

Stephen *Foster*

b. 1826 d. 1864

Stephen Foster is the first American composer we study in this course. His childhood was quite different from the Europeans we've learned about. Stephen¹ was born on the fourth of July in 1826. This particular fourth of July was especially significant because of three events:

1. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.
2. Thomas Jefferson died on that day.
3. John Adams died on that day as well.

In the home of William and Eliza Foster, however, there was great joy that day as the eighth child was welcomed into the family. Stephen's mother was a kind, loving woman.

His father was a businessman and had some political connections. He was considered well educated for the time and place. However, due to business difficulties, the Fosters were often in financial need.



Stephen spent most of his life in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was a lively place, a busy frontier town where three great rivers converged. (The Monongahela and Allegheny rivers meet in Pittsburgh, where they form the Ohio River.) These water highways transported men, women, children, animals, and cargo up and down the Ohio River valley to the Gulf of Mexico. This was an era and a place in which business ruled, and the arts were not as developed or as appreciated as they were in Europe during that time.

Stephen was closest to his brother Morrison, or Mit, as he was often called. Mit was three years older and understood his brother in a way none of the rest of the family did. Steve was born with a deep love of music, but unlike many of the other composers we've read about, Stephen grew up in a time, place, and family that did not think highly of musical talent (at least not in boys). At best, it was an acceptable hobby for a young man, but it wasn't a satisfactory occupation. As you might imagine, Steve did not receive much support for this musical gift. He was occasionally indulged with a musical treat—a night at a concert, a flute or clarinet to play—but generally he had to keep his passion for music in check. In fact, Mr. and Mrs. Foster spent much time trying to arrange things so that Stephen would follow a proper career choice.

Besides briefly attending boarding school and a local (private) grammar school, Steve was also privately tutored. His formal schooling ended in his early teens. During this time, he and Morrison and their friends formed a secret all-male club called Knights of the S.T. (probably standing for “Square Table”). They met at the Fosters’ home and spent much of their time singing. Some of Steve’s earliest works were composed during this time. When he was 18, his first song was published.

Stephen also had a gift for performing and mimicking. He was influenced by minstrel performers and “**Ethiopian**” music, in which white men imitated and exaggerated black music and stereotypes of the times. As a child, he played “theatre,” performing Ethiopian songs for friends and neighbors. He loved the soulfulness of the **Negroes** (a term, like “colored” used during this time to refer to African Americans), whom he heard singing on the wharves where the boats arrived from New Orleans and other points south.

Additionally, he was exposed to Negro music because of his relationship with the Fosters’ **bound** (similar to an indentured servant) servant, Olivia Pise. Morrison wrote about “Lieve,” as she was called, as “she was a devout Christian and a member of a church of shouting colored people. Stephen was fond of their singing and boisterous devotions. She was permitted to often take Stephen to church with her. . . .”

When Foster was 20 or 21, he moved to Cincinnati to work for his elder “brother” William. (William was actually a young relative of Stephen’s father who was taken into the family and treated as a son.) Stephen worked as a bookkeeper for William. It was while in Cincinnati that Stephen had his first musical success. “Oh! Susanna,” a rollicking, fun song he penned, caught the public’s imagination and spread like wildfire. Not only did it appear immediately in every minstrel show, it quickly became the theme song of the forty-niners on their way to the California Gold Rush.

The commercial success of this song (and another of the same period, “Uncle Ned,”) gave Foster the means with which to show family and friends that he could make as good a living in music as he could in commerce. Unfortunately, even though these songs stormed the nation, Foster actually earned very little from them. It is thought that the publishing firm that Foster sold “Oh! Susanna” to profited a quick \$10,000 for this song that Stephen sold them for \$100. By 1850, at least ten of his pieces had been published, and he quit bookkeeping and moved back to Pittsburgh.

There, in 1850, he proposed to Jane Denny McDowell, the daughter of a well-regarded physician. Jane was later described by her granddaughter as “buoyant and sunny in disposition, attractive and loveable and full of the joy of living to the last day of her life.” She and Stephen loved each other, but theirs was not always an easy marriage.

The year 1850 was a busy one for Foster. He published 11 songs, including the well-known

“Camptown Races” (originally called “Gwine to Run All Night”) and another popular work, “Nelly Bly”. During this time, Foster also began a relationship with E. P. Christy, the minstrel performer (whose name later became a generic word for minstrel shows). These so-called “Plantation Melodies” sung at the minstrel shows were highly popular, and Foster provided a number of them over the next few years.

One of his most popular, enduring songs was written in 1851—“Old Folks at Home,” often called “Way Down Upon the Swanee River”. Despite the crude dialect, this song has an appeal that has crossed race and class and cultures. It speaks of the yearning for home in a simple, yet haunting melody.

