

**The
Uncanny
John Phillip
Sousa**

*When everybody knows
your name*

John Sousa

John Philip Sousa (November 6, 1854–March 6, 1932) was an American composer and conductor of the late Romantic era known particularly for American military and patriotic marches. Because of his mastery of march composition and resultant prominence, he is known as “The March King.” In public he was typically referenced by his full name.

—Wikipedia

When my father was a boy, if someone asked him if he was related to John Philip Sousa, he would either tell the truth—“No”—and feel like he let the questioner down, or he would lie. “Oh yeah,” he’d say. “He was my grandfather’s cousin twice removed.” As my father got older, and depending on the audience, he’d say, “All Portagees are related, aren’t they?” or, “Not technically, but Aunt Gloria was kind of a marching band groupie, and one time backstage in aught-six he signed her tits after the show. That practically makes me his nephew.” Eventually he decided that if he ever had a son, he would name him John Philip.

Now, every so often, I get asked about my name. Or someone makes a comment like, “Strike up the band!” The other day at a bookstore, I handed the clerk my discount card and he said, “Well, well, well. Are we feeling fit to beat the band today?” I don’t even know what this means, but the inevitable follow-up—“I bet you hear that all the time”—I’m well prepared for.

I don’t hear it *all* the time. But I’ve heard it enough in thirty-six years that I’ve come up with a classification system for the types of people who ask me about my name. In order of frequency, those people most likely to comment on my name when they first meet me are:

- Band geeks
- Veterans

- Patriots
- Older Americans
- Trivia buffs
- Hostile liberals
- Prominent politicians
- Confused obstetricians
- People who think my name is Francis Scott Key

These categories frequently overlap, except in the case of the confused obstetrician, although she may or may not count as a hostile liberal. “Is that like the famous, raging anti-Semite Sousa?” she asked me. This was by far the most upsetting thing anybody has ever asked me about my name. At the time, I was working as a research assistant for the chair of the Jewish Studies department at UC Santa Cruz, so I asked him if he had ever heard that John Philip Sousa was an anti-Semite, and he hadn’t. I did a little research. Google searches of “John Philip Sousa + anti-Semitism” and “John Philip Sousa + Jews” were conducted. A neo-Nazi group in Ohio set some anti-Semitic lyrics to “Stars and Stripes Forever.” A Jewish Community Center, also in Ohio, was staging a revival of Sousa’s comic opera “El Capitan.” An article in a coffee table book about John Philip Sousa said that there was one subject his band members were forbidden to discuss: religion. “That means he probably had Jewish musicians in his band, and he was sensitive to that,” said my boss, and he thanked me for looking it up. (This turns out to be true, that he had Jewish musicians in his band: His favorite soprano, Estelle Liebling, was Jewish.) I never brought it up with the obstetrician again, and she didn’t bring it up either, but she did help my wife deliver, via caesarian section, my daughter Lily Dian, so I forgave her.

I guess it’s a good thing my father’s last name wasn’t Wagner. Although, if it had been, I probably wouldn’t have been named after Richard Wagner; the most likely candidate would have been the actor Robert Wagner, star of my grandmother Mabel’s favorite

show, *Hart to Hart*. That show debuted after I was born, but Robert Wagner was still pretty famous in 1974; my dad would have known him as the jewel thief from *The Pink Panther*. Incidentally, Robert Wagner starred in the 1952 feature *Stars and Stripes Forever*, playing the fictitious Willie Little, a member of Sousa's band, who in the film has invented the sousaphone.

My father wanted to be able to answer "yes" when he was asked if he was related to John Philip Sousa and he wanted this to be the truth. The story he told made me a punch line to his favorite joke: "So now, when someone asks me if I'm related to John Philip Sousa, I say, 'Yes. He's my son.'"¹ If I were present when he told this story, I'd laugh along with everyone else, and get my head patted by the nice old ladies or whomever, and act grateful to be part of my dad's running comedy show.

Maybe that's what drew me to stand-up comedy. I took a class during the winter quarter of 2005 at UC Santa Cruz through the theatre department. When I sat down to write my first bit, I decided to see if I could make my name as funny as my dad always tried to make it. My first set started like this:

Hi, I'm John Sousa. And yes, before you ask, my middle name is Phillip. My dad always said he named me after John Philip Sousa so I'd be famous, but all it's really gotten me is a couple drunken hookups with chicks who used to be in band, and three or four tuba-playing stalkers. The worst part about the stalkers was I had to move all the time. They would show up at 2:00 in morning to serenade me with the oom-pah part of "The Washington Post March" under my window. My landlords hated that. On the other hand, if I ever got into trouble, I could whip out my sousaphone, and the stalkers came running to battle me out of a jam.

¹ His best punch line—"I'd love to, honey, but I don't think my asshole can take another biscuit"—I didn't hear until I was a teenager.

The professor's evaluation said that my "first stand-up was very interesting. I thought his material was smart and funny, but it wasn't quite connecting with the audience." No shit. The only line that got a laugh from anyone besides him was "whip out my sousaphone." I got a B+. My performance improved dramatically with a shift in material.

