

Gray Panthers of SF on Paul Robeson

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Paul Robeson's Life Matters: Part 1

(From his autobiography, Here I Stand.)

By B.A. Lee

Paul Robeson gave his life and his career to the cause of equality, human rights and peace through music.

Robeson's roots were in a religion that reveals African influences through musical creativity that allows no break between the sacred and the secular. Born and raised in New Jersey, among other children of former slaves, home was theater and social center. His father, Rev. William Drew Robeson, taught him selflessness and integrity by the example of his life and work; he flatly rejected Booker T. Washington's concept that Negro education be limited essentially to manual training. He firmly believed that the heights of knowledge must be scaled by the freedom seeker: "Neither the promise of gain nor the threat of loss has ever moved me from my firm convictions."

At Rutgers he excelled in debate, football and academics. To finance his law studies at Columbia University he took up acting, and in 1925 he appeared in Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones and All God's Chillun Got Wings."

His law career at a New York City law firm ended when he quit because a secretary refused to take dictation from him. He then turned to acting in films and on the stage, as well as singing in concerts all over the world.

He wrote in Here I Stand, "The power of spirit that our people have is intangible, but it is a great force that must be unleashed in the struggles of today. That spirit lives in our people's songs --in the sublime grandeur of Deep River, in the driving power of Jacob's Ladder, and in the militancy of Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho, and in the poignant beauty of all our spirituals."

"Like most of Africa's children in America, I had known little about the land of our fathers but in England I came to know many Africans. I came to see the roots of my own people's culture, especially in our music, which is still the richest and most healthy in America. My pride in Africa, and it grew with the learning, impelled me to speak out against the scorners. I wrote articles for the New Statesman and Nation, The Spectator, and elsewhere, championing the real but unknown

glories of African culture. If African culture is what I insisted it was, what happens then to the claim that it would take 1,000 years for Africans to be capable of self-rule? In the Soviet Union I saw how the Yakuts and Uzbeks and all the other formerly oppressed nations were leaping ahead from tribalism to modern industrial economy, from illiteracy to the heights of knowledge... 1,000 years? No, less than 20."

"I felt, too, that the rapidly growing power of the Soviet Union in world affairs would become an important factor in aiding the colonial liberation movement; in New York, at the United Nations, we have all been able to see with our own eyes that on every issue that has come up the Soviet Union and other socialist countries have voted in support of the colored peoples of the world."

"I went to Spain in 1938, and that was a major turning point in my life. There I saw that it was the working men and women of Spain who were heroically giving their last full measure of devotion to the cause of democracy in that bloody conflict. ... In Spain I sang with my whole heart and soul for these gallant fighters of the International Brigade. Spain -- the anti-fascist struggle and all that I learned in it --brought me back to America. As artist and citizen, as a Negro and friend of labor, there would be plenty for me to do at home."

In 1947 Robeson was influential in persuading Henry A. Wallace to be a candidate for President on the New Party ticket. Robeson stumped the country for months building up support for the New Party.



Paul Robeson and Civil Rights Congress picketing the White House, August 1948

Paul Robeson's Life Matters: Part 2

(from his autobiography *Here I Stand*)

By B.A. Lee

The Paris Peace Conference in April 1949 was convened to address East-West hostilities of the Cold War. The invitation to speak before the body of international delegates became another turning point in Robeson's life. He said "it is unthinkable that American Negroes could go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed them for generations, against the Soviet Union, which in one generation has raised all people to full dignity."

