

# “Stars and Stripes Forever”—Military Band (1897)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Ace Collins (guest post)\*



On October 1, 1880, a 26 year-old musician and composer accepted the challenge of leading the United States Marine Corp Band. From his first day on the job, John Philip Sousa, a son of a Marine Corps musician, radically changed the group’s direction. He tossed out old standards, brought in new arrangements of popular music, and penned original compositions. With its modern sound, the military unit quickly emerged as the nation’s premier musical ensemble, one of America’s top sellers of wax cylinders, a fixture on the sheet music sales charts, and a sure box office sellout.

In 1892, thirsting for new challenges, Sousa resigned his position with the Marines and joined with David Blakely, a former newspaper reporter and politician turned entertainment promotor, to form Sousa’s Band. As Sousa was one of the most gifted composers of the time and the 58 year-old Blakely was a master in creating publicity, this partnership was a marriage made in entertainment heaven. Building on the exploding recording industry, Sousa’s Band rattled off a series of hits including the wildly popular “El Capitan March” and “Washington Post March,” while also selling out concerts from coast to coast. Thanks to this success and Blakely’s relentless marketing, the bearded band leader’s image became one of the most recognized in America. Within three years, Sousa was the Elvis or Sinatra of his day. But the demands of fame coupled with the band’s unrelenting travel schedule took such a great toll that, in 1885, an exhausted Sousa turned his baton over to Blakely and walked away. As the Sousa Band continued touring and recording, its leader headed to Europe.

Spending time with his family brought a sense of peace he hadn’t known since before taking the job as conductor of the Marine Corp Band. Yet, on November 8, 1896, Sousa’s bliss and relief were dashed by a single telegram. The previous day, David Blakely had been found dead in his office. Rocked by his friend and partner’s passing, Sousa decided it was time to go home.

Sousa booked passage on the *Teutonic*. With visions of the ever-enthusiastic Blakely haunting him day and night, the deeply depressed composer and conductor paced the passenger ship's deck for hours on end. During the long waking hours, Blakely was both everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Even as Sousa looked across the Atlantic, he saw his friend and partner in the waves and heard his laughter on the wind. Yet, he was never really there. As the days crawled by, it was Blakely's incredibly optimistic spirit that fought its way past grief and into Sousa's consciousness. For all of its flaws, Blakely had felt that America was a shining star for the world, and that he had been blessed to have been born in the United States. Blakely also believed it was his calling to bring joy and hope to the American people through uplifting entertainment. With this now inspiring image of his friend and country locked in his mind, an elementary tune began playing in Sousa's head. By the time the *Teutonic* docked in New York, the little melody had grown into a fully arranged score, with a huge band, that only Sousa could hear, blasting each note.

“Throughout the tense voyage,” Sousa would later write, “that imaginary band continued to unfold the same themes, echoing and re-echoing the most distinct melody. I did not transfer a note of that music to paper while I was on the steamer, but when we reached shore, I set down the measures that my brain-band had been playing for me, and not a note of it has ever changed.”

After placing the composition onto paper, Sousa rushed to the band he and Blakely had created. First, he assured the concerned members the show would go on. Next, he taught them the song he had created on his ocean voyage. Then the band went back on tour. While playing before packed houses, the director used his new march as the triumphant conclusion to each concert. The response was overwhelming.

As more and more people asked about the song, Sousa sensed his tribute to Blakely was lacking. After sitting down at his desk and once more considering his late partner's vision of America, as well as recalling his own emotions when seeing the United States flag upon his return from Europe, the bandmaster crafted lyrics for his latest march tune. When finished, the verses focused on the nation being the shining light of freedom, a country offering hope for the world's desperate and oppressed masses, and a land where the common person could expect and experience justice. To anchor this idealistic vision of the United States, Sousa wrapped his thoughts in the flag and called the anthem “The Stars and Stripes Forever.”

When recorded in 1897, “The Stars and Stripes Forever” would hold the #1 place on the national charts for seven straight weeks. Four years later, Sousa's tribute to Blakely would again top the charts. Spurned by patriotic fever, it was revived during the Great War (now known as World War I) becoming the song that inspired millions to help fight the war to end all wars.

In 1932, the United States Marine Band was performing in Washington Square, when Captain Taylor Branson, the band's director, noted John Philip Sousa in the audience. Stopping the concert, Branson asked the 78 year-old legend to lead the President's Band in the inspiring strains of “The Stars and Stripes Forever.” As Sousa picked up the baton, the years seemed to fall away. With the energy and vitality of a young man, he stirred the performers and the crowd. When the last note was played, the musicians and crowd stood in unison to cheer an American icon.

A few weeks later, on March 6, 1932, Sousa was conducting a rehearsal of the Ringgold Band at Reading, Pennsylvania. The last song played was “The Stars and Stripes Forever.” Later that evening, in his room at the Abraham Lincoln Hotel, Sousa suffered a heart attack and died. Four days later, two companies of Marines and sailors, the Marine Corp Band, and honorary pallbearers from the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps, along with thousands of mourners, saluted a casket appropriately draped with the stars and stripes. It was the perfect farewell to America’s greatest bandmaster.

On December 10, 1987, “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” a song penned to honor the passing of John Philip Sousa’s closest friend, was named the “Official March of the United States of America.” It remains the best known and most beloved march in American history as well as a symbol of the promise of a nation to people across the globe. While the great bandleader and composer has been dead for decades, he has never been forgotten. His music continues to be used in motion picture soundtracks and played all over the world. Even today, no Independence Day celebration is complete until “The Stars and Stripes Forever” is played.

*Christy award winner Ace Collins defines himself as a storyteller. In that capacity, Collins has authored more than 80 books that have sold more than 2.5 million copies for 25 different publishers. His catalog includes novels, biographies, and children’s works as well as books on history, culture, and faith.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.