Not only that, but there was only one true statement in my set, the part about my dad saying I'd be famous because I already had a famous name. "Someday, Johnny, you could run for Congress."² He's actually said this more than once. "You're already famous!"

But John Philip Sousa is not *that* famous, and people are easily confused. "I bet you were born in the dawn's early light," they say, or something else that references "The Star Spangled Banner." Unfortunately, trivia is very important to me, so I can't just let it slide. "No, Francis Scott Key wrote that," I say, and once, I got this retort: "Um, no *you're* wrong. He wrote *The Great Gatsby*. You wrote the national anthem."

The celebrity-name angle backfired on my father completely with the advent of the internet. On Google, I'm completely and totally anonymous. Try it. "John Sousa" gets you 344,000 hits, the first 50 of which (I got bored clicking "Next" after this) are for the composer. "John Phillip Sousa" gets mocked by the search engine's auto-correct: "Did you mean: john *philip* sousa?" It then proceeds to give you more links with the corrected name. It's the italics that hurt the most: *You* don't exist, but here is some useful information about a composer of marches. I'd like to take a moment here and thank my mother for the extra "l" in my Phillip. If she was going to carry me for nine months, she'd be damned if she would have no say whatsoever in naming me. So now I'm the uncanny John Phillip Sousa; almost, but not quite famous, creepy and in need of correction. I'm the March King of Uncanny Valley, leading a band of Real Dolls made up like clowns, carrying

² This is the plot of the 1992 Eddie Murphy movie *The Distinguished Gentleman*. Murphy plays a con man who wins a special election for Congress when the current occupant—who has the same name as him—dies. It sucks.

Moog synthesizers and didgeridoos and musical saws, playing “Stars and Stripes Forever” backward, revealing the hidden Satanic message imploring you to sniff glue.

I’ve only had one truly negative personal interaction with

someone about my name, with someone who knew exactly who John Philip Sousa was and exactly why he *hated* him and, by extension, hated me. My freshman year at UC Santa Cruz, I was given a work-study grant by financial aid. I went for a job interview at the newly constructed science library. My interviewer quickly turned to into an interrogator: “So. Hmm,” he said, peering at me over his wire-rimmed glasses. “Are you a fan of marching music?” This was his opening question, and it sounded like an accusation. Not “What makes you want to work in a library?” or “So, tell me a little about yourself, what kind of research are you interested in?” I was used to people commenting upon and asking about my name, but nobody had ever been hostile before. And this guy obviously knew what my name was before he scheduled the interview. Was he just trying to mess with me? Was he forced to interview all of the work-study candidates, and therefore decided to take out his frustrations with an unfeeling bureaucracy on me, a confused eighteen-year-old freshman?

“It’s not like I own a bunch of CDs,” I said, “But it’s okay, I guess, around the Fourth of July.”

“Well, I’m not a fan,” he spat. “It’s the soundtrack to American imperialism. It’s everything that’s disgusting about America: militarism, jingoism, old men in stupid hats riding around in toy little airplane cars.” I know there’s something about Santa Cruz that attracts the worst kind of self-righteous scold, the type of person for whom everything is a political act, including what a parent names his child. But what did he have against the Shriners? Did he hate Jerry’s Kids, too? It’s not like my name was Ronald Reagan or Pete Wilson.³

³ The reviled (at UCSC) former governor of California from 1991 to 1999, not the late San Francisco newscaster.

I did meet Pete Wilson, once, the summer after that first year in college. Two weeks before my nineteenth birthday, my friend invited me to go with him to a Republican barbecue fundraiser in Orinda, California. Governor Wilson was going to be making an appearance. Not having anything better to do, and with my friend's assurances that I wouldn't have to actually donate my own money to the GOP, I checked the barbecue out. I had no way of knowing this at the time, but that barbecue turned out to be good practice for living with my grandmother three years later, after she'd been diagnosed with Alzheimer's: I had the same conversation, over and over again. Some variation on, "Wow, Santa Cruz? That's really liberal, isn't it?" As this quickly became tedious, I began to change my answers I every time I heard this question from someone new.

I said things like, "Yeah, well, it's pretty cool, because the president of the College Republicans and the president of College Democrats both live on my floor, so it makes for some great debates in the lounge." Republicans feel hugely persecuted on college campuses; they can't figure out why people find talk about "undeserving, minority-welfare-mama-affirmative-action hires" offensive, so when they hear that their side is well-represented in a place like UCSC, they're ecstatic. What I didn't say is that my roommate and I had stolen the "Bush/Quayle '92" sticker from said College Republican's door and defaced it to read "Lick Bush '92." But by the end of the barbecue, I was full-on playing the part: "Tell me about it," I'd say, rolling my eyes. "They say they want justice and equality, but what they really want to do is give my hard-earned tax dollars to illegal aliens so they can buy Cadillacs, and perform abortions on American flags while speaking any language but English. I mean, it's even worse than you think." I'd have thought that, being Republicans, my name would have come up, especially since the name tag I was wearing said "John Sousa" on it. But it didn't; they were more interested in kicking liberal ass and taking liberal names. I was disappointed, until I met the governor.

