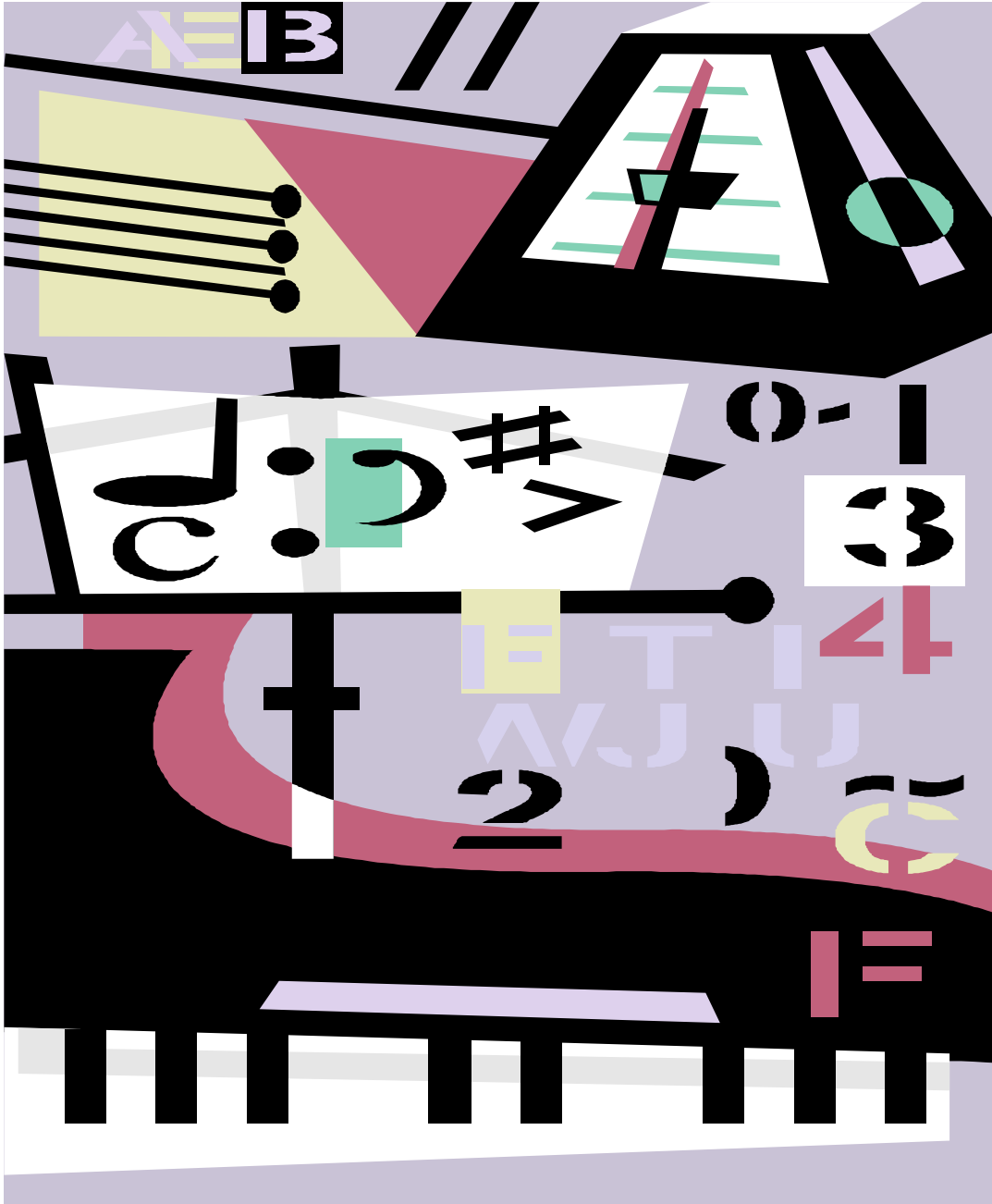


The Power of Music



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Music has always been a very important part of my life. Even as a young child, I always had a strong love for dancing, singing, and doing pretty much anything that dealt with music. And this love has only grown stronger with time. I believe that music is a very powerful force. It can make you experience certain emotions and do certain things that nothing else can. Music can make you happy when you are feeling sad, it can comfort you when you are feeling alone, and it can also motivate you when you feel like you don't have the strength to carry on. No matter what emotions I have experienced during the past twenty-one years of my life, music has been there to help me get through them even when nothing and no one else was. But while many songs that I have enjoyed over the years have come in and out of style, there is one song that will always have a place in my heart. This is because this song is much more than a song that is fun to sing along with. It is a song that exemplifies who I am and the woman that I aim to be. That song is the Negro National Anthem.

