

Introduction

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Paul Robeson is the greatest legend nobody knows. April 9, 1998 marked the hundredth birthday of this brilliant, complex, athlete-actor-singer-activist who was, arguably, the most prominent African American from the 1920s through the 1950s. He was the quintessential Renaissance man whose talents and achievements far transcended his first national arena, the football field. In fact, heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis once said that he and Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play major league baseball in 1947 with the Brooklyn Dodgers, owed everything to Robeson.¹

Paul Robeson's life ended in loneliness and despair. His tragedy was the fact he was born too soon. To honor this man for all seasons on the centennial of his birth, a number of educational and cultural institutions—the New-York Historical Society, Rutgers University, and Long Island University to name only a few—sponsored programs celebrating his life and evaluating his legacy. The essays in this volume were first presented at a one-day conference held at Long Island University's Brooklyn Campus on Saturday, February 28, 1998. They cover many aspects of his life: his significance as a singer, his political activism, his effort to achieve solidarity between blacks and Jews, the important part his wife Eslanda Goode Robeson played in his struggle, and the way conservative Americans rioted against him, refused to discuss him in the press, and attempted to silence his voice. Courses on Robeson are offered at colleges and high schools: a final essay explains how Robeson's multi-faceted career can serve as the core of a course on African-American or twentieth-century United States history.

Robeson gives us so much to celebrate, to mourn, and to ponder. Growing up in a segregated society, Robeson enjoyed a spectacular career as an athlete at Rutgers University. He won varsity letters in football, among other sports, despite being brutalized by teammates and opponents who often deliberately stepped on his hands with their metal cleats. Ever resilient, he picked himself up many times and went on to be named to Walter Camp's All-America Team, the first black so distinguished. Robeson might have won these honors at Princeton University, where his father, an ex-slave, was pastor at the African Methodist Episcopal Church. But then-President Woodrow Wilson of Princeton University refused to admit a black student. Today, the street on which Robeson grew up is named Paul Robeson Place; his father's church still stands.

Robeson also towered above his Rutgers classmates academically: he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and was class valedictorian. After graduation from Columbia University Law School, where he met his wife Eslanda Cardozo

Goode—a political activist in her own right—he practiced law briefly before deciding to pursue the acting and singing careers which brought him critical praise and international fame.

It was Robeson's eloquence as a spokesman for human rights and social justice, however, that made him a true hero. Speaking twelve languages, he used his great bass-baritone voice and the lessons that he had learned on the gridiron to break down barriers of race, class, and ignorance. A natural ambassador of good will, he traveled the world over championing peace and equality. He was also extremely generous: he donated his profits from Eugene O'Neill's play *All God's Chillun'*, in which he starred in 1934, to Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler.

But the Cold War marred the Hollywood happy ending. Because of his deep (like the river he exalted in memorable song) love for the Soviet Union and reverence for her people coupled with his belief that the USSR was committed to equality for all races and cultures, Robeson spoke out spiritedly in defense of America-Soviet friendship.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Cold War is that it led people with good intentions to side with ruthless leaders who placed ends before means and support for a cause ahead of reasoned considerations of alternative social visions. In the 1930s, thousands of Americans joined a Communist Party committed to racial equality and organizing unskilled workers into labor unions, unaware they were serving the interests of Joseph Stalin, whose regime was secretly funding the Party. When politics took a turn toward the right in the 1940s and 50s, politicians in the United States stifled freedom of expression and persecuted not only Communists, but liberals and socialists who shared some of their programs. Well-meaning Americans concerned about the Red Menace became the tools of the House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC), Senator Joseph McCarthy, and a Republican Party anxious to demonize President Harry Truman and the Democrats as the men who "lost" China and Eastern Europe. If we are to condemn Robeson for defending an indefensible Soviet Union, his sin is no greater than every President from Truman to Reagan who supported murderous dictatorships in Asia, Africa, and Latin America simply because they were anti-Communist.

Robeson's international prominence made him a logical target of the zealous anti-Communists. He was red-listed and his passport was revoked. Like the protagonist in a Greek tragedy, he was marginalized, ostracized, and exiled in his own land. A victim of Cold War politics, he failed to receive the recognition that he richly deserved for his extraordinary achievements. Many young people today have never heard, or heard of, Paul Robeson. Older Americans remember him either as a singer or a victim of McCarthyism.

A year before the Robeson Conference, on April 3-5, 1997, I organized a three-day conference to honor Jackie Robinson on the fiftieth anniversary of

Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.



Live premiere broadcast of "Ballad for Americans," conducted by André Kostelanetz, CBS radio studio, New York, 1939.

the Brooklyn Dodger hero's historic breakthrough into major league baseball. (The proceedings of this conference have been published by M. E. Sharpe of Armonk, New York.) Ironically, Robeson and Robinson crossed paths if not swords over remarks Robeson allegedly made in 1949. The great singer implicitly warned that American Negroes would not fight against the USSR if the Cold War turned hot. Exhorted to respond, Robinson went to Washington where, at a HUAC hearing, he criticized Robeson's stance. Overlooked by the national press was that he joined Robeson in denouncing segregation in both society and the armed forces in which he had served.