He returned to the United States in June 1949, and on June 19 addressed the Welcome Home rally in Harlem: "Why did I take this stand on the Atlantic Pact -- the Arms Pact -- and its forerunner, the Marshall Plan? Let us examine the results of the Marshall Plan. We don't need to guess and theorize. Western European countries have completely lost their freedom. ... American Big Business tells all of Western Europe what to do, what it can produce, where it must buy, with whom it can trade. And, finally, with the Atlantic Pact, the western Europeans are told that they must be ready to die to the last man in order to defend American Big Business. But beyond this strangling of Western Europe, the real meaning of the Marshall Plan is the complete enslavement of the colonies. For how can British, French and other Western European bankers repay Wall Street? Only in raw materials -- in gold, copper, cocoa, rubber, uranium, manganese, iron ore, ground nuts, oils, fats, sugar, bananas ... from South Africa, Nigeria, East Africa, French Africa, Belgian Congo, Trinidad, Jamaica, Cuba, Honduras, Guatemala, Viet Nam, Malaya. The Marshall Plan means enslavement of our people all over the earth, including here in the United States on the cotton and sugar plantations and in the mines of the North and South. And the Atlantic Pact means legal sanction for sending guns and troops to the colonies to insure the enslavement and terrorization of our people."

In reaction to his defense of the rights of his people and his continuing friendship with the Soviet Union, the establishment, including the NAACP, made him an object of hatred, resulting in a boycott of his speeches and concerts for ten years. The Peekskill riots in 1949 were among the ugliest in a century. The audience circled him to protect him from the Ku Klux Klan.

From 1950 to 1958 he was confined to the United States, his passport held up by the State Department. Robeson: "I have often reflected on the truth expressed in the words of a song that I have sung at many a concert, 'Love Will Find Out the Way'. ... I shall always remember the concert arranged by the miners held at Peace Arch Park on the border between the State of Washington and the Province of British Columbia, May 18, 1952. 30,000 Canadians came from many miles away to hear me, to demonstrate their friendship and to protest against all barriers to cultural exchange." Gray Panthers Gretchen and Dick Davis witnessed this event from Bellingham, Washington.

Barred from singing at major concert halls, Robeson came to San Francisco in 1956 to sing at a black church, accompanied by Mollie Bagwell, mother of Alex Bagwell, now still living at 100 years old. Gray Panther Mitzi Raas volunteered to drive him to the San Francisco's Sheraton Palace Hotel, where he insisted that his whole entourage be accommodated. Mitzi recalls he was a big man; her car sank noticeably under his weight.

From the *San Francisco Sun Reporter*, 1956: "Whites hate and fear him simply because he is the conscience of the United States in the field of color relations. He says all the things which all of them wish to say about color relations, and the manner in which he says these things attracts the eye... of the world."

In July 1956 when he was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, he stated: "I came back to America to fight for my people here and they are still second and third-class citizens, gentlemen, and I was born here of the Negro people and of working people and I am back here to help them struggle. The Soviet Union and the People's Democracy in China are in the forefront of the struggle for peace, and so is our President, thank goodness, and let us hope we will have some peace, if committees like yours do not upset the applecart and destroy all of humanity. Now can I read my speech?"



The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.

(Paul Robeson)

***The Artist as Revolutionary* by Gerald Horn, a Review**

By B. A. Lee

From the statement Robeson was not allowed to make to the HUAC Committee, 7/13/56: "...When will Dulles explain his reckless 'brink of war' policy by which the world might have been destroyed? And specifically, why is Dulles afraid to let me have a passport, to let me travel abroad to sing, to act, to speak my mind? ...My fight for a passport is a struggle for freedom - freedom to travel, freedom to earn a livelihood, freedom to speak, freedom to express myself artistically and culturally. I have been denied these freedoms because Dulles, Eastland, Walter and their ilk oppose my views on colonial liberation, my resistance to oppression of Negro Americans, and my burning desire for peace with all nations."

The world had not forgotten him. His invitation to join the Stratford-on-Avon Shakespeare Theater, signed by 27 MPs, concludes: "There was never a more vital time for free countries to uphold their professions with regard to freedom of travel, as undertaken in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially important in the case of so outstanding an artist as Paul Robeson, who properly belongs to all humanity."

