ENRICO CARUSO (1873-1921)

Birth Name: Enrico Caruso
Place of Birth: Naples, Italy

Career Highlights: Enrico Caruso was widely considered the greatest international opera star of his day. He was not American – Caruso was born and died in Naples, Italy – but he spent many years living in New York as a leading star at the Metropolitan Opera, and was the United States’ first recording superstar, issuing almost 300 recordings with the Victor Talking Machine Company (later RCA). While much of his recording focused on operatic works, Caruso recorded many popular songs, including the Neapolitan (southern Italian) song “O Sole Mio,” in the language of his native Naples. (In 1960, Elvis Presley had a No. 1 hit with the song “It’s Now or Never,” sung to same tune as “O Sole Mio.”) In 1918, Caruso recorded the patriotic American World War I song “Over There.”

Recording: “O Sole Mio” (traditional Italian song), 1916

Recording: “Over There” (patriotic World War I song), 1918
Questions to consider:

→ What cities are the newspapers below from? What does the size and placement of the articles about Caruso’s death suggest about his popularity in the United States?
→ What are some of the terms used to describe Caruso in the headlines to these articles?
→ Why might American audiences have been interested in listening to recordings of popular Italian songs?
→ What does Caruso’s recording of a song like “Over There” suggest about his attitude toward the United States? About Americans’ attitudes toward him?
→ Why might it have been easier for an Italian to find success as an opera star in the United States during this period than in another field?
→ How might Caruso’s success have helped paved the way for singers of Italian descent who came after him?