

Lift every voice and
sing essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I found this song as I did research for a book review I had hoped to do on the callalights movement. The National Association of the Advancement of Colored People's website first identifies it as "The Black National Anthem" making its importance clear to those not familiar with it.

Although direct access to the handwritten version was not available the content of the song is remarkably extensive. Having been written in an era of segregation and oppression where Jim Crow laws were at their climax, this poem becomes far more than a piece of art turning into a significant part of African American culture.

James the initial attempts of reconstruction after civil war. At 29, when he wrote this poem, he was a lawyer, school principal and writer among other things, later becoming the first African American to be part of the Florida bar.

Having the important assignment of writing a piece to celebrate Lincoln's birthday and the pressure of having Booker T. Washington as audience, he managed to create a magnificent piece. However, knowing its importance and relevance would have less impact as a poem, he asked his brother John Roseland to make musical arrangements to turn it into a song.

In effect, the impact was such, that it has been taught, generation after generation and featured in schools as both musical piece and historical one, even being used at President Obama's first inauguration. The lyrics or verses depending if viewing it as a song or poem are full of affliction and agony expectancy. It is efficacious in describing the pain and struggles previously endured by African American as slaves which is clearly

manifested on verses as: “ Stony the road we trod, Bitter the chastening rod”.

It exposes how hard the course towards freedom is and how humiliating was the force used against slaves. It would have been helpful to know how the children performing and the audience felt about this on Engl tried to obtain information both at various websites but found nothing. At a time so full of controversy, oppression and cruel discriminating laws, an actual ethnography project would have given us valuable information. The lyrics in “ Lift Every Voice and Sing” are a significant part of African American culture, which reflect pain, suffering, resentment, and hope.

Examining the lyrics, by the language used, we can see Johnson is a well-educated, religious man fearful of God and proud of his land. It is also clear the struggle for African American freedom is far from over as he speaks in both past and present tense. He mentions the roads rained on by the blood of those massacred, and how this has strengthened the way the survivors now stand. Although pain and suffering is displayed through the whole song, there is also a display of hope, freedom and holiness.

The song gives me a sense African Americans were attempting to voice out the freedom obtained and the freedom not yet acquired, but very well desired. Johnson widely gives glory and praise to God for taking African Americans under his wing and helping them achieve their liberty. In spite of this document being a cry for social equality, it is depicted in a spiritual manner rather than political, which tells us plenty of the importance religion

had among African Americans at the time. It seems as if church became their shelter and the pathway to social relief.

Knowing the Johnson was a second generation free African American lead to several questions. Did JoJohnny's inspiration for the song come from slaves other than Booker T. Washington (who was his mentor and inspiration)? Or from his generation's experience with Jim Crow laws and constant riots against African Americans. Among nation's white population, was he targeted because of his race or well respected as a result of his education and achievements? Did JoJohnny's performance of 500 children inspire any of them to be civil rights activists in their adulthood?

More importantly, how do African American feel about this song and its significance? As the investigation via interview is limited to answer the first few questions I made an attempt to answer the last. I chose to play this song at my mother's beauty salon for a period of 5 hours with 15 minutes interim every community in Brooklyn, New York.

The subjects of the study were 17 clients, African American women of various ages ranging from 10 to 67 years of age and 5 Dominican employees ranging from 26 to 55.

The employees stayed for the entire 5 hours differing from the clients whose shorter stay was 13 minutes and the longest 3 hours and 25 minutes. The people involved were informed of the purpose of the exercise and were well aware I would be observing, taking notes as well as reviewing the surveillance video. Thankfully they were cooperative however there names

will be kept confidential and will be refer to by numbers in the order they came in.

My observations started at 9: 30 am at the time the salon opens. I was well prepared, equipped with notepad, pen and a tasteful version of “ Lift Every Voice and Sing” by

BeBabeiWinswhich will be refer to as the song, and a yoyouthideo by The BaBalmiCleaning’schannel, which will be refer to as the video. During the first 25 minutes of observation I played the song, the next 15 minutes I played the video, 15 minutes interim and 5 minute interviews (one interview being close to h hour). I repeated the cycle for 5 hours giving me a total of 3 hours and 20 minutes of silent observation, 1 hour and 15 minutes total interim and 45 minutes of interviews. The Math will not add up as some of the interviews overlap the interim or observation.

I observed the workers start their duties not given much importance to what was going on and barely paying attention to the lyrics and their main concern being why wasn’t BaBackchatlaying instead.

As the clients started arriving there behavior was trivial and constant. As they arrived, some greeted, all signed in and sat to wait for service. Some of them enjoyed the song or video very briefly as they focused on their phones, ‘ pads, or laptops, a few even using headphones. Others were too busy socializing or discussing their services for the day with vigorous enthusiasm.

I did observe an increased attention when the video started playing instead of the song. As I conducted the interviews the reactions varied showing expressions of dislike, indifference, and profound emotional demonstration.

I will mention only a few of the interviews. One worker (26 year old female) asked me if I was trying to make her fall asleep and what in the world would make me choose that song. When asked how the song made the 39 year old worker, with limited English language knowledge, feel she stated: " I don't understand much, but I feel it is a gospel song and it feels spiritual like something related to God".