

# Paul Robeson: The Forerunner

Paul Robeson is dead at the age of 77. Robeson, who was one of the great leaders of the Post World War II era, is largely unknown to the present generation because of a government-media conspiracy first to slander him and then to remove him from history.

Paul Robeson's achievements in several fields were unprecedented; he challenged the racism of this country and linked the struggle of Black Americans for liberation to those of oppressed people throughout the world; and he withstood a massive campaign by the government and the white media to silence him.

The achievements of Paul Robeson have deliberately been hidden from the American people and in the words of his son, Paul, Jr., "Not only has a web of lies and falsifications been institutionalized, but his entire record of achievement has all but been eradicated in the United States...the facts about Paul Robeson have been removed from available reference material."

Paul B. Robeson was born in Princeton, New Jersey in 1898, the youngest child of Reverend William Robeson, who had escaped from slavery at the age of fifteen.

Robeson won a scholarship to Rutgers University, which he attended from 1915 to 1919, one of the most racist periods in American history, and was one of two Blacks on campus. He won Phi Beta Kappa honors in his junior year, was valedictorian of his class, a debating team champion, won thirteen varsity letters in four sports. Ironically he was not invited to participate in the Glee Club because of his social activities.

Robeson was one of the greatest football players of all time. He was selected by Walter Camp for the 1917 and 1918 All-American teams. In 1917 Camp said, "there has never been a more serviceable end, both in attack and defense, than Robeson." Robeson was 6'3" tall and weighed 217 pounds. On defense he was considered the best middle line-backer of his era. ("College Football," published in 1950 and called the "most complete record compiled on college football," listed a ten-man All-American team for 1918, leaving Robeson off the roster.)

Robeson earned a degree in law at Columbia University in 1923.

Robeson began his singing career with a New York concert in 1925. The *New York World* wrote: "All those who listened last night to the first concert in the country made up entirely of Negro music...may have been present at a turning point, one of those thin points of time in which a star is born and not yet visible - the first appearance of this folk wealth to be made without deference or apology. Paul Robeson's voice is difficult to describe. It is a voice in which deep bells ring..."

The *New York Times* said: "Mr. Robeson's gift is to make them (spirituals) tell in every line, and not by any outward stress, but by an overwhelming inward conviction. Sung by one man, they voiced the sorrows and hopes of a people."

Thirty years later, British music commentator Benny Gwen said, "He is one of those all too rare people who can, through some miraculous alchemy of the spirit, reach out, and within the scope of a single gesture or phrase, touch the hearts of both galleryites looking for a good time and the intellectuals probing for *The Message*. When he sings I hear the unsullied expression of human spirit."

Robeson was one of the world's leading concert singers during the 1930's and 1940's and his singing career spanned 35 years, from 1925 through 1960, yet he is barely mentioned in the American literature on musicians of the period.

Robeson starred in over ten major plays in the United States and England, including "Porgy and Bess," three Eugene O'Neill plays - "All God's Children," "The Hairy Ape," and "The Emperor Jones," and "Show Boat." He portrayed "Othello" in the 1943-1944 Broadway production which set an all time record for a Shakespearean play on Broadway with 296 performances. He played Othello in London at Stratford-on-Avon, England in 1930 and 1959. He received the Donaldson Award for the best acting performance in 1944 and the Gold Medal for the Best Diction in American Theater from the American Academy of Arts and Science.

In 1924, Robeson starred in a Black produced film, "Body and Soul," in 1930 in an experimental film "Borderline," and from 1932 through 1939 he starred in eight major movies in England and the United States. He left the film industry in 1939, denouncing Hollywood: "The industry is not prepared to permit me to portray the life or express the living interests, hopes and aspirations of the struggling people from whom I come..."

In reference books published in the U.S. about the theater and films, Robeson is seldom ever mentioned. The television industry put an iron-clad ban on him. Today, most newsreel and film footage on Robeson has vanished - it has been confiscated - and most of the newsreel footage available has had the sound track erased.

Of particular concern to those whites who attempted to silence Robeson was his unusual intelligence. He continued to study all of his life. He mastered 25 languages and taught himself to speak and write Chinese.

The reason for the erasure from the public record of an outstanding athlete, singer and actor was his determination to use his talents in an all-out struggle against oppression. He said, "The artist must elect to fight for Freedom or Slavery. I have made my choice."

Although successful and secure in his career, his concern was for the poor and oppressed of the world and he made his

art a weapon for the people.

After living abroad for twelve years and experiencing freedom for the first time, Robeson returned to the United States in 1939.

During the decade before Montgomery, Paul Robeson gave inspiration to the Freedom Movement. Following the Second World War, Blacks were involved in industrial union organizations, which put Black and white workers together in the steel, packing house, longshore and auto industries. Around the world, the movement for independence was growing - Mahatma Gandhi and J. Nehru in India, the uprising of the Indonesians, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and the establishment of the People's Republic of China. England and Europe moved toward the left. The Iron Curtain dropped over Europe and an Iron Curtain was being dropped over the rights of Blacks in the United States.