A funny (and true) story about this song is that the river he initially used was the Pee Dee River, but his brother Morrison related that Stephen was looking for a better name. They pulled out an atlas, and found the Suwanee², a little river in Florida. “That’s it! That’s it exactly!” said Stephen, and so it was. “Old Folks at Home” is the state song of Florida, but Foster never visited Florida! In fact, he most likely visited the South only on one occasion.

Jane and Stephen’s only child, Marion, was born in 1851. Her father was devoted to her. She, as an adult, said, “I was his pet. He took me everywhere with him, and I was the only one allowed to invade the sanctity of his den where he wrote his songs. . . . He could not bear the slightest noise or interruption in his work. . . .”

Although a kind man who loved his family, and a musical genius, Foster did not have a successful family life or a financially successful musical career³. Although there are many myths surrounding Foster’s last years, the truth is somewhat difficult to determine. To sum up a complicated history, his lack of money led to hard times for his family. And, sadly, drinking became a problem for Foster, as well. His wife, though she loved him, had to live apart from him during two different periods. There are any number of stories regarding his last months, but this is what we read from his wife, who was writing to his beloved brother Morrison concerning Stephen:

Sept. 30th, 1861

Dear Mit:

I have been spending a couple of months here, and I am now beginning to feel very uneasy about Steve, and he has not at present the money to send me. I concluded to ask you to lend me ten dollars as I wish to go back to him immediately, and indeed it is very necessary that I should be with him.

A week later she again wrote:

I received your letter yesterday, enclosing ten dollars and I assure you that I am very much obliged indeed. When I arrive in New York, I will deliver your message to Steve.

Jane was probably with Stephen during the winter and spring of that year 1861 to 1862. She wrote Morrison again in June 1862:

I received a few days ago your very kind letter. You have my best and warmest thanks for your kindness. I left Steve in New York; he was well, and publishes once in a long while. The clothing you sent him he was very much obliged to you & told me that he would write and thank you.

This last letter from Jane was written about three months before Stephen died:

You do not know, dear Mit, how much relieved I felt about Steve when I read your letter. If you can persuade him to return to Cleveland with you, I am sure that all will soon be well with him again.

Unhappily, whatever Morrison's plan was, it was not to be. In this letter sent to him by Foster's young associate and collaborator, George Cooper, we read this:

Your brother Stephen, I am sorry to inform you, is lying in Bellevue Hospital in this city very sick. He desires me to ask you to send him some pecuniary assistance as his means are very low. If possible, he would like to see you in person.

Two days later, Cooper sent the following telegram to Morrison (which probably reached him before the letter did):

Stephen is dead. Come on.

Part of the legend surrounding Foster's last days is the tale of possessions. His wallet contained 38 cents and a little piece of paper with five penciled words—"Dear friends and gentle hearts." This is true. However, stories of his dying a "friendless bum in a sordid room" are greatly exaggerated. This letter from his brother Henry should be taken into account: "We found everything connected with Stevey's life and death in New York much better than we expected, he had been boarding at a very respectable hotel [or boarding house] and did not owe the landlord a cent or any one else that we knew of. . ."

Thus ends the life of Stephen Foster. Although we don't know whether he knew the Lord, we do know his music lives on. His compositions have survived more than a century and have a solid place in the annals of American composers.

Teacher Notes

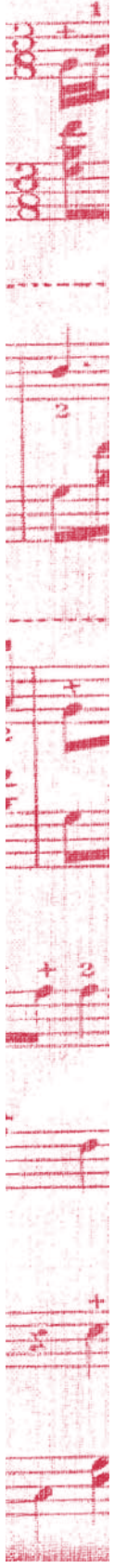
¹You will find his childhood nickname(s) spelled various ways, spelling rules were so much more relaxed then and it depended on who was writing it and when it was written, including:

- Steve
- Stevey
- Stephy

- Stevie
- Stevy

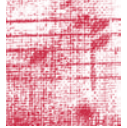
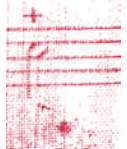
²The Suwannee River—also spelled Suwanee River—is a major river of southern Georgia and northern Florida. Foster spelled it “Swanee” to better fit the melody. (We call this “poetic license.”)

³It is not that Foster was a bad businessman as some have supposed. The laws and regulations regarding music copyright at this time were virtually nonexistent.



