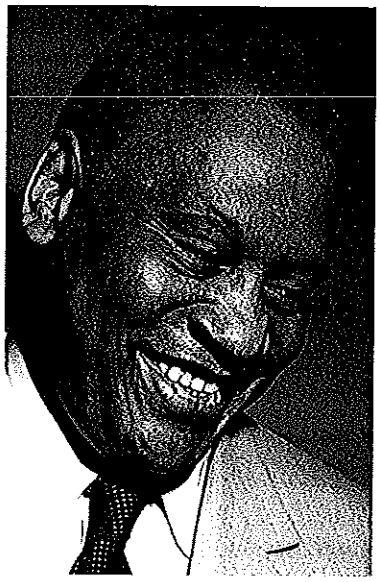

PAUL ROBESON, A BIOGRAPHY

Born on April 9, 1898, in Princeton, New Jersey, Paul Robeson was a multi-talented man whose artistic and political career spanned more than four decades, from the 1920s to the 1960s. Known worldwide during the 1930s and 1940s, he fell from prominence in the 1960s because of the political controversy that surrounded him during the McCarthy era. Robeson was a talented dramatic actor whose New York production of *Othello* (1943-44) once held the record for the longest running show on Broadway. He was the first professional concert singer in history to use Negro spirituals as his unique vehicle. He broadened his repertoire in the 1940s, however, to incorporate folk songs from other countries — Chinese, Russian, Welsh, and Jewish among others — to illustrate the linguistic, artistic, and human unity among different cultures. A linguist, Robeson studied more than 20 languages.

Although he never received any formal training in singing, Robeson was imbued with the "music of his people" from his early childhood in the small Presbyterian and African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches where his father served as a minister in the New Jersey towns of Princeton, Westfield, and Sommerville. His father, William Drew Robeson, was an ex-slave who ran away from Virginia at the age of 15 in 1860, through the Underground Railroad. A man of great conviction and dignity — he was always a model to his son — he worked his way to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and later to the pulpit. The father of nine children, he was 53 years old when Paul was born. Paul Robeson's mother, Maria Louisa Bustill, died when he was six years old. The Bustill family is one of the oldest black families in the United States. During the Revolutionary War, her great grandfather, Cyrus Bustill, baked bread for the Continental troops in Philadelphia, and was a co-founder of the Free African Society for free blacks in 1787. The family was also actively involved in the Underground Railroad.

Paul Robeson graduated from high school with distinction in Sommerville and won a scholarship to Rutgers University. During his junior year there, he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He was also a star athlete at Rutgers, earning twelve athletic letters in baseball, basketball, football, and track, and was chosen during his senior year, in 1918, for the Walter Camp All-American team. He graduated the same year. In 1973, Rutgers University awarded him an honorary degree, and in addition held a week-long program of concerts, films, and exhibits of his work.

After graduation from Rutgers, Robeson moved to Harlem and enrolled in the law department of Columbia University. His father had died in 1918, and while at Columbia, Robeson supported himself by working as a professional football player and, once, as a postal clerk. He graduated with honors in 1923 and worked for a few months in a New York law firm. In 1921, while still at Columbia, he married a biology

and chemistry major, Eslanda Cardozo Goode, who was to become a distinguished writer and anthropologist. Early in the marriage, Eslanda Robeson played a decisive role in changing the course of her husband's career. According to his own reminiscence, it was she who urged him to accept the title role in Ridgely Torrence's play *Simon the Cyrenian* performed at the YWCA in Harlem in 1921.

Though this first experience with the stage meant little to him at the time, it proved to be a turning point in his life. The following year, Robeson appeared on the professional stage in a production of *Taboo*, a play by Augustin Duncan later retitled *The Voodoo*. That same year, he also appeared in *Shuffle Along*, singing with a quartet. In 1924, he joined the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village for the production of Eugene O'Neill's play, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. By then, he had resolutely given up the legal profession. During the following years, he appeared in several plays, including *The Emperor Jones* (1925), *Black Boy* (1926), *Porgy* (1928), *Show Boat* (1928), *Othello* (1930), *The Hairy Ape* (1931), and *Stevedore* (1935) and in 11 films, including "Body and Soul" (1924) by Oscar Micheaux; "Borderline" (1929), an experimental film directed by Kenneth McPherson; "Song of Freedom" (1937); "Proud Valley" (1939), produced in England; and "Tales of Manhattan" (1942).

