1915. The band was traditionally all male except for the harpist and one or two singers.

Professional musicians felt highly honored to become members of Sousa's band. Sousa was always considerate of his artists and paid them top salaries. If a man were a first-rate performer, he could remain with the band indefinitely. However, if a man were indifferent or played in a careless fashion, he was dropped from the roster.



Sousa was a bandmaster of rare understanding. For example, if the band were rehearsing a new number for the first time, Sousa would first lead his men through the selection in routine manner. Next he would order it to be played in the way he thought best. After the band had gone over the piece several times, Sousa would tell his players to rest for five minutes. On his way out of the room, he might overhear a certain artist run through his part several times until he was able to perform the melody to his own satisfaction. When the band returned, the conductor would remark: "I overheard Jones going over his part just as I was leaving the room. His interpretation of the new number is much better than mine. Now, I want you to listen please, as Mr. Jones plays it the way it should sound." The musician would play his part accordingly, and the others would follow his example. At one time Mr. Sousa asserted: "If I refused to avail myself of the individual genius of any one of my artists, I would be a very poor conductor."

There are certain expressions that Sousa used over and over again in conducting his own band and amateur groups. These are some of them: "I can overlook wrong notes, but not bad intonation. . . . An artist is one who plays difficult music with ease . . . . Play this as softly as the Lord will let you. . . . Making a mistake is 98 percent man and 2 percent instrument. . . . Give me all you've got, please."

A great service was rendered by the Sousa Band in its performance of classics in remote areas. The band played in many cities where a symphony orchestra had never been seen, and the music lover who lived in a small- or medium-sized city had virtually no opportunity to hear any live music other than that performed by village bands or small theatre orchestras. In comparing his accomplishments with those of American symphony orchestra conductors he once stated bluntly: "I think I have done more missionary work for the better class of music than all the rest of them put together." He was always eager to help a struggling young composer, and it is probable that his band played more new, unpublished American music than any other musical organization in this country at the time.



Sousa was a master showman. He learned the value of showmanship as a young man playing violin in Washington and Philadelphia theater orchestras. He made it his business to play music to which his public would respond with enthusiasm, and he knew that for a piece of music to be appreciated, it had to be presented effectively. Showmanship was an essential requirement of every Sousa program, and also of each member of the band. "The man who does not exercise showmanship is dead," he said many times.

During World War I Sousa enlisted in the Navy, where he organized various band units at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center. After the war, he reorganized his band and toured extensively during the 1920s. In the summers he presented concerts, often four a day, at expositions, fairs and resorts. During the jazz years of the Roaring Twenties, most touring bands went out of business; but because of Sousa's reputation, his band continued to draw great crowds. However, in 1929 the tours were sharply curtailed because of the Depression.

He appeared for the last time as guest conductor with the Ringgold Band of Reading, Pennsylvania. He suffered a heart attack after an evening rehearsal and died on March 6, 1932. The last composition he conducted was *The Stars and Stripes Forever*.

John Philip Sousa was elected to the Hall of Fame for Great Americans in 1973. Three other great Americans were elected at the same time: Louis Demitz Brandeis, George Washington Carver, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Fully 216 distinguished Americans from the 50 states wrote letters in support of this great honor. Letters were received from 38 governors, such as the following:

*As a conductor and bandmaster, Sousa elevated band music and the study of brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments to new heights in America. This cultural legacy remains with us to this day.*

— Nelson Rockefeller



Portrait of Sousa prepared by the Department of the Navy for the United States Marine Corps.

The great bandsman has also been honored by the Sousa Stage in the concert hall of the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., which was funded by the contributions of thousands of band directors and students. Sousa was a unique figure in American musical life, and his music remains an inspiration to all who hear and perform it.



# The JOHN PHILIP SOUSA BAND AWARD



Since its inauguration in 1954, thousands of U.S. high schools have presented the John Philip Sousa Band Award to their most outstanding band student. The award recognizes those young musicians displaying superior musicianship, leadership, dependability, loyalty, cooperation, and other qualities of conduct which school instrumental music programs strive to impart. The Sousa award is the top nationwide prize in the school band field, both in prestige and appearance. It promotes the entire band by encouraging musicians to greater achievement and enthusiasm while providing an inspiring stimulus for potential instrumentalists. The handsome award reflects credit on both the band and the band director.

It is fitting that this award should be inspired by the name of John Philip Sousa, the premiere American bandsman who was elected in 1973 to the Hall of Fame for Great Americans. No other composer is so well known to band students, and Sousa was one of the most renowned supporters of school music programs. He appeared as a guest conductor of school bands throughout the U.S. and served as an adjudicator of numerous youth band festivals.

We are deeply grateful to the Sousa family for its gracious approval and cooperation in allowing us to make this award. We reprint here the original endorsement of the award from the Sousa family that appeared in the December 1954 issue of *The Instrumentalist*.

*We both feel that great credit is due to the editors of The Instrumentalist for the very fine idea of offering a Sousa Award to stimulate interest in school band music and to reward outstanding students for their contributions to this movement. The award is the continuance of a tradition — interest in young people and in school band music — that was very close to the heart of our father. We feel that the award is a wonderful goal, the acquisition of which will be a project in which the student may expend his energies in a most praiseworthy manner.*

Signed, **Helen Sousa Albert, Priscilla Sousa**