

Patrick Gilmore – America's First Superstar!

Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore was born on Christmas Day in 1829 in Ballygar, County Galway, a kinsman of Daniel O'Connell. In one of life's twists of fate, at the age of sixteen, Patrick accompanied his father, who was a member of the Ballygar Fife and Drum Band, to a protest rally in Athlone, a garrison town where the British paraded their finest military bands. The young protestor became enamored with the band music which he heard in Athlone and the discipline of marching bands. Thus began one of the great careers in marching band musical history. Eventually Gilmore moved to Athlone where he became a member of a local band.

One of the great bandleaders in Europe at the time, named Keating, introduced Patrick to classical music and taught him the finer points of playing the trumpet. He joined Keating's Regimental Band and traveled with the band to Canada in 1847. Gilmore flourished as a band member and it was at this time that he decided to make a life in music for himself in America. Patrick and his brother immigrated to Boston in 1848 where he immediately became a member of a local band and took a position with the Ordway Brothers Music Store. In a short time he became the leader of the Boston Brigade Band and then the Charlestown Militia Company. Patrick's musical talent was quickly recognized. He became known as the best trumpet player in the east; he became the director of the Boston Brass Band in 1851; he started a music publishing business, Gilmore and Russell, which became the most respected music publisher in Boston; and he opened a retail store which sold sheet music and musical instruments. Gilmore organized the first Promenade Concert in America in 1855, the forerunner of today's Boston Pops.

Gilmore's leadership of the Boston Brass Band was especially notable because the Band was composed of professors, composers and artists. By 1855, he was invited to succeed Francis Morse, founder, as the director of the Salem Brass Band. Gilmore was offered \$1000 a year if he were to lead the Salem Brass Band, a generous salary at a time when \$600 was a good annual wage. Under his leadership, this Band was eventually invited to play at the inauguration of President James Buchanan in 1857. By 1859, Gilmore had taken over the Boston Brigade Band under the condition that he would pay all of its expenses and change its name to the Gilmore Band. The Band became a Boston institution, playing before enormous crowds. When Fort Sumpter was fired on in 1861, Gilmore and his band gave their full support to the war effort on the Union side. The band played at recruiting rallies and other military functions, including escorting regiments to their training camps. Concerned that the band would be broken up through enlistments, Gilmore and his band members agreed to join the 24th

Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment stationed at Fort Warren in Boston Harbor.

While on the island, Gilmore heard a recruit singing a doleful tune, which was known as "John Brown's Body." He set it to music and it became the foremost marching song of the Civil War. The song was rewritten with the same music by Julia Ward Howe and is now known as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Over the course of his life, Gilmore wrote and performed many songs that became big hits in the United States . Included among them were "Good News From Home," "Sad News From Home," "Seeing Nellie Home" and "God Save Our Nation." His greatest musical achievement, undoubtedly familiar to most Americans, was written when Gilmore sensed that the Battle of Gettysburg was a turning point in the Civil War. It is entitled, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." This song parallels the Irish folk song "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye" which Gilmore must have carried in memory from Ireland .

When Johnny Comes Marching Home

Get ready for the Jubilee,

Hurrah! Hurrah!

We'll give the hero three times three,

Hurrah! Hurrah!

The laurel wreath is ready now

To place upon his loyal brow,

And we'll all feel gay

When Johnny comes marching home.



Johnny, I Hardly Knew Ye

They're rolling out the guns again,

Hurroo, Hurroo

They're rolling out the guns again,

Hurroo, Hurroo

They're rolling out the guns again,

But they will never take our sons again,

No, they never will take our sons again

Johnny, I'm swearing to ye

Gilmore and his band served with General Burnside in the Carolinas . At the close of hostilities, Gilmore was personally asked by Abraham Lincoln to organize and perform at the inauguration of Gov. Michael Hahn of Louisiana in New Orleans in 1864, part of the healing process Lincoln had envisioned for the wounded nation. Gilmore had long dreamed of massing musicians together in one performance and with this directive from the Commander-in-Chief, he saw his chance. Gilmore organized 500 musicians and 5,000

schoolchildren, many from Confederate families, playing and singing patriotic songs. Gilmore's magnificent concert earned him a letter of commendation from President Lincoln.

Inspired by his success in New Orleans , Gilmore organized a festival in Boston in 1869 with 1,000 musicians and 10,000 singers. In the spirit of his contemporary, P.T.Barnum, he followed by producing the World's Peace Jubilee of 1872. These epic concerts had a 2,000-piece orchestra and a 20,000-voice chorus. Johann Stauss, Jr. was paid \$100,000 to appear at these concerts – the only time he visited America . Working in New York in the 1870's, the Irishman from Galway created Gilmore's Concert Garden , which became the first Madison Square Garden .

Gilmore was the musical director for many important celebrations, including the July 4th Centennial in Philadelphia (1876) and the dedication of the Statue of Liberty (1886). He made some of the first commercial recordings for Thomas Edison in 1891. It was Gilmore and his band that started the now familiar tradition of greeting the New Year in Times Square . Gilmore died of a heart attack while on tour in 1892. On the night of his funeral, a young bandleader named John Philip Sousa dedicated his performance to the "Father of the American Band." Gilmore is buried in Calvary Cemetery in Woodside, Queens .

(Written by Tom Lee, September 2004)

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