

Lift Every Voice and Sing

"**Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing**" – often referred to as the "**Black National Anthem**" – is a song written as a poem by James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) in 1900 and set to music by his brother John Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954) in 1905.^[1]

History

"Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" was publicly performed first as a poem as part of a celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday by Johnson's brother John. In 1919, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) dubbed it "The Negro National Anthem"^[2] for its power in voicing a cry for liberation and affirmation for African-American people.^[1]

In 1939, Augusta Savage received a commission from the New York World's Fair and created a 16-foot (5 m) plaster sculpture called *Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing* which was destroyed by bulldozers at the close of the fair.^[3]

In Maya Angelou's 1969 autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the song is sung by the audience and students at Maya's eighth grade graduation, after a white school official dashes the educational aspirations of her class.^[4]

In 1990, singer Melba Moore released a modern rendition of the song, which she recorded along with others including R&B artists Stephanie Mills, Freddie Jackson, Anita Baker, Dionne Warwick, Bobby Brown, Stevie Wonder, Jeffrey Osborne, and Howard Hewett; and gospel artists BeBe & CeCe Winans, Take 6, and The Clark Sisters, after which, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" was entered into the *Congressional Record* by Del. Walter Fauntroy (D-DC).^[5]

In 2008, jazz singer Rene Marie was asked to perform the national anthem at a civic event in Denver, Colorado, where she caused a controversy by substituting the words of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" into the song. This arrangement of the words of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" with the melody of The Star Spangled Banner became part of the titular suite on her 2011 CD release, *The Voice of My Beautiful Country*.^[6]

On January 20, 2009, the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who was formerly president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, used a near-verbatim recitation of the song's third stanza to begin his benediction at the inauguration ceremony for President Barack Obama

On September 24, 2016, this song was sung by mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves and chorus at the conclusion of the opening ceremonies of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, at which Obama delivered the keynote address.

On October 19, 2017, when white nationalist leader Richard Spencer spoke at the University of Florida, the university's carillon played "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" to convey a message of unity.^[7]

On April 14, 2018, Beyoncé included the song in the set list of her concert at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival

References

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6. Pellegrinelli, Lara (July 3, 2009). "Poetic License Raises a Star-Spangled Debate" (<https://www.npr.org/2009/07/03/106257394/poetic-license-raises-a-star-spangled-debate>) *All Things Considered* NPR. Retrieved January 15, 2012.
7. Diaz, Andrea; Chavez, Nicole (October 20, 2017) *College's bell tower trolled white supremacist with black national anthem* (<http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/20/us/university-florida-bell-tower-trnd/index.html>) CNN, retrieved 2017-10-20

External links

- Free scores by J. Rosamond Johnson at the [International Music Score Library Project \(IMSLP\)](#)—including "Lift Every Voice and Sing"
 - *Lift Every Voice and Sing: A Celebration of the Negro National Anthem* at the [Wayback Machine](#) (archived March 1, 2009), edited by Julian Bond and Sondra Kathryn Wilson
 - *NPR's Performance Today page on Black History Month 2003*—includes a link to a RealPlayer version of the song
 - "Chicago Sun-Times columnist Lynn Sweet, transcript of Rev Lowery's Inauguration Benediction
 - Video of singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" on [YouTube](#) led by Alice Walker and Dr. Rudolph Byrd at Emory University
 - [Grace and James Weldon Johnson Website](#)
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