Robeson began his professional singing career in 1925, at a highly successful concert in New York. In October, 1927 he left for a two-year tour of the major European capitals. In 1928, he settled with his family in London, pursuing careers as both an artist and scholar. In the years following, he commuted between the United States and Europe.

According to his biographers, politics began to play a major role in Robeson's life and career following a visit to the Soviet Union in 1934, on an invitation from the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. This first encounter with the Soviet Union laid the basis for a profound love and friendship for the "land of Socialism." Before departing, Robeson commented that in the Soviet Union, he had felt, for the first time, that he was treated not like a Negro, but with the full dignity of mankind.

Robeson himself denied such a dramatic turning point in his political life. Rather, it was the reality of segregation and racial discrimination in the United States and the class struggle between the British aristocracy and the laboring masses in England and its colonies that shaped his political consciousness. "The artist must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery... I have made my choice," he said in 1937.

With the rise of fascism, particularly in Germany and in Spain, Robeson was greatly inspired with the idea of an anti-fascist united front of "all freedom loving people." In 1938, during the Spanish Civil War, he traveled to Madrid, where he entertained the International Brigade at the front with battle songs in Spanish and other languages. The following year he decided to return to the United States to contribute to the war effort and particularly to join in the struggle for equality in the United States and for African independence He made famous, on the radio and in concert halls, such patriotic songs as "Ballad for Americans" and "What Is America to Me." He also participated in U.S.O. tours with his accompanist, Lawrence Brown. During this period, he received many awards for both his artistic and political contributions: the Abraham Lincoln Medal for notable and distinguished services in human relations (1943); the Donalson Award for Best Acting Performance (1944); the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Gold Medal for having the best diction in the American theater (1944); an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters degree from Morehouse College in Atlanta (1943); and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) Spingarn Medal for Outstanding Achievement (1945).

Politics and Robeson: The war's end, however, and the subsequent anti-communist attitudes in the United States led to difficult times for Robeson. Because of his progressive views, he was labeled subversive, and a pervasive campaign to silence and discredit him was launched.

As early as 1946 Robeson had appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in California. Although he swore that he was not a communist, he voiced his admiration for communists who were fighting for democracy. From the 1930s on, Robeson had maintained a close relationship with progressive labor unions, both in the United States and in Great Britain. In 1947 for example, he joined the picket lines in St. Louis to protest segregation of black actors in the theater. Also in 1947, he gave a series of concerts in Panama on behalf of the United Public Workers of America (CIO) in their attempt to organize the predominantly black Panamanian workers, and addressed the National Maritime Union Convention back in



It was around this time that the censorship of Paul Robeson in the United States began. In April 1947, he was prevented from performing in Peoria, Illinois, after a contract to use a local mosque was abruptly canceled, and after the mayor of that town had refused to let him use the city hall. The following month, the Albany, New York, board of education denied him permission to hold a concert at a local high school. Later that year, he decided to leave the professional stage in the United States for an unspecified number of years to devote his time to the struggle for justice and civil rights.

The campaign to silence Robeson began to focus in 1948. In June he appeared before a Senate committee to protest a bill drafted by the HUAC that called for Communist Party members and so-called "Communist front" organizations to register as foreign agents. Robeson declined to answer whether he was a Communist. He further antagonized the committee by saying that his loyalty to the United States in a war against the Soviet Union was conditional. He soon began receiving death threats from the Ku Klux Klan while campaigning for Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party candidate for the 1948 presidential election.

The next year was a turning point in the campaign against him. While touring Europe during the first half of the year, he gave a speech at the World Peace Conference in Paris in which he declared, "It is unthinkable that American Negroes will go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations... against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind." This statement was greatly distorted and provoked a storm in the media, at the State Department, and among several "respectable Negro leaders," including Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Walter White, national secretary of the NAACP. White

explained that Robeson did not speak for "the overwhelming majority of the Negro people," and cast doubt on his loyalty as an American citizen. Various other prominent African-American figures, such as folk singer Josh White, Jackie Robinson, and Max Yergan were induced by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to issue similar statements condemning Robeson.