As a young child I was raised on the south side of Chicago and had attended an all black school until I was in the fifth grade. It was at this school where I experienced singing the Negro National Anthem for the very first time. I was about six years old and in my first grade class which was taught by a very nice teacher whose name was Ms. Duffy. It was on a cold winter day in February and she was trying to teach us the lyrics to the song because our class was chosen to sing it in front of the entire school in our annual Black History Month assembly. Our class did a pretty good job of learning the song and our performance of the song exceeded our teacher's expectations. My class had attended school assemblies before, but that was the very first time that we were able to sing the song with our peers and all of us took a lot of pride in that accomplishment.

At my elementary school, we began our school programs in the normal tradition of most other elementary schools, but with a twist. We would start off every assembly, graduation, or special school event by singing the national anthem as someone held the national flag. This would immediately be followed by the entire audience singing the Negro National Anthem as the African flag, a flag in the colors of black, green, and red, was high in the air. To this day I can still recall how powerful it was when the entire audience would come together and sing that song.

This school tradition came to a definite halt for me when I was ten years old because my mother had decided to move from our predominately African-American neighborhood in South Chicago to a southern suburb where there was

hardly an African-American to be found at that time. When I moved to this suburb where there were very few members of my race, I attended predominately white schools where we would sing the national anthem for every sporting event, graduation, and school function but never ever the Negro National Anthem. Because it has been years since I have experienced the feeling of singing the Negro national anthem, I began to feel like I almost completely lost a very important part of my culture. As a result, I felt that it was a must that I learned more about it.

The Negro National Anthem is actually entitled “Lift Every voice and Sing” and it was written by James Weldon Johnson in 1900. James Weldon Johnson was born on June 17, 1871 in Jacksonville, Florida to his very proud parents, James and Helen Louis Dillet Johnson. Although Johnson was born after slavery had been abolished, he lived during a time when African-Americans were still seen as being inferior to whites. As a result, Johnson developed a very strong desire to let nothing including his color prevent him from achieving all of his goals during his lifetime. He even wrote a pledge for himself that represented his unwillingness to let the effects of racism get in his way. “I will not allow one prejudiced person or one million or one hundred million to blight my life. I will not let prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine, and I shall defend and maintain its integrity against all of the powers of hell” (Bond 18).

Johnson knew that in order for him to achieve his much-anticipated success he would have to receive an education. This caused him to seek an education at Atlanta University, as well as Columbia. Being a well-educated man paid off for Johnson in 1898, because it was during this year that he became the first African-American to be admitted to the Florida bar. Over the course of his life, Johnson became known as a “songwriter in New York, an American consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua, executive secretary of the NAACP, and professor of creative literature at Fisk University” (Johnson 1). He also wrote many powerful books such as *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, *Black Manhattan*, and *God’s Trombones*. In addition to writing books, he was also very well known for his poetry. The poem that eventually became a song that he is most famous for is definitely the Negro National Anthem.

Well the actual song came about in 1900 when James Weldon Johnson, his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, and a few other men planned a celebration for Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. James wanted to write a poem about Lincoln, but at first no useful words would come to mind. “But finally a line did come and it would not go away. Lift every voice and sing” (Felton 64). From the moment when that phrase came to Johnson’s mind, the words just kept coming and they would not stop. It was almost as if his brain was thinking faster than he could write. But once Johnson had taken all of the words that he had floating around in his head and put them on paper, his brother, who was sitting at the piano, was

able to come up with music almost instantly. As James read his poem over Rosamond's music, they both knew that the song could not have been any more perfect. Although they may not have realized it at that time, it was at this very moment that James and Rosamond Johnson had created a piece of history that would not only outlive them, but continue to be sung over one hundred years after its creation.

