

## 2023 Chelsea Martin Luther King Jr. Days of Service and Social Action

### What is the history behind 'Lift Every Voice and Sing'?

With words by the American writer and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson, and music written by his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, the pair initially wrote the song in 1900 to celebrate the birthday of the late 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln.

It was taught to 500 school children in Jacksonville, Florida, who sang it at the birthday celebrations. The song slipped from the Johnson brothers' memories after they moved across the country to New York, but Black communities in the South continued to sing the hymn and share it with others, and it rapidly gained popularity.

Around 20 years later, the NAACP began to promote the hymn as 'the Black national anthem' and it was widely used as a rallying cry during the Civil Rights Movement in America throughout the 1950s and 60s. With lyrics that speak of faith and freedom, paying homage to the endurances of their ancestors, the hymn is a hopeful look to a future of equality.

'Lift Every Voice and Sing' has a historical and meaningful place in the hearts of many Black Americans. As Jon Batiste, leader of the band Stay Human, has said, the hymn "connects us to the history of all the people who we stand on the shoulders of – who have marched and fought and died for the freedoms we enjoy and that we're trying to improve upon."

The last century has seen an abundance of significant appearances for the hymn. Acclaimed writer Maya Angelou recalled it being sung during her eighth-grade graduation ceremony in her 1969 autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and James Brown quoted lyrics from the song as part of his performance of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' ahead of the historic boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Chuck Wepner in 1975, which inspired the film *Rocky* the following year.

Lyrics from the song were also incorporated into Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration ceremony by the Reverend Joseph Lowery, and in 2018 Beyoncé sang the hymn during her ground-breaking headline performance at the Coachella music festival in California.

In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the ensuing protests and demonstrations held nationwide and echoed across the globe, the hymn received further public attention. It has since been incorporated into several sporting events, including NASCAR and the NFL, where it has been performed since 2021 as part of the ever-popular Super Bowl event which marks the end of the American football season.

## **Lift Every Voice and Sing – The Black National Anthem**

*Words: James Weldon Johnson*

*Music: J. Rosamond Johnson*

Lift every voice and sing,  
'Til 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 'til 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 died.  
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,  
'Til 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.