I almost blew it though, because the GOP is the party of underage binge drinking. There was an open bar serving Henry Weinhard's ale, which contributed greatly to my conservative Republican play-acting shtick. Nobody asked me for my ID, they just kept serving me up. Governor Wilson's speech lasted two beers. He spoke about how he had been a Marine, and that the Marine Corps had a motto, "A few good men," and how he needed the good people of California to send him a "a few more good men" in Sacramento, so he could lower taxes and kick out the Mexicans and end affirmative action.⁴ After he was done, he shook some hands, and my friend and I were taken by a member of his advance team to be introduced.

"Governor, these young men would like to meet you, sir," the handler said, as Governor Wilson walked up. My friend, who had run for the city council as soon as he turned eighteen, and who fancied himself an up-and-comer in the Contra Costa County Republican Party, attempted to convey his professionalism and ambition to the governor as he shook his hand. I stood there swaying drunkenly, squinting my eyes to try to bring the governor into focus.

I felt almost guilty as the governor looked right past my friend, at my name tag, and said, "John, that's a great name you got there, son."

"Thanks, Governor," I said, trying my best to stand straight up as I gave him my best firm handshake. "My middle name's even 'Phillip.'"

"That's great, son," the governor said, and hustled past us, jumping into his idling limousine to be whisked away to another fundraiser.

For a long time I hated my name. I chafed under what I perceived to be expectations of greatness, which I attributed to my name. When people said things like, "That's a great name, son,"

⁴ These last two were implied by that fact that he was Pete Wilson.

what I heard was “*Don’t fuck it up,*” like I had to earn the right to be named after such a great American. It was never my name—I was only borrowing it, trying to both fill the shoes of a mythical patriotic musician and legitimize my father’s relationship to the name. It’s not necessarily that I didn’t crave attention. I did and I still do. I was a class clown, an athlete, and I would never have taken that stand up comedy class if I didn’t want to get up in front of a group of people and have them laugh at me. But I hated that this one thing, my name, attracted attention whether I wanted it or not. I had no control over it.

On the first day of school there was always a good chance I’d become the catalyst for an impromptu civics lesson. “Hmm, John Sousa,” my teacher might say. “Is your middle name Philip?” followed by an explanation of who and what John Philip Sousa was. “Maybe on Veteran’s Day, John, you could bring in some John Philip Sousa music for show-and-tell”—like I could just reach into my dad’s eight-track collection, between Janis Joplin and Journey, and pull out John Philip’s Greatest Hits. Starting in fourth grade, I played the viola, and whenever there was a performance the orchestra leader couldn’t help but introduce me by my full name, even though I’d ask him or her not to. This attention embarrassed me, because I felt like once it was announced to a group of strangers that my name was John Phillip Sousa, they no longer saw me. They were now seeing John Philip Sousa, the ghost of a national treasure.

In trying to take ownership of my name I internalized my father’s joke. Even though I thought it was stupid, I still repeated it every time someone brought up my name. My senior year in high school I had a girlfriend whose mother had little use for me. One day, I was at her house and met some of my girlfriend’s extended family. I got the standard “Is your middle name Philip?” questions; my girlfriend’s mom jumped in and just made up her own story about how I got my name. “Well, his mom’s an artist, you know, real *creative*, and she wanted something to reflect that creativity.” This woman, who usually showed me nothing but veiled (and sometimes

not-so-veiled) contempt, hijacked the story of how I was named with ease.

“Actually, my dad’s a musician,” I said, “and everyone used to ask him if he was related to John Philip Sousa.” I went through the story; the punch line killed.

When her brother was done laughing, my girlfriend’s mom deadpanned through gritted teeth, “Well, I like my version better.”

What is the best thing about being named John Phillip Sousa?

My birthday is June 27, which is exactly seven days before July 4. This week is almost exactly six months from the week between Christmas Day and New Year’s Day. Starting around Memorial Day, you hear patriotic music, which, depending on where you live, gets more and more noticeable the closer you get to the Fourth of July. And most of the patriotic music in the canon was written by John Philip Sousa, because it was made to be played by a band in parade formation. It’s kind of like how you start hearing Christmas music around Thanksgiving, except that most light-rock-less-talk radio stations don’t adopt an all-patriotic-music format for a whole month. So for the week between my birthday and July 4, probably because I’m actively looking for it, it seems like everywhere I go I hear one of the marches. Then, at the Fourth of July parade, and in the bandstand at the park where I watch fireworks, it’s extremely likely that I will hear at least one John Philip Sousa march. And as the opening bars to “Stars and Stripes Forever” ring out, I see the shower of sparks overhead, and I hear the boom of exploding rockets, I pretend that it’s all for me.

And I love it.