Into this milieu, one of hope for the oppressed but from which aspirations for freedom would be drowned by the counter-revolution, stepped Paul Robeson.

Robeson was huge in stature, eloquent and fearless in his castigation of racism, and an established folk hero. He provided a special link with the people of the Third World through his life abroad and his personal acquaintance with many of Africa's emerging leaders. He was one of the few who understood the implications of the growing movement toward fascism in the United States.

In 1946 he led a delegation to visit President Truman, asking that Truman sponsor anti-lynching legislation. Later he led a mass mobilization in Washington, D.C. demanding that Congress pass a fair employment practice bill. As a co-chairman of the National Negro Congress, he presented "We Charge Genocide," accusing the United States government of crimes against Black citizens, to the United Nations. He cancelled a series of eighty concerts in Scandinavia, with a fee of \$100,000, when he learned the sponsoring organization endorsed NATO, "because the guns of NATO are ultimately pointed at African people struggling for their independence."

As the country slipped into "McCarthyism," with its witchhunts, jailings and black lists, every organization that was attacking racial segregation was put on the "subversive list."

Despite the atmosphere of repression, Robeson fought back.

In 1948, Robeson accepted the vice-chairmanship of the Progressive Party, which besides running Henry Wallace for the Presidency, ran several Blacks for high office.

A nationwide media campaign against Robeson followed. Concert halls were closed to him and organizations that sponsored his concerts were threatened. He continued to sing and speak in spite of the repression, saying, "I will not retreat one thousandth part of one inch."

Robeson's passport was revoked by the government in 1950. By this time the McCarthy investigations were at their height. White racial hysteria was rampant, Confederate flags flew across the South, 5 million were unemployed, and the Korean war began. In 1952, President Truman signed an unprecedented Executive Order, which was read to Robeson at the border when he attempted to enter Canada for a concert (passports are not necessary for exit to Canada). It forbade him to set foot outside the United States in penalty of five years in prison and \$5,000 fine and added that United States border personnel had been advised to apprehend him by any means necessary if he attempted to cross the border. Standing under the Peace Arch at Blaine, Washington, he sang to 40,000 people assembled on the Canadian side of the border.

In spite of his confinement to the United States, invitations were received from around the world. So much pressure mounted from abroad that Truman offered to return his passport if Robeson would agree to sing and not speak abroad. After a world-wide campaign and a Supreme Court ruling, his passport was returned in 1958.

He went abroad to fill television and theater engagements in Europe, Australia and New Zealand, then returned in 1963. His remaining years were in retirement due to poor health.

When Robeson's book "Here I Stand" was published in the United States (by a Black publisher) the white boycott of the book was a near-total success. With one insignificant exception, no white commercial newspaper or magazine in the entire country as much as mentioned the book. The book was praised in England, Japan, and other countries abroad. In India it was reviewed as a four-page supplement to *Blitz*, under the heading "Black Voice of God."

In the U.S. the cause was taken up by the Black press. It was reviewed by many Black newspapers and serialized in the *Afro-American*. The only negative review was by the NAACP, which was caught up in the fear of "communist infiltration" of its ranks and had expelled one of its founders, W.E.B. DuBois. The NAACP's *Crisis* called Robeson one who "imagines his misfortunes to stem, not from his own bungling, but from the persecution of the white folks on top." DuBois, however said, "The persecution of Paul Robeson by the government...has been one of the most contemptible happenings in modern history."

Benjamin Davis, a noted Black Communist Party leader, said the book was boycotted by the press because the book, "brings forward a people's program of action, which, if seized upon by the Negro people and their allies, could not fail to have the most profound positive effects upon the present struggles of the Negro for dignity and full citizenship."

(A second edition was published in 1971 by Beacon Press.)

Paul Robeson first visited the Soviet Union in 1934. In Moscow, Robeson found a friendliness toward him that he did not experience in the United States. He said, "Here for the first time in my life I walk in full human dignity." He visited the Soviet Union many times and stayed in Moscow for a year in 1937 and 1938. He visited Spain during the Spanish revolution, singing in the anti-fascist trenches. Robeson was always welcome in the USSR as a friend. A mountain in Central Asia was named for him - and in 1952 he was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize.

Of his relationship with the Soviet Union and the question of communist affiliation, Robeson wrote in 1958:

"My views concerning the Soviet Union and my warm feelings of friendship for the peoples of that land, and the friendly sentiments which they have often expressed toward me, have been pictured as something quite sinister by Washington officials and other spokesmen for the dominant white group in our country. It has been alleged that I am part of some sort of 'international conspiracy.'"

"The truth is: I am not and never have been involved in any international conspiracy of any other kind, and do not know anyone who is. It should be plain to everyone - and especially Negroes - that if the government officials had a shred of evidence to back up that charge, you can bet your last dollar that they would have tried to put me under their jail! But they have no such evidence,

because that charge is a lie..."

"...In 1946, at a legislative hearing in California, I testified under oath that I was not a member of the Communist Party, but since then I have refused to give testimony or to sign affidavits as to that fact. There is no mystery involved in this refusal...I have made it a matter of principle, as many others have done, to refuse to comply with any demands of legislative committees or departmental officials that infringe upon the Constitutional reports of all Americans."

