

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” was written and composed by the Johnson brothers, a pair of influential men from Jacksonville, Florida. James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson worked together their whole lives, first in show business and later in pursuit of civil rights. They believed that artistic and cultural excellence was the key to the advancement of Black people in America.

James Weldon Johnson was the older of the brothers and throughout the course of his lifetime was a lawyer, diplomat, professor, writer and poet and the first African American leader of the NAACP. He wrote the song while he was serving as the principal of a segregated school in Jacksonville, and the hymn’s debut was performed there, sung by 500 children at an event celebrating Black history.

Having trained at the New England Conservatory of Music, his brother John was the hymn’s composer. John had a long and successful musical career, composing and performing in stage musicals and operettas which spanned a wide range of musical genres.

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” was composed in 1900. The Reconstruction efforts that followed the end of the Civil War had failed and racism was on the rise, determined to close any door that Black achievers tried to open. Within the Black community, education, artistic excellence and the influence of Black churches were sources of strength and hoped-for roads to progress and advancement. In this way, this song was a history, a proclamation and hope for a better future. It was an immediate success among Black communities and organizations. In 1919, the NAACP declared that it was “The Negro National Anthem.” Interesting to note, is that it wasn’t until 1931 that “The Star Spangled Banner” was adopted as the national anthem of the United States.

The lyrics of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” follow and there is also a link to four different renditions of the hymn for your listening enjoyment.

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening 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

Stony the road we trod
Bitter the chastening 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 through the blood of the slaughtered
Out from the 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 has 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
Our native land

Click here to listen to Youtube performance videos of the anthem:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGF1N9aq2Lc9STwAmOjWz2eT1tYaPis>

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