

Paul Robeson: The fight for freedom

The persecution of Paul Robeson by the government and people of the United States during the last nine years has been one of the most contemptible happenings in modern history. . . . To struggle up as a black boy in America; to meet jeers and blows; to meet insult with silence and discrimination with a smile; to sit with fellow students who hated you and work and play for the honor of a college that disowned you—all this was America for Paul Robeson. Yet he fought the good fight; he was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised and we esteemed him not. . . . In America he was a "nigger"; in Britain he was tolerated; in France he was cheered; in the Soviet Union he was loved for the great artist that he is. He loved the Soviet Union in turn. He believed that every black man with blood in his veins would with him love the nation which first outlawed the color line. . . .

"I saw him when he voiced this. It was in Paris in 1949 at the greatest rally for world peace the world ever witnessed. Thousand of persons from all the world filled the Salle Pleyel from floor to rafters. Robeson hurried in, magnificent in height and breadth, weary from circling Europe with song. The audience rose to a man and the walls thundered. Robeson said that his people wanted peace and "would never fight the Soviet Union." I joined with the thousands in wild acclaim. . . .

"This, for America was his crime. . . . Yet has Paul Robeson kept his soul and stood his ground. Still he loves and honors the Soviet Union. Still he has hope for America. Still he asserts his faith in God. But we—what can we say or do; nothing but hang our heads in endless shame."

—W.E.B. DuBois, 1958

Paul Leroy Robeson was born in Princeton, New Jersey, on April 9, 1898, the son of an escaped slave. His was a poor family—his father a minister, his mother dying when he was six years old.

At 16 he graduated from high school with honors and won a scholarship to Rutgers University through an oratory contest. He was the third black to attend Rutgers. The only black on campus the four years he was there, he was constantly confronted with racism and hostility. He graduated in 1919, valedictorian of his class; earned a Phi Beta Kappa key in his junior year; won the major oratorical contest four years in a row; was twice named to the All-America football team; played on the baseball and basketball teams; sang in the Glee Club.

He moved to Harlem and attended Columbia Law School, working on weekends as a professional football player. In 1921 he married Eslanda Goode, a chemist.

While in law school Robeson played in two theater productions—"Simon the Cyrenian," and "Voodoo." He completed law school in 1923 and joined a prestigious law firm. Realizing that his career in law was limited and racial insults would continue, he left law and made a career in the theater.

Robeson starred in Eugene O'Neill's new play, "All God's Chillun Got Wings." The fact that Robeson's hand was kissed by a white woman brought hysteria and death threats by the Klan. With controversy raging, O'Neill selected Robeson for the starring role in "Emperor Jones." Robeson received great acclaim and positive reviews for his role in "Emperor Jones," and when "All God's Chillun" opened the reviews were mixed. After closing in New York "Emperor Jones" opened in London, still featuring Robeson.

Robeson's singing career began by accident. He ran into Laurence Brown, accompanist for Roland Hayes, one day in Harlem. They went to dinner and afterward Paul sang a few songs for those present. Among the guests was the director of a theater in the village who arranged a recital. A prominent music critic wrote: "Paul Robeson's voice is difficult to describe. It is a voice in which deep bells ring."

For the next four years Robeson and Brown toured the nation. Robeson took the opportunity to explain the spirituals he sang—they "portray the hopes of our people who faced the hardships of slavery. . . . They sang to forget the chains and misery. The sorrow will some day turn to joy. All that breaks the heart and oppresses the soul will one day give place to peace and understanding, and every man will be free. That is the interpretation of the true Negro spiritual."

In 1928 Robeson joined the cast of Kern and Hammerstein's "Show Boat" in London, singing the song that was written for him—"Old Man River." He was an overnight hit with the English public and he decided to remain in London, where he would have more opportunity for artistic development. Two years later he starred in Shakespeare's "Othello"—the first black to appear in the role of Othello since the 1860s.



PAUL ROBESON

Life in England had a profound effect on Robeson. Accepted in the company of the nation's greatest artists and philosophers, he associated with people like George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Ramsay MacDonald, Gertrude Stein and was exposed to socialism.

One day he noticed a British aristocrat's behavior toward his chauffeur. "I said to myself, 'Paul, that is how the southerner in the United States would speak to you, that is how I realized that the fight of my Negro people in America and the fight of the oppressed workers everywhere was the same struggle. That incident made me sad for a year. I sat home and read and wondered. If anything finally made class difference clear to me against the English background it was the general attitude toward servants and also the

servants' acceptance of their status."

Preparing for his role as Othello, Robeson studied the works of Shakespeare and the English language. "I have read virtually everything of Shakespeare's," he said. "Now that I know the English people and really understand what their country means to them, now that I am in touch with the English spirit, I feel I can play Othello."

Robeson's interpretation of Othello was revolutionary—he considered Othello to be a proud and noble black man alone in a white world. "Othello in the Venice of that time was in practically the same position as a coloured in America today," he told a British reporter.



I am the Black child.
All the world awaits my coming.
All the earth watches, with interest,
to see what I shall become.
Civilization hangs in the balance.
For what I am,
The world of tomorrow will be.
I am the Black child.
You have brought me into this world,
about which I know nothing.
You hold in your hand my destiny.
You determine whether I succeed
or fail. Give me, I beg you, a world
where I can walk tall and proud.
Train me, as is your duty unto me,
To love myself, my people, and to
build our Black nation.

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