Why was Robeson treated as a non-person - erased from the pages of history? It was because Paul Robeson was a man. In spite of the racism, degradation and humiliation heaped on him as a Black - he surmounted the obstacles and actualized his potential for creativity, manhood and humanity. He not only struggled for liberation of Blacks in the United States but reached across the seas to join that struggle with the oppressed people of the world.

He said, "...I learned that the essential character of a nation is determined not by the upper classes, but by the common people, and that the common people of all nations are truly brothers in the great family of mankind." This belief in the oneness of humankind, about what I have often spoken in concerts and elsewhere, has existed within me side by side with my deep attachment to the cause of my own race."

Lloyd Brown, one of the member of "Othello Associates" that published the

1958 edition of "Here I Stand", wrote in 1971, "inevitably, like a mountain peak that becomes visible as the mist is blown away, the towering figure of Paul Robeson will emerge as the thick white fog of lies and slanders is dispelled. Then he will be recognized and honored here in his homeland, as he is throughout the world, as Robeson the Forerunner."

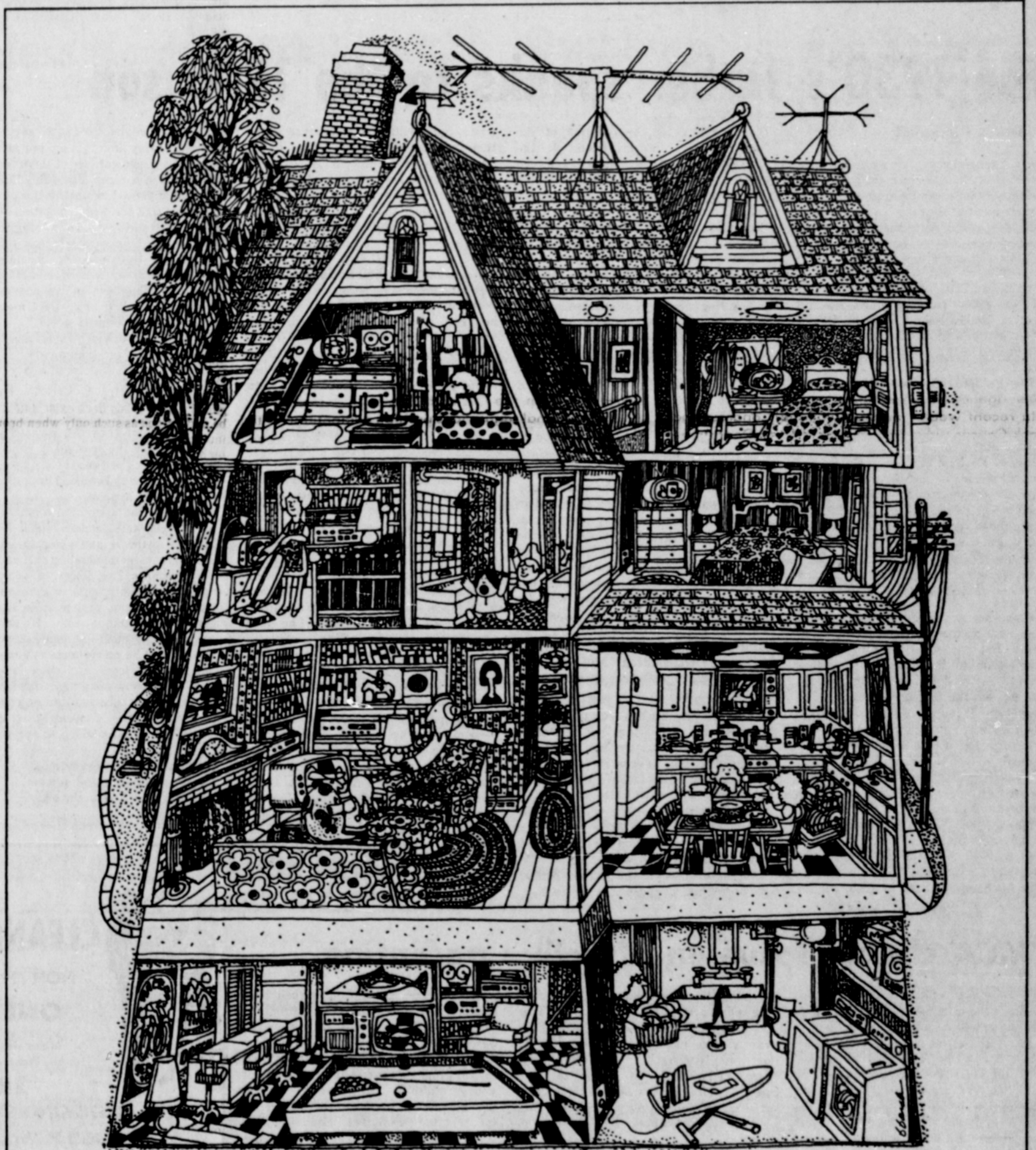
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