


BIOGRAPHY

George M. Cohan

American vaudeville was the training ground for the youngster who was to become America's greatest showman—George M. Cohan. By the early 1900s, Cohan dominated the American theater. Known as “the man who owned Broadway” and “the prince of the American theatre”—this talented singer, dancer, actor, playwright, songwriter, and director would produce 80 Broadway shows over the next four decades.

As you read, think about the traits and talents that led to the success of George M. Cohan.

“I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy, / A Yankee Doodle do or die. / A real live nephew of my Uncle Sam’s / Born on the Fourth of July” proclaimed the lyrics of one of Cohan’s best known songs. Well, actually, George was probably born on the third of July in 1878, but the intensely patriotic boy claimed the nation’s birthday as his own. His parents incorporated him into their vaudeville act when he was a baby. By the time he was 9, he was a full-fledged member of The Four Cohans (mother, father, older sister, and George), who presented “songs, dances, and snappy patter.” The family traveled constantly, lived in run-down theatrical boarding houses, and worked wherever they could find bookings.

By age 13, George was writing material for the act—both songs and snappy patter for sketches they performed. The Four Cohans soon became “headliners,” the best-paid acts in vaudeville, and George happily took credit for their success. He was a brash young man, bursting with ideas and supremely self-confident. After one music publisher told him, “Your songs are not publishable. Please do not send any more,” Cohan sneered, “Just goes to show how smart those babies there are, publishing all that bum material written by a lot of hams, and here am I, the best songwriter,

walking right past their door with four or five big sure hits under my arm.”

Cohan was right to be so self-confident. By 1904, he had broken with his vaudevillian past and written a full-length musical entitled *Little Johnny Jones*. Starring himself as a brash and highly patriotic young American (true typecasting), Cohan had a major hit on his hands and contributed two new hit songs to the nation’s repertoire—“Yankee Doodle Dandy” and “Give My Regards to Broadway.” With *Little Johnny Jones*, Cohan turned away from the musical form that had dominated the American stage—the European operetta—and created the distinctly American musical comedy popular to this day.

In 1917, Cohan wrote a song in response to the United States’s entry into World War I. When he introduced “Over There” to American troops training at Fort Myers near Washington, D.C., the song became an instant hit. President Woodrow Wilson, whose declaration of war had inspired Cohan initially, called the song “a genuine inspiration to all American manhood.” As World War II loomed in 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt presented Cohan with a special congressional medal celebrating “Over There,” a song that was soon to find new popularity. Cohan died a year later.

Questions to Think About

1. How would you describe George M. Cohan’s personality? What talents and skills made him such a great success in show business?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** In what way was George M. Cohan a great asset to his country during his lifetime?