

CULTURE

Lifting Up

Learn the history, significance of the Black National Anthem

By Mariette Williams

Lift Every Voice and Sing is a hymn, a call to action and a prayerful promise for Black Americans that a better day is coming. The song has been performed at presidential inaugurations, commencement ceremonies and national sporting events, and although it has come under some recent scrutiny (including objections from some politicians about the song being performed at the Super Bowl), its origins go back more than 100 years.

The anthem was written and composed in 1900 in Jacksonville, Fla., by brothers James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson, and then first performed publicly to celebrate President Abraham Lincoln's birthday.

Also known as the "Black National Anthem" or the "Negro National Anthem," it holds special meaning for Black Americans who were, at the time, excluded from civil rights such as voting and equal access to education.

"To Black Americans, the song represents pride, hope and honor."

— YOLANDA COPELAND, owner of Explore JAX Core tours

"The Negro National Anthem means visibility and hope," says Kailea Myrick, curator of Jacksonville's Ritz Theatre and Museum. "When Francis Scott Key wrote *The Star-Spangled Banner*, African Americans only counted as three-fifths of a person, and *Lift Every Voice and Sing* is a celebration of how far we have come in America and honors the hard work of the generations before us."

Lift Every Voice and Sing was initially written as a poem by James Weldon Johnson, the principal of the Stanton Normal School, which was the first public school for Black students in Florida. The hymn was first recited by the schoolchildren, and John Rosamond Johnson, the musical director at Bethel Baptist Church, later set the words to music. In the ensuing years, the song was sung at churches and schools and was adopted by the NAACP as a unifying ballad during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and '60s.

"The Johnson brothers didn't expect



James Weldon Johnson bust, Ritz Theatre and Museum

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