In 1954 the World Federation of Trade Unions asked him to record a hymn called "Man" for a documentary film, *Song of the Rivers*. It had a score composed by Shostakovich, words by Brecht, and commentary by the French novelist Pozner. Robeson was invited to perform for the conference of delegates honoring the tenth anniversary of the United Nations. In the journal *Freedom* he wrote, "I'm proud that I'm one of many people whose voice is raised around the world in protest against Jim Crow and exploitation of the Negro people both here and in Africa."

His voice had much to do with the 1954 Supreme Court ruling outlawing segregation in U.S. schools.

And on May 26, 1957, he sang by telephone to an audience of 1,000 in London. That concert was held in connection with a conference sponsored by the National Paul Robeson Committee, a group of distinguished people in Britain.

In 1958 the Supreme Court ruled in the Kent-Briehl decision that no U.S. citizen can be restricted from travel because of political views. He traveled, performed, and was widely honored, culminating in a huge 1973 event for him at Carnegie Hall. He died in 1976.

The Artist as Revolutionary, Gerald Horne, Pluto Press, 2016. Gerald Horne says that Paul Robeson was a champion to Black prisoners, particularly when Robeson's long-time Black friend, Rep. Ben Davis from Harlem, was jailed in 1949 for being a communist. Davis wrote from his cell "Black prisoners' knowledge of Robeson was their passport to pride."

Robeson's experience with the Loyalist troops in Spain influenced him to support the American war effort to defeat the Axis powers. His *Song of Free Men* was recorded by Columbia in Russian, Spanish and German, as well as English. He said that languages were his passion; singing, his hobby.

Robeson was the target of racist mob violence even before the infamous Peekskill riots. His appearance at a 1948 campaign rally in Houston for the Progressive Party presidential candidate, Henry Wallace, one of 500 free performances, was disrupted by hecklers, many prejudiced against Jews and Blacks. The backlash against Robeson gained momentum when he challenged President Truman to support anti-lynching legislation. His support of African independence movements added to the backlash and was the "official" reason for the State Department revoking his passport.

The 1949 Peekskill event, just north of New York City, was supposed to be a rally on behalf of the Civil Rights Committee, headed by William Patterson. The first concert was cancelled because of predicted violence, but Robeson returned the following week protected by supporters. There were chants of "Lynch Robeson," effigies of him, bottles hurled at the audience, and car windows smashed by the police, but the concert went on. When Robeson returned to Harlem he was greeted by 5,000 supporters.

He was not intimidated. Though he had been blocked from the concert stage and theatre, he continued to study and to attend events with friends at embassies in Washington. The Workers Music Association in 1951 lamented the marginalizing of Robeson, demanding recordings

of *Joe Hill* and *Scandalize my Name*. He established the newspaper *Freedom in Harlem* and, with the Civil Rights Congress, petitioned the United Nations to sanction the United States for perpetrating genocide against African Americans. The petition set the stage for the Civil Rights movement. In May of 1954, the High Court ruled against Jim Crow.

Between 1952 and 1954, Robeson sang four concerts for thousands of Canadians and Americans on both sides of the border at Peace Arch Park. In 1955, in response to a warming of US-USSR relations, as well as the anti-Jim Crow ruling, Picasso, Sartre, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Ingrid Bergman, and many other luminaries appealed for a restoration of Robeson's passport. The government demanded that he sign an affidavit declaring he was not a member of the Communist Party. Robeson quoted Shakespeare and sang *Water Boy* in his refusal to sign.

From 1954 to 1958, he recorded more than 100 tracks in the living room of friend and pianist Helen Rosen. His son Paul Robeson, Jr., sound engineer newly graduated from Cornell, commented that the evening sessions were relaxed and his father's voice especially full and beautiful. Results were excellent despite the primitive equipment; the CD *On My Journey* is testament to the success. The founding of an independent record label, Othello Records, in 1958 published Robeson's memoir *Here I Stand*.

