

Stephen Foster

1826-1864



Stephen Foster was the first great American popular song writer. He wrote in lots of different styles, but was first famous for his minstrel songs.

Foster was born near Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, and had only casual music training. But he loved music and published his first song in 1844, when he was only 18 years old. When he was 20, Foster wrote his first huge hit "Oh, Susanna!" . This song became the unofficial anthem of the California Gold Rush in the following years.

He then signed a contract as a professional songwriter for the Christy Minstrels, a group of performers for the Minstrel Shows of the age. While working for them, he wrote some of his most famous songs: "De Camptown Races" "Old Folks at

Home" (also known as "Swanee River") and "My Old Kentucky Home."

Foster really taught himself to write songs, and developed a unique style with his melodies. He used simple harmonies and the melodies were incredible catchy and memorable.

Foster was most importantly notable for being America's first professional songwriter. He completely made his living from writing and publishing songs, Foster was not a performer at all.

Copyright laws were primitive in those days, and Foster never saw a lot of money from his songs. For example, Foster was paid only \$100 for his song "Oh Susanna!" only a fraction of the money the song actually made. Stephen Foster's name didn't even appear on much of the music that he got published.

Stephen Foster lived a middle class life as a hard working musician, known for his music, but never made wealthy from his work. He died at the age of 37 in New York City.

Questions to answer.

1. Who was Stephen Foster?
2. Why was Stephen Foster important?
3. What were minstrel shows?
4. Name four of his songs.
5. What are copyright laws?