

**The following interview with
MELBA MOORE
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 5, 2017**



Melba Moore
(Photo by Alan Mercer)

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS: Had you always been aware of the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing” or when did you first discover it?

MELBA MOORE: No, I had never heard of it! *[Laughs.]* I was working with Dr. Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women and we were travelling all over the county with her and the Black Family Reunion Celebrations. I was her members chair and we were traveling with people like Coretta Scott King and all these heroes and she-roes of the movement and sharing with people all the incredible things we had inherited from our African-American predecessors.

I was so impressed with Dr. Height. When we were touring, I was on sort of a hiatus with my career; I was just happy for her to be my mentor and me to be her “mentee.”

Finally, I was invited to sing something at the end of one of the events and I didn’t really know what to sing and Dr. Height said, “Why don’t you sing the Negro National Anthem”?

And I was like, “What is that?!”

She told me.

So, I went and got the sheet music....

It’s just so important that African-Americans know that we have our own song, our own anthem, not only for our history, but for us as a *community*.

LOC: About when was this?

MM: This was the late 1980s. We were travelling supporting Dr. Martin Luther King’s Birthday as a national holiday. Dr. Height had worked to make that happen. She had used her

political knowledge to make that happen. She got the Black caucus on board, the National Black Congress....

LOC: When you decided to record the song for your album, “Soul Exposed,” did you receive any pushback from the record company?

MM: No. The first person I told that I wanted to do this song was Scott Folks; I really have to give him credit. He was in A&R for the record company [EMI-Capitol] at that time. I’ll never forget him. He was all for it.

The record company already had the Winans [under contract]—and I was born-again Christian by that time, too—so it was a way of combining the gospel with the secular, the coming together and bringing together of these different audiences. It was not a difficult push.

LOC: That was my next question. The song was produced by BeBe Winans and I was wondering how he was brought into the project. Did you already know him?

MM: No, I didn’t, but I was a fan of his music, their music. It was Scott who reached out to him.

LOC: The song—and resulting music video—was a star-studded affair. How did you go about recruiting the other artists for it?

MM: That was BeBe and Scott. They went out on the road. They traveled all around and got the artists to put their voices on the tape in their dressing rooms or wherever they were.

LOC: So you weren’t all in the studio together?

MM: No, we just couldn’t do that. And they were able to do it [in the field]. But, we were all together for the video by the time we did that, now that I think of it. Of course, for the video, we were lip-synching for that.

LOC: I assume it wasn’t hard to get people to take part.

MM: No...but everybody was like, “I wish I had thought of that!” [*Laughs.*]

I’m glad we did have the other artists otherwise the song would not have had the importance and power or gotten the attention that it did. Otherwise, it would have been, “This is just Melba Moore’s next single.”

It also helped that BeBe changed the sound of the song.

LOC: How so?

MM: “Lift Every Voice,” is sort of like the American National Anthem, it isn’t an easy song to sing; it’s not very musical. But BeBe took it and changed the arrangement and even gave it this great R&B vibe and he made it a hit record but also, like I said, not just “Melba’s next record.”

LOC: Were you happy with reaction that the song got once it was released?

MM: ESTATIC! It so went out of the realm of “hit record.” And stations—like BET and radio stations—started playing it at the end of their sign-off, like stations used to play the National Anthem at the end of the day. They showed it great respect.

LOC: I assume that it is a staple of your concerts now?

MM: A “staple” at certain events, yes. My career and art is very diverse. It depends on the show—type of show--I’m doing. If I’m performing for a real R&B crowd, I’ll do it. But am I playing mostly to a “Broadway crowd” or mostly to a white audience? Not everyone is interested in a history lesson or they aren’t familiar with what the song means. But I think being added to the Registry will make more people more aware of the anthem. You know, 1990 was a long time ago now. I think we could use a refreshment.