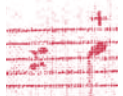
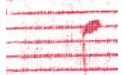
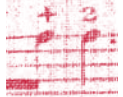
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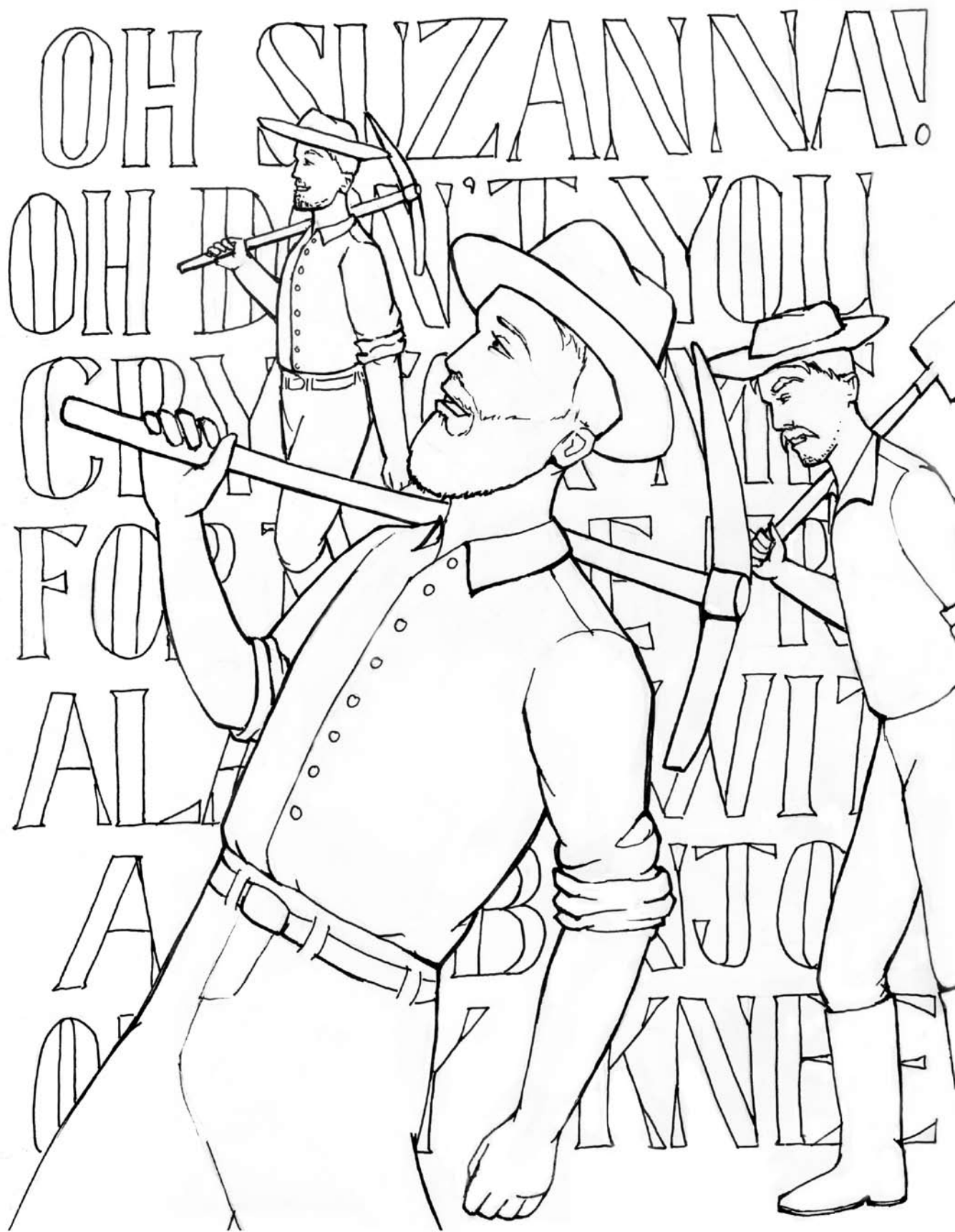


1. Stephen Foster grew up in
 - a. Vienna, Austria.
 - b. Cincinnati, Ohio.
 - c. Atlanta, Georgia.
 - d. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
2. True or False: As a child, Foster received much encouragement from his family to become a musician.
3. In his family, Steven was closest to _____ .
4. Foster's music was influenced by (circle all that apply)
 - a. Beethoven.
 - b. minstrel performers.
 - c. jazz.
 - d. "Ethiopian" music.
5. Foster's first musical success was the song _____ .
6. The song "Oh! Susanna" was the "theme song" for the _____ 49er's on their way to the California _____ .
7. True or False: Foster never married.
8. Which of Stephen Foster's songs is the state song of Florida?

ME



9. True or False: In spite of publishing many popular songs, Foster did not make much money from his musical career.
10. True or False: Stephen Foster leaves a legacy as a great American composer and a strong spiritual leader.



Forty-niners belt out Foster's "Oh! Susanna."