Plans in 1956 to travel to Toronto in support of the metal miners were aborted when the FBI influenced Canada to deny entrance. He was thought by the FBI to be more dangerous than Communist leaders. His \$25,000 award of the Stalin Peace Prize in 1953 was eagerly pursued by the IRS, as can be imagined.

Anticipating good news, the two concerts at Carnegie Hall in May of 1958 were sold out. As the curtain fell after the second, Robeson announced that his travel rights as a US citizen had been restored. He told the Pittsburgh Courier, "All my life I've been fighting to prove that all men are brothers, I am still fighting to prove it, and I intend fighting to prove it the rest of my life."

Invitations came from Russia, England, Japan, Nigeria and India. 120,000 people crowded the sports Palace in Moscow, 4,000 in St. Paul's

Cathedral. In China, he sang *The March of the Volunteers*, the post-1949 national anthem. As his income increased, his health deteriorated. Both Paul and Essie Robeson were hospitalized in Moscow. He toured Mexico, Australia and New Zealand to celebrate his 60th birthday. In 1962, he was back in England in a nursing home in London.

Though he wanted to go to Ghana in 1963, the Robesons were ill and returned to Philadelphia to live with his sister. Essie died of cancer in 1965. Paul rested watching football with his grandson and enjoying renewed friendships. The renewed interest in Robeson and the revolutionary socialism he represented brought him into contact with SNCC, the National Urban League and the Congressional Black Caucus. In April 1965 Cesar Chavez, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Louis Armstrong, James Baldwin and other famous people came together for a tribute to Robeson. Columbia Law School honored him in 1969.

In 1974 Paul Robeson retired from public life. In January 1976, though he seemed "in fine fettle," he suffered a series of strokes and died on January 23rd.

At his death Paul Robeson was considered "both a partisan of the most degraded sector of humanity, Africans, while being an advocate of a working-class internationalism that embodied universality. The multi-lingual descendant of enslaved Africans, whose dedicated study of languages was designed in part to illustrate the essential unity of humankind, continues to symbolize the still reigning slogan of the current century: 'workers of the world, unite.'"



Paul Robeson singing for shipyard workers in Oakland, California, Sept, 1942.

Gray Panthers of SF Celebrates Paul Robeson



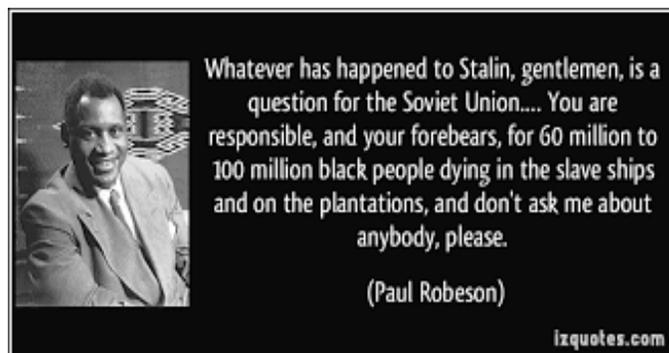
Chairman: "Why did you not stay in Russia?"

Robeson: "Because my father was a slave, and because my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay right here and have a part of it, just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?"

From his testimony to June 12, 1956 House Un-American Activities Committee hearing.



Robeson sings to West Lothian miners in Scotland



Whatever has happened to Stalin, gentlemen, is a question for the Soviet Union.... You are responsible, and your forebears, for 60 million to 100 million black people dying in the slave ships and on the plantations, and don't ask me about anybody, please.

(Paul Robeson)

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From Robeson's testimony to HUAC, 1956



Paul Robeson speaks to crowd gathered in Trafalgar Square in London, June 28, 1959 to demonstrate against the H-bomb and nuclear weapons. Some 10,000 demonstrators marched to Trafalgar Square from Hyde Park for the rally.



Paul Robeson joins picket line outside the American Theater in St. Louis on Jan. 25, 1947. He had performed the night before to an integrated audience at the Kiel Opera House, but refused to play segregated theaters. (St. Louis Post Dispatch)