

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Lift Every Voice and Sing

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Although not technically a song of the Civil Rights Movement, we begin with this song to indicate that the fusion of religious and political aspirations had a long and honored place in American Negro music. Sometimes referred to as “The Negro National Hymn” or “The African American National Anthem,” it was written in 1899 as a poem by James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938), distinguished author, poet, educator, politician, and early civil rights activist, who was for many years a leader in the NAACP and a promoter of the Harlem Renaissance. The poem was set to music in 1900 by his brother John Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954).

The first stanza is a call to singing: Why? The second stanza recalls the difficult journey from a gloomy past: In what mood does the stanza end, and toward what future does it point? The third stanza is a prayer: For what, and why? What does the poem suggest about the connection between being true to God and being true to America?

Watch Ray Charles perform “Lift Every Voice and Sing” on the Dick Cavett Show in 1972 at www.youtube.com/watch?v=QU8921j20e8, and listen to the Grace Baptist Church Cathedral Choir perform the song at www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyS3HPInHtl.

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 seas.
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,

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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 a 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.

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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.