

## **George M. Cohan – Prince of Broadway**

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

**(Lead: Vince; Chorus: Vince, John and Brian)**

*Johnnie, get your gun  
Get your gun, get your gun  
Take it on the run  
On the run, on the run  
Hear them calling, you and me  
Every son of liberty  
Hurry right away  
No delay, go today  
Make your daddy glad  
To have had such a lad  
Tell your sweetheart not to pine  
To be proud her boy's in line*

*Over there, over there  
Send the word, send the word over there  
That the Yanks are coming  
The Yanks are coming  
The drums rum-tumming  
Everywhere  
So prepare, say a prayer  
Send the word, send the word to beware  
We'll be over, we're coming over  
And we won't come back till it's over  
Over there*

The song “Over There” were the immortal words written by George Michael Cohan in 1917, the song created while walking from his residence to his desk at the theater. President Wilson described “Over There” as “a genuine inspiration to all American manhood” at a time when Cohan remained unwavering in his patriotic passion. In 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt awarded Cohan a special Medal of Honor for his contribution to the cause of World War 1. (You might have seen the movie *Yankee Doodle Dandy* where FDR honors Cohan, the entire picture reflects on his career).

Born on July 3, 1878 (not the fourth of July as the song *Yankee Doodle Dandy* claims but that's show biz) in Providence, Rhode Island, Cohan spent his childhood as part of a vaudevillian family. Living the typical vaudeville life, Cohan and his sister traveled a circuit of stages, slept in boarding houses and backstage of the theater while their parents performed, only occasionally attending school. At nine years old, Cohan became a member of his parents' act, reciting sentimental verse and performing dance routines. By the age of 11, he was writing comedy material, and by 13 he was writing songs and lyrics for the act, which was now billed as The Four Cohans. In 1894, at the age of 16, Cohan wrote his first song, “Why did Nellie Leave Home?” to a sheet music publisher for 25 dollars. In his late teens, Cohan began directing The Four Cohans, which became a major attraction, earning up to 1,000 dollars for a week's booking. Cohan wrote the songs and sketches that his family performed and had starring roles.

He coined a famous curtain speech: "Ladies and gentlemen, my mother thanks you, my father thanks you, my sister thanks you and I thank you!" At 20 years of age, managing the family's business, he was becoming a brazen young man, proud of his achievements. As a precocious young actor, Cohan had fits of temperament and anger which were never characteristic of his mature life when he was soft spoken except when performing on stage. He continually quarreled with managers and stagehands, periodically announcing "I'm through with the theatre" and caused endless trouble for his family because of his temperament. Often when The Four Cohans were billed first, a bad spot in vaudeville, he would fly into a rage and tell the theatre manager he would buy the theatre someday "just to throw you out." He once autographed a photograph writing "I can write better plays than any living dancer and dance better than any living playwright."

As a songwriter he wrote many songs. You might be familiar with this one:

***(Vince Eikmeier and Brian Hegarty helping)***

*Who is the man who will spend or will even lend?*

***Harrigan, That's Me!***

*Who is your friend when you find that you need a friend?*

***Harrigan, That's Me!***

*For I'm just as proud of my name you see,*

*As an Emperor, Czar or a King, could be.*

*Who is the man helps a man every time he can?*

***Harrigan, That's Me!***

*H - A - double are - I - G - A - N spells Harrigan*

*Proud of all the Irish blood that's in me; Divil a man can say a word agin me.*

*H - A - double are - I - G - A - N, you see,*

*Is a name that a shame never has been connected with, **Harrigan, That's me!***

George M. Cohan called himself "just a song-and-dance-man", but at the height of his career he was unquestionably the first man of American theatre. Songwriter, dancer, actor, playwright, producer, theatre-owner—he was the most versatile person in show business. He became a very rich man from his theatrical and songwriting enterprises. As he lived simply, this gave him an opportunity to play another role. He was probably the most generous man of his day providing money to an 'old actor' down on his luck. He had a long list of actors to whom he made regular allowances—people who had acted with him, had worked for him, or had merely known his mother and father in show business. His reputation as a "soft touch" was widespread. "Okay kid," was his favorite response to any reproach (which you most likely heard in the movie "Yankee Doodle Dandy"). In private life he was soft-spoken, a far different person from the Broadway "smart-aleck" he appeared to be in his younger years.

Cohan energized the American stage. His plays were all action and speed. At first, they were criticized for having no "ideas", a criticism which he voiced himself, but as he grew older his work came to have more intellectual content. He used the patriotic note whenever the opportunity offered, and it was no accident that he happened to be the author of "Over There", selling more than 1.5 million copies. Among other notable compositions are: "You're a Grand Old Flag" and "Yankee Doodle Dandy," which have passed from generation to generation as popular tunes celebrating the American spirit. Others include "Give My Regards to Broadway", "Mary's a Grand Old Name", "So Long Mary", and hundreds more. And he has more than 85 plays to his credit.

Cohan tried Hollywood but was treated none too sympathetically. Movie producers and employees, not recognizing his unique position in the American theatre, had failed to make use of his genius. A gatekeeper had barred his automobile from the movie lot because he wasn't a star and an obscure young sub-executive who performs routine tasks, had reprimanded him for submitting a manuscript in his familiar penciled writing on yellow paper. He felt lost and was glad to be back on Broadway.

***(John Costello)***

*I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy  
A Yankee Doodle, do or die  
A real live nephew of my Uncle Sam  
Born on the Fourth of July  
I've got a Yankee Doodle sweetheart  
She's my Yankee Doodle joy  
Yankee Doodle came to London  
Just to ride the ponies  
I am the Yankee Doodle Boy*

When Cohan was approached by a Hollywood writer about filming "Yankee Doodle Dandy", a story about his life, Cohan asked "would anybody go see it?" "Tell you what", the Hollywood man said, "we'll give away dishes and make sure". The only request Cohan had was to sit all by himself in a theatre to watch the film before the public sees it. Cohan walked out of the theatre and into a telegraph office to send a message to the Hollywood writer. It read: "Thanks, kid. Hope you don't run out of dishes. Signed George M."

For all the money he made, Cohan was always predominately the artist rather than the business. He had an office, but seldom went to it. He transacted much of his business from public telephone booths, remarking that his office really was in his hat. He liked to mingle with the audience between acts or after the show or sit up with cronies over a late-night meal and a drink in an after-theatre restaurant off Broadway. From these listenings and talkings new ideas for plays would develop.

At one time he was almost as well-known as a baseball fan as he was a theatrical man. He remained a fan to the end of his days, finally giving up his practice of going to the game every day the Giants were in town. Cohan was president, for several years, of the Catholic Actors Guild.

He died quietly on the morning of November 5, 1942 from cancer. In the early 1960s, a statue of George M. Cohan was erected in the center of Times Square, at the intersection of Broadway and 47<sup>th</sup> street. The man who once owned Broadway gazes down the street he dedicated his life to.

Not bad for a man who can trace his family roots back to County Cork, Ireland.

Gentlemen! Vince Eikmeier thanks you, John Costello thanks you, Mike Canning thanks you and I thank you.