I. Overview - *Lift Every Voice and Sing*

"*Lift Every Voice and Sing*" – often referred to as the "Black national anthem" in the United States, is a song based on a poem by James Weldon Johnson (1871 – 1938) in 1900 and set to music by his brother John Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954) in 1905. In 1919, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) dubbed it "the Negro national anthem" for its power in voicing a cry for liberation and affirmation for African-American people.

![J. Rosamond Johnson with his brother, James Weldon Johnson. Photographed by ASCAP](https://dos.myflorida.com/cultural/programs/florida-artists-hall-of-fame/james-weldon-johnson/)

II. Biography - Poet: James Weldon Johnson

James Weldon Johnson: POET, WRITER, COMPOSER

Biography

The legacy of James Weldon Johnson—Florida-born educator, poet, novelist, journalist, anthologist, diplomat, lyricist, lawyer and civil rights activist—stands as an icon in the cultural heritage of America's black community.

Born in Jacksonville in 1871, Johnson led a remarkable life and career that cast him as an emblematic figure in America's early-20th Century struggle with a racist and segregated society. For millions of black Americans of his day, Johnson stood as one of the nation's most revered beacons of hope for a better future.

In 1887, Johnson enrolled at Atlanta University where he distinguished himself in writing and as an orator. He eventually earned a graduate degree while founding a short-lived but notable campus newspaper, Daily American. As editor, Weldon showed a zeal for political activism. After returning to Florida in 1897, he soon launched a bold new career path, becoming the first African American to be admitted to the Florida Bar since Reconstruction.

But his broad interests and gifts—principally in poetry and music—steered him away from a typical law career. In 1901, he moved to New York to join his younger (by two years) brother, John Rosamond Johnson, a musical prodigy destined for his own outstanding career. For the next few years, Weldon traveled with his brother's popular music trio and helped write many of their songs. In 1905, Rosamond set to music a poem his brother had written (in 1899) and the result was "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." The song became hugely popular among black congregations, and by the 1920s was being called "The Negro National Anthem."

In 1906, at age 25, Weldon returned to Jacksonville to accept a job as principal of the city's largest public school, the all-black Stanton School. He only served a few months before President Theodore Roosevelt tapped him for a diplomatic post as U.S. consul in Venezuela. During his brief tenure at Stanton, Weldon made a profound change in the school's curriculum, installing two grades (9th and 10th) with courses in English composition, algebra, literature, physics, geometry, history and Spanish.

After two years in Venezuela, Weldon was appointed U.S. consul in Nicaragua in 1909. There he married Grace Nail, an artist he had met during his songwriting days in New York. During his six-year stint in the foreign service, Weldon became a published poet and an accomplished writer, publishing (anonymously) what would become his most famous book, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, in 1912.

Returned to New York in 1914, Weldon became editorial page editor for the influential New York Age, a black-owned weekly newspaper. Weldon's powerful editorials soon made him famous, and in 1916 he moved to Washington, D.C. to become the national organizer of the newly founded National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

During his 14-year tenure at the helm of the NAACP, Weldon's stature as a paramount political leader in the African-American community solidified, as did his stature as a poet and anthologist. He became a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, publishing many memorable works, notably a collection of poems entitled God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse (1927). His contributions to African-American folklore included The Book of American Negro Poetry, which he edited in 1922, and two volumes of spirituals.

In 1930, Weldon resigned his post with the NAACP to accept a named professorship in creative literature at Fisk University in Nashville. He often lectured on the plight of black Americans, staunchly advocating for their civil rights. On a summer vacation in Maine in 1938, Weldon died in an automobile accident at age 67. In 1988, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp in his honor, and he is commemorated by numerous awards and scholarships in his name.
III. Biography - Composer: John Rosamond Johnson


John Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954) COMPOSER, CONDUCTOR, ACTOR

Biography

A native of Jacksonville, John Rosamond Johnson was a musical prodigy— at age 4, he was an accomplished pianist. After studying at the New England Conservatory in Boston, Johnson returned to Jacksonville and served for a time as the musical director of the Bethel Baptist church.

In 1905, Rosamond set a poem written five years earlier by his talented brother, James Weldon Johnson, to music. The NAACP later adopted "Lift Up Ev'ry Voice and Sing" as "the Negro national anthem."

A passion for musical comedy soon drew Johnson into show business. By age 23, he was touring as a vocalist with the company of Oriental America, thought to be the first all-black show on Broadway that wasn't a burlesque house act.

While in New York, Johnson met numerous luminaries in the music field, most notably Oscar Hammerstein, who would ultimately help shape his career. He also met and teamed up with gifted singer/songwriter Bob Cole, of Atlanta. For seven years, the pair toured as "Cole and Johnson," and wrote and published more than 200 songs, including Under the Bamboo Tree, which sold more than 400,000 copies, making it one of the nation's most popular tunes. Besides crafting a sophisticated vaudeville style, Cole and Johnson produced two musicals, The Shoo-Fly Regiment (1907) and The Red Moon (1909).

Brother James Weldon eventually joined Cole and Johnson, and the trio soon became one of the most influential song composition and musical show writing teams in New York. These men elevated the "Negro Songs" from music that promoted negative stereotypes of African Americans to sophisticated tunes that were used in Broadway musicals.

In 1912, Oscar Hammerstein appointed Rosamond as musical director of his Grand Opera House in London, making Johnson the first African American to serve in this capacity in a white theatrical (light opera) company. After two years in London, he returned to New York with his new wife, Nora Floyd, and the couple started the Music School Settlement for Colored People.

Later, after directing a singing orchestra and appearing in a series of groundbreaking plays given by The Colored Players at the Garden Theater in Madison Square Garden, Johnson appeared in 1935 in what would become the classical musical Porgy and Bess.

When World War I broke out, Johnson received a commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 15th Regiment. After the war, he toured with his own groups, and even sang and played the part of a lawyer in the original production of Porgy and Bess in 1935. Although he did not write another musical comedy, Johnson continued to compose songs, instruct young people in music and serve as a "theater doctor" for many plays until his death in 1954.
Lift ev’ry voice and sing,  
‘Til 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 ’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 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,  
‘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.
V. Reflection Essay

1. Please read this document carefully.
2. Please write a 250 word reflection essay based on the prompts below. (It may be longer if you prefer.)
3. Please submit your #4 Reflection: *Lift Every Voice and Sing* recording to Envelope #4 in Canvas.

1. What are your biggest take-aways from reading this document?
2. How has knowing the history of this important song and its’ poet and composer influenced your study and performance on this work?
3. What line(s) of the poem are the most significant to you at this time of your life and why?
4. How does knowing this song inspire you to more fully work towards creating an anti-racist culture in our country and on our campus?
5. Is there anything you would like to add to this essay that has not been asked?