

## *The African American National Anthem*

The hymn, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” is known as the national anthem for African Americans. It places emphasis on the history of people of color which includes many triumphs and struggles. This great song is known across the world, but the history behind the song’s creation and first performance is often unknown. Therefore, read further and reflect on the meaning of this hymn for people of color.

James Weldon Johnson was born in 1871 in Jacksonville, Florida. He was a poet, lyricist, lawyer, government official, and a lover of the spirituals. He was the first African American to be admitted to the Florida bar in 1897. He and his younger brother, John Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954), a musician, wrote musical comedies and operas. But their best known composition is “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” This song was written as a special tribute to honor almost forty years of freedom for people of color in America. It was first performed by a children’s choir as a church program on February 12, 1900.

James Weldon Johnson went on to become United States Consul to Venezuela in 1906 and to Nicaragua in 1909. In 1913, he became the editor of the *New York Age*. He was also very active in the NAACP. Other writings of Johnson include *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* in 1927. *Black Manhattan* in 1930, and *Negro Spirituals* in 1925. Johnson died in 1938.

The United States Postal Service issued a 22 cents commemorative stamp (the eleventh in the Black Heritage Series) in his honor in 1988.

## “LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING”

*Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;  
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the list’ning skies,  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.  
Sing a song full of the faith  
that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope  
that the present has brought us;  
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,  
Let us march on till victory is won.*

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*Stony the road we trod,  
bitter the chast’ning rod,  
Felt in the days  
when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat,  
have not our weary feet,  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come over a way  
that with tears has been watered.  
We have come, treading our path  
thro’ the blood of the slaughtered,  
Out from a gloomy past,  
till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam  
of our bright star is cast.*

• • • • •

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,  
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou who hast by thy might, led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.  
Lest our feet stray from the places  
Our God where we met Thee,  
Lest our hearts drunk with the wine of the world  
we forget Thee;  
Shadowed beneath Thy hand  
May we forever stand,  
True to our God,  
True to our native land.

*James Weldon Johnson  
John Rosamond Johnson*

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