

Negro national anthem one of those best kept secrets

■ 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' written 100 years ago.

Suppose you went to a ball game and the announcer said, "Ladies and gentlemen, please stand and sing the Negro national anthem – 'Lift Every Voice and Sing.'" Would you have to ask, "What song is that?" If so, you wouldn't be the only one asking because the Negro national anthem is one of those best kept secrets. And it was written 100 years ago.

PBS's "The American Experience--America 1900" depicts the beginning of the 20th century as a time when most Americans were feeling very positive about the country, and there was a "can do" spirit among the people. Many African Americans, while no longer slaves yet not fully free, nevertheless got caught up in the heady optimism of that time.

In that setting of promising possibilities in 1900, poet James Weldon Johnson penned: "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." And those words became the first verse of the Negro national anthem.

About 100 years earlier, another poet, Francis Scott Key, wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner" ("Oh, Say, Can You See") during the War of 1812. But his song did not reach its full popularity until the 20th century when Con-

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gress adopted it as the nation's national anthem in 1931.

Besides being two great songs of the 20th century, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and "The Star-Spangled Banner," have something else in common. Both are musically very difficult to sing. I have heard complaints about how hard it is to sing "Oh, Say, Can You See." Some critics want the tune simplified.

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"Lift Every Voice and Sing" was first sung in Jacksonville, Fla., at a special celebration. An all-black chorus of school children sang the three, very long and musically complex verses.

Later on, segregated black schools and black churches in the South sang the anthem regularly. When African Americans migrated from the South to other parts of the country, they took "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the Negro national anthem, with

them.

I first heard this momentous song at a church gathering "up North." Later, I heard it at award banquets; after that, at black history celebrations and Kwanzaa festivities.

This anthem acknowledges the legacy of slavery. "Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, Felt in the days when hope unborn had died.... We have come over a way that with tears has been watered; We have come, treading our path thro' the blood of the slaughtered; Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last."

Also, this song embraces the present and looks to the future. "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."

If Francis Scott Key could "come back and walk the earth" – would he be pleased or shocked or amused by the people who have attempted to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at public events? Perhaps he would agree with me that Whitney Houston has been the best singer of "Oh, Say, Can You See."

And if James Weldon Johnson could "return to earth" – he might be pleasantly surprised that his 100-year-old song is still being sung in this new century at many gatherings by many people who gladly "lift every voice and sing."

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