At the Robinson conference, Paul Robeson, Jr., discussed his father's famous exchange with Robinson. He offered new information as did noted journalists Lester Rodney and Bill Mardo. Just before he died, Robinson in fact recanted his denunciation of Robeson and, in effect, apologized. Now that the Cold War is over and our former enemy is a newly-minted capitalist ally, despite a free-falling ruble, it is time for the nation as a whole to follow Robinson and reappraise Robeson, appreciate his achievements without justifying his Stalinism, and assess his entire persona, warts and all.

On balance, Robeson emerges as a giant whose flaws—and his unwavering defense of the Soviet Union even after Stalin's excesses came to light is a major flaw—are outweighed by his genius. In the face of rampant racism, young Paul triumphed at Rutgers as scholar and athlete. He invested the characters that he portrayed on stage and screen with a nobility invariably denied the Negro at that time. He spoke out against racism when it was neither fashionable nor safe. He went to the Spanish front in 1938 to show his solidarity with the freedom fighters against Franco's fascists. He introduced the "Ballad for Americans" (which the New York City Labor Chorus reprised at the conference) in 1939 on CBS radio. He helped the fledgling Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organize black workers into the union in the early 1940s. In 1943 he reaped awards for his magnificent interpretation of Shakespeare's Othello. That same year, he addressed major league baseball moguls and urged them to open the doors of the national pastime to meritorious men of color.

Then the Cold War came. Robeson was caught in the cross-fire. He went from national hero to national pariah. He slipped into obscurity. But a handful of unrepentant radicals, civil libertarians, and black activists remembered him. During the 1950s, they sought to have his passport restored. Success greeted their efforts in 1958. Robeson reprised his Othello in 1959, which I witnessed at Stratford-on-Avon in England, and enjoyed two years of triumphant acclaim all over the world. Ill health, perhaps triggered by a confrontation with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, whom he rebuked for continued anti-Semitism in the USSR, which may have produced a massive psychic breakdown, plagued his twilight years from 1961 until his death.² Unable to sing or appear publicly, Robeson was pushed aside by a throwaway culture. Robeson died in 1976, a shadow of the towering figure he had once been.

The place of Robeson's death was Philadelphia, his final home. Having been born in New Jersey and lived much of his life in New York, he is a fit subject for a special issue of *Pennsylvania History*, now subtitled *A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*. Despite major studies of his life by Philip Foner and Martin Duberman, most school textbooks slight Robeson. To fill this void, I contacted Henry Foner, labor leader and trustee of the Paul Robeson Foundation, to set the springs of the Robeson Conference in motion. The youngest of four famous brothers, Henry contacted that amazingly prolific author, Howard Fast, who was also blacklisted and defied the agents of McCarthyism, serving time in prison rather than naming names. Not only did Fast conjure up a vivid recollection of the riot against Robeson at Peekskill, New York, in 1949, he also refused to accept payment for his appearance. The supremely energetic Foner also contacted the New York City Labor Chorus and gained the support of Paul Robeson, Jr. "Let a thousand flowers bloom," he exhorted, urging us to explore all aspects of his father's life.

I must at this point confess to a family skeleton rattling in the closet. Raised as a "Red-Diaper Baby," I was weaned on Robeson's music and inspired by his deeds. At Camp Kinderland, an interracial summer sleep-away facility for the children of radicals, Paul Robeson appeared as a frequent visitor. He would sing on Sundays for us with his unforgettable voice.

I remember the McCarthy Era with fear and trembling. Patriotic Americans hurled stones and tomatoes when I marched in May Day Parades. Worse, in 1951, a right-wing, red-faced (from excessive drink, not political coloration) junior high school administrator ousted me from the school presidency and revoked the American Legion medal I had won on merit. At age fifteen, I learned a painful lesson which propelled me to identify with other victims of the era, including Paul Robeson.

Imagine if Robeson had been born in 1958 instead of 1898. Alive today, he would be an athlete, scholar, lawyer, singer, actor, and political leader in an era when the doors of opportunity are open to African Americans that were closed tight during his lifetime. Such reflections are a way of measuring how far we have come in race relations in the past three hundred years. And while we still have a long way to go, Robeson's heroic efforts to batter down those closed doors remind us how far back we started.³

Notes

1. As quoted by Ira Berkow, "Joe Louis Was There Earlier," *New York Times*, April 22, 1997, and cited in Joseph Dorinson, *The New York Times Newspaper in Education Curriculum Guide* (1997), 97.

2. As reported by Robert Robinson, *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union: An Autobiography*, with Jonathan Slevin (Washington, D.C., Acropolis Books, 1988), 319.

3. Much of this introduction appeared in an op-ed article, Joseph Dorinson, "Paul Robeson, All-American," *New York Daily News* (April 6, 1998), 33. For details of Robeson's multifaceted life, see especially, Philip S. Foner, ed., *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches,*

Interviews 1918-1974 (New York: Braziller, 1978); Lenwood G. Davis, *A Paul Robeson Research Guide and Selected Annotated Bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood, 1982) and *A Paul Robeson Handbook: Everything You Wanted to Know About Paul Robeson* (Kearney: Morris Publishing, 1998); Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1988); Susan Robeson, *The Whole World in His Hands: A Pictorial Biography of Paul Robeson* (New York: Carol Publishing, 1981); Jeffrey C. Stewart, ed. *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press for the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, 1998). Andrew Buni's book on Robeson as a sports figure should be in print by the time this issue appears.