

Lift Every Voice and Sing

In 1988, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church approved a resolution asking that the Standing Committee on Church Music, in cooperation with the Office for Black Ministries, prepare a collection of Black hymns to augment the resources of the *Hymnal, 1982*. The volume was published in 1993 and edited by Dr. Horace Boyer. Dr. Boyer was a well-known professor at the University of Massachusetts. His is a long, long list of accomplishments in the world of music. While his awards were numerous, they include the Martin Luther King Heritage Award from the city of his birth in Winter Park, Florida and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Society of American Music, and recognition by the Union of Black Episcopalians. His contributions to our church were many.

While “Lift Every Voice and Sing” had been included in the *Hymnal, 1982*, its further inclusion, in fact serving its part in the title of the new, supplemental hymnal, (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*), placed it in its rightful context. We know that “Lift Every Voice and Sing” is often called the Black National Anthem. While its author, James Weldon Johnson, would not have named it such as he penned it, these are his own words as he reflected on the deep meaning it came to have for so many.

“A group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, arranged to celebrate Lincoln's birthday in 1900. My brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, and I decided to write a song to be sung at the exercise. I wrote the words and he wrote the music. Our New York publisher, Edward B. Marks, made mimeographed copies for us and the song was taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred [African American]¹ school children.

Shortly afterwards my brother and I moved from Jacksonville to New York, and the song passed out of our minds. But the school children of Jacksonville kept singing it, they went off to other schools and sang it, they became teachers and taught it to other children. Within twenty years it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country. Today, the song, popularly known as the [Black] National Hymn, is quite generally used.

The lines of this song repay me in elation, almost of exquisite anguish, whenever I hear them sung by [Black] children.” - *James Weldon Johnson, 1935*

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.

¹ Contemporary words and phrases have been used in place of historically racially charged epithets.

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 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 hast 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.

“the school children...kept singing it”²

It's a beautiful hymn. Everyone loves to sing it. But it is borne out of experience—Black experience. It is important that we acknowledge and affirm that sacred grounding. Before you begin this month, be sure to listen and watch this rendition. Then return to it over the course of your other activities. And the next time it's part of the music at church, remember.

Remember. Hope, pray, act.

<https://www.blackpast.org/black-past-features/black-national-anthem/>

² From the web page of the James Weldon Johnson Foundation: <https://www.jamesweldonjohnson.org/press-1>