Here are the lyrics to the song that has managed to survive one hundred and four years.

Lift Every Voice and Sing
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 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. (Johnson 101)

"The song was sung at the Lincoln's birthday celebration. The children who performed it remembered it and others who heard it sang it too. They took

it with them wherever they went. Later, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People selected it as an official song. It then came to be known as the Negro National Hymn" (Felton 66). Here is a quote taken from James Weldon Johnson in 1935 in which he talks about how this song came to life. "After my brother and I had written the song, it was taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred colored 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 Negro National Hymn, is quite generally used. The lines of this song repay me elation, almost of exquisite anguish, whenever I hear them sung by Negro children" (Bond 3).

Although the history of how "Lift Every Voice and Sing" came to be can never be changed, the way that the song is interpreted varies from person to person. Therefore every person that may hear the song or read the lyrics can and most likely will interpret it in their own unique way. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier states "in "Lift Every Voice and Sing" James Weldon Johnson endowed the African-American enslavement and struggle for freedom with a certain nobility. He expressed an acceptance of the past and confidence in the future. It is likely that Johnson was trying to develop a sense of history among his race. On one hand, the lyrics reveal how African-Americans were estranged from their cultural past by the impact of racial oppression and that they manifested the psychological and physical scars inflicted by that injustice. On the other hand, the song is irrefutably one of the most stalwart and inspiring symbols in American civil rights history. In this song Johnson basically tries to tell African-Americans not to lose hope. His words "Lift every voice and sing" basically tell us that we must persist and remain vigilant until victory is won" (Bond 17).

According to baseball great, Hank Aaron, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" touches our hearts because it speaks directly to us and our people. It belongs to us, was written by us, and is sung by us (Bond 7). I think that Aaron made a very good point in this statement. As Americans we have numerous patriotic pledges, slogans, and anthems that demonstrate the pride and love that we have for our country. Symbols such as the American flag, slogans like Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country", and the famous line from our National Anthem, "Land of the Free, Home of the Brave" all demonstrate the loyalty that we, as Americans, have toward our country. But unlike these symbols of U. S. nationalism, the Negro National Anthem exhibits the pride and loyalty that African-Americans have in their heritage and themselves. The Star-Spangled Banner may represent the attitudes that many Americans have toward this country, but America has not always been the "Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave". America was once a country where many men and women had their cultures, freedom,

dignity, and human rights taken away from them just because they were different. As a result, African-Americans have a history that is all their own and I think that it is safe to say that they deserve an Anthem of their own as well.

Susan Taylor, editor of the popular African-American women's magazine, *Essence*, expressed how "Lift Every Voice and Sing" had affected her life when she stated, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" is the reminder the world needs that our struggle for civil rights has been a long and painful one. It did not begin in the 1950's with sit-in and demonstrations, with Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. Our battle for black empowerment started long before Malcom X, Stokely Carmichael, and Angela Davis raised their fists, and long before DuBois, Bethune, and Garvey were even born. Our fight for human rights began centuries ago, with the start of the Atlantic slave trade, when the first Africans decided to rebel because they would rather risk death than be enslaved. This song eloquently and passionately calls us to remember not just our pain, but also the promise that God will never fail us" (Bond 235).

The aspect of the song that Taylor discusses is just as essential to truly understanding "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as those mentioned by Frazier and Aaron. While this song gives the African-American community hope for our future and supports our unique history, it definitely reminds us of the struggles and hardships that our ancestors faced hundreds of years before the problems of Jim Crow and racism even came into existence. In order for us as a people to avoid taking the many rights that we have today for granted, it is a must that we all take the time to remember the blood, sweat, and tears that our predecessors shed so that we could enjoy these simple rights. Although ugly forms of hatred such as racism still exist, we as African-Americans have certainly come a long way over the years. It may have taken hundreds of years, but our ancestors' dreams have finally come true. African-American children can now go to the same schools as white children to be equally educated, so when they are adults they can work side by side for equal pay. Even though we have come this far, the fight is definitely not over. So we must continue to "march on till victory is won" (Bond 4).

During the past few weeks, I have learned many things about the effect that this song has had on different people not only from books, but from actually talking to people as well. I knew that I wanted to get responses from a diverse group and since the majority of my classes are predominately white, I decided that the best place for me to gather my information would be from those living in my household.