The lines of battle were now sharply drawn. While Robeson was in Europe, the United States government jailed 11 Communist leaders, including New York City Councilman Benjamin Davis, a personal friend of Robeson's, under the Smith Act. Many artists and former activists were coerced into submitting to the HUAC lists of names of colleagues alleged to be Communists under the threat of having their careers destroyed and themselves thrown in jail. The State Development Commission of Connecticut went to court to prevent Robeson from visiting his family home in Enfield, Connecticut. Robeson denounced these repressive measures through two militant organizations, the Council on African Affairs that he had helped to found, and the Civil Rights Congress, where he held the office of vice president. These two organizations were subsequently investigated by HUAC and labeled subversive.



Despite these pressures, Robeson continued to speak out. On August 27, 1949, he was scheduled to give a concert in Peekskill, New York, on behalf of African-American and Jewish trade unionists and pacifists. A mob of rioters led by members of the KKK and the American Legion stoned the gathering. The concert was canceled but Robeson pledged to return, determined to sing "wherever people want me to sing. My people and I won't be frightened by crosses burning in Peekskill or anywhere else," he declared in a public statement. The following week Robeson went back to Peekskill along with 25,000 people who traveled from New York City and other places in the Northeast to hear him. About 2,500 black and white trade unionists and veterans made a human wall around the concert area while Robeson sang. The mob got its revenge after the concert, as groups of people on their way home were ambushed, stoned, and beaten on the highway while the police and New York State troopers stood by.

After the Peekskill concert and riot, the campaign of repression and intimidation against Robeson intensified. Both private and public institutions in the United States joined in the process. In March 1950, he was barred from appearing on an NBC television program with Eleanor Roosevelt on the pretext that his appearance "would probably result in diverting the discussion from the subject scheduled to one which revolves around Robeson's personal views." The whole of the white media, with the exception of the progressive press, imposed a thorough censorship on Robeson's activities and statements. All major concert halls across the country were closed to him. His records disappeared from stores, and recording and advertising agencies kept him at arm's length. Then in August 1950, the State Department, using its "discretionary powers," canceled Robeson's passport after he refused to sign an affidavit in which he would pledge under the Smith Act that he was not a Communist. His income dropped from many hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to a mere $3,000, until he had to resort to the sale of his family house in Connecticut. Again called before the HUAC, he proudly confronted his interrogators and was cited for contempt for having shouted at them, "You are the real un-Americans, and you should be ashamed of yourselves." This campaign of harassment from the FBI and other forces lasted for more than 20 years. Yet he would not yield "one thousandth of an inch."

Robeson's Concert Tours: Robeson's appeal was never simply limited to the African-American community. He had performed many times in European capitals, had toured England and the British provinces (he enjoyed a close relationship with the Welsh miners), and was admired by the Russian people. His records were popular all over the world. He had worked with or known Sergei Eisenstein, whom he had met in Harlem in 1931; Kwame N'krumah and Jomo Kenyatta, whom he met in England in the 1930s; Pablo Neruda and Nazim Hikmet, Chilean and Turkish poets, respectively; Alexander Fadeev, famous Soviet novelist and theoretician of Socialist realism; Kuo Mojo, Chinese historian and statesman; Frederic Joliot-Curie, French nuclear physicist and president of the World Peace Council; Bertolt Brecht, German playwright; and Dmitri Shostakovich, Soviet composer, with whom he collaborated in the production of the film "Song of the Rivers". In the United States, he was associated with the leading personalities in the fields of art, literature, politics and sports. And, most important to him, he was always in close communion with his people and his culture.

The black community in the United States and progressive organizations on four continents supported Robeson, demanding an end to the political persecution against him and the return of his passport. Petitions were signed enthusiastically, and letters of support were sent in great numbers from Europe, Africa, and the West Indies. Defenders felt that the real focus of these attacks were the Civil Rights Movement, the political left, and the growing solidarity of black people in the United States with the anti-colonial movement in Africa. Robeson sued the State Department and hired Leonard Boudin to present his suit to the Supreme Court. Following repeated challenges by Robeson and his lawyers, the State Department acknowledged that "even if the complaint had alleged, which it does not, that the passport was canceled solely because of appellant's recognized status as a spokesman for large sections of Negro Americans, we submit that this would not amount to an abuse of discretion in view of appellant's frank admission that he had been for many years extremely active politically in behalf of the independence of the colonial peoples of Africa." After eight years of an international outcry, Robeson finally won. His passport was restored in 1958, toward the end of the McCarthy era.

Robeson had resumed touring the country in 1952 in a series known initially as the Paul Robeson Birthday Tours, because they were usually scheduled around his birthday. The tours included more than 25 cities and were organized by the United Freedom Fund, a group closely associated with Robeson. The UFF was an umbrella group designed to raise funds for its three member organizations: the Council on African Affairs, founded in 1937; the National Negro Labor Council; and the magazine *Freedom*. In contrast to his earlier concert career, these tours were organized through various grassroots sources. In each city, local chapters of the participating organizations of the UFF would join with local trade unions, African-American churches, and progressive individuals

to "sponsor" a Robeson concert. The committee thus formed would coordinate the event with John Gray, national field representative of the UFF from 1952 to 1955. These concerts were usually held in high school or college auditoriums, in union halls, or in civic and religious centers. The membership of many local trade unions throughout the country played a significant role in publicizing and selling tickets to these events, which were as a rule boycotted by the mainstream media.

In January 1952, Robeson was invited by the International Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union of British Columbia in Canada to address their annual convention in Vancouver. He agreed to attend, since American citizens did not, by law, require a passport to travel to Canada. He was stopped at the border, however, with the threat of a five-year jail sentence and a $10,000 fine. United States border patrols were further instructed to stop him "by any means necessary. " Robeson resigned himself to address the meeting by telephone. In May he returned to the border where he sang to a crowd of more than 40,000 people gathered in the Peace Arch Park. The Peace Arch concerts were thereafter held in May of each year, in defiance of United States government censorship, from 1952 to 1956, when his travel ban was lifted.

In similar acts of defiance, Robeson often sang over the telephone and sent recorded messages to gatherings he could not attend: World Peace Council annual meetings; the Soviet Writers Conference (1954); the Bandung Conference (1955); the Welsh Miners' annual celebration (1957); and a conference of more than 1,000 people organized in 1957 by the Let Paul Robeson Sing Committee in London. This latter occasion drew the following comment from the Manchester Guardian: "American Telegraph and Telephone and the General Post Office in London last night helped Paul Robeson make the U.S. State Department look rather silly."

In the United States, Robeson felt the need for a regular medium to counter the press censorship and the campaign waged against him. He launched a weekly newspaper called *Freedom in Harlem* in 1950. Under his byline the paper carried a regular column "Here Is My Story," until it ceased publication in 1955. The Othello Recording Corporation, which he established in 1952, served a similar purpose. Two albums of his songs were released under this label, "Paul Robeson Sings" (1952) and "Solid Rock" (1953). His autobiography, *Here I Stand*, was also published by Othello Associates in 1958 but was not widely reviewed in the press. As a result, the book did not enjoy the wide distribution it deserved.

During his first concert in 10 years at Carnegie Hall in May 1958, Robeson announced to a cheering audience that his passport had finally been renewed. Two months later, he left the United States for a European tour that included England, France, East and West Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union. In 1959 he was welcomed at the Kremlin by Nikita Khrushchev, and performed *Othello* for the last time in Stratford-on-Avon in England. The following year, he toured Eastern Europe for the last time, and in November went to Australia and New Zealand.

In April 1961, Robeson, who had been suffering from a severe disease of the circulatory system since 1959, entered a hospital in Moscow. He was to remain there for more than two years. Meanwhile, President N'krumah offered him the History Chair at the University of Ghana, but he was too ill to accept. Nevertheless, the State Department intervened to block his appointment.

Robeson came back to the United States through London the following year, he had decided to retire from public life. His last appearances were at the occasion of the death of his friend, Benjamin

Davis, in August 1964, and at a celebration given in his honor by the journal *Freedomways* in April 1965. His wife, Eslanda, had died of cancer in December of that year at the age of 68, and he went to live with his sister Marion Forsythe in Philadelphia. Although he received many awards and honors during his retirement, they were as a rule accepted by his son Paul Robeson, Jr. Visitors were politely but firmly turned away, and the people in Philadelphia were oblivious to his presence among them. Paul Robeson died quietly on December 28, 1976. His funeral service was held at the Mother A. M. E. Zion Church in Harlem, for many years the parish of his brother, Reverend Benjamin Robeson.

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