This may seem like a somewhat desperate attempt to add a few extra lines to my paper, but seriously you can't get that much more diverse than my apartment. There are two African-Americans that live in our apartment, but even though we are both members of the same race we are very different. Deonna was raised in an all black inner city project on the South side of Chicago. I on the other hand have lived the last ten years of my life being brought up in a

middle-class suburban neighborhood that was predominately white for the first few years that I lived there. Hitomi is a middle-class Japanese-American who was raised in Canada and moved to America when she was a freshman in high school. And Becki is your typical blonde, middle-class, republican, white, twenty-year-old female who has almost never dared to step outside of her comfort zone.

Because of our different ethnic and economic backgrounds, we have all had varied experiences in life. This is exactly why I chose my roommates to be my guinea pigs for this research project. I began this experiment by basically asking them if they had ever heard of the "Negro National Anthem" or "Lift Every Voice and Sing"? If they stated that they had heard of the song, I asked them about how they came to know about the song. When I asked Becki and Hitomi, they pretty much gave me the reply that I expected to get from them and said that they had never heard of the song. On the other hand, Deonna stated that she can still remember almost all of the words to the song because she attended an all black school where they sung the song at every school assembly.

After I found out that Hitomi and Becki had never heard the song before, I decided to give each of them lyrics to the song and have them sing it along with Deonna and I. At first they really were not catching on to the tune of the song but by the time that we reached the midpoint they surprisingly had it down packed. After having them not only read the lyrics, but also sing the song, I asked them what they thought about the song. Becki seemed embarrassed to comment, but she finally came around to saying, "I can see why black people would consider a song like this to be their National anthem. It is a song that talks about their history and their hopes for the future".

Hitomi surprised me when she said that she felt like the song could be talking about her ancestors in a way as well. She stated that as she sung the song it made her think about the injustices that her people suffered just for being from a different country. Although Asians may not have experienced the inhumanity of slavery, their history in America includes being forced to live in Japanese concentration camps during World War II and facing the same racism and unjust stereotypes that many minorities of today still come into contact with. Hitomi definitely caused me to look at the Negro National Anthem in an entirely new light. Even though it is a song that shows how hard African-Americans have had to work to get where they are today, members of all minority groups can undoubtedly identify with the song. This is because there is at least one point in history that every minority group has struggled to deal with the hardships of being different.

The research that I have done has showed me that most of the non-black population has never even heard of the song, "Lift Every Voice and Sing". I personally think that this is a shame. By forcing our children to mindlessly recite the words to the "Pledge of Allegiance" and the Star-Spangled Banner on a daily basis without even introducing them to historical works of art such as the Negro

National Anthem we are depriving them of a very important part of history. As Americans we must come to the realization that U. S. history consists of much more than the history of the white American male.

If we are going to take on names such as the melting pot we must acknowledge that without the hard work and diligence of African-Americans, Latin-Americans, and many other ethnic groups this country would not be what it is today. As a future teacher of the leaders of tomorrow, I am going to make it my duty to teach my students that black history is much more than a month. I will do my best to find ways to teach them to become great readers and writers, as well as open minded citizens. I am a very firm believer in the saying, "You will never know where you are going, until you know where you have been". As a result, I feel that it is my responsibility to somehow show my students where our country has been over the years so they will know where they are headed in the future.

As a twenty-one year old African-American female, I believe that "Lift Every Voice and Sing" is about the history, hope, and aspirations of my ancestors. Now when I look back at those old assemblies that we used to have at my old elementary school, I can see why they would have us sing that song every time the school would come together in the auditorium. I think that all of us young African-American children coming together to sing such a powerful song embodied a strong sense of pride in our past and our bright futures. Singing the song helped to remind us how much our ancestors struggled so that we could be here today with the hopes of becoming anything that we wanted to be. Now that I am older the song still gives me hope because it let's me know that if my ancestors can overcome slavery, segregation, lynching, racism, and many other things that were inflicted upon them just because of the color of their skin, there is absolutely nothing that can stop me from fulfilling my dreams. This song definitely lets me know that if I work hard and have faith in God I can and will succeed.

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