

BIOGRAPHY OF PAUL ROBESON

By PHILLIP W. WEISS

Paul Robeson – athlete, scholar, lawyer, stage actor, movie star, labor activist and civil rights leader – was born in Princeton, New Jersey, on April 9, 1898. His father, the Rev. William Drew Robeson, was a former slave; his mother, Maria Louisa Bustill, was part Cherokee Indian. In 1915 Paul entered Rutgers University. At Rutgers Paul won a total of 15 letters in track, basketball, baseball and football and twice was elected to the collegiate All-American football team. Paul excelled in the classroom as well. In 1918 he was elected to the national honors society, Phi Beta Kappa, and in 1919 graduated as the valedictorian of his class, having achieved the highest scholastic average in the history of the college. In 1919 Robeson entered the Columbia University School of Law and in 1923 graduated with a law degree. While attending school, Paul played professional football. In 1921 he was a member of the Akron Pros of the American Professional Football Association, the precursor of the National Football League, and in 1922 played for the Milwaukee Badgers where he was a team mate of two other black players, Fritz Pollard and Duke Slater. In 1921 Pollard became the first African-American to coach a professional football team and Slater later starred for the Chicago Cardinals.

Robeson turned down an offer to fight the heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey.¹ Robeson, who was six feet three inches tall and weighed

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¹ Scott Ehrlich, *Paul Robeson – Singer and Actor* (Chelsea House Publishers, New York), 1988, p. 40

over two-hundred pounds and had proven his physical strength and toughness on the football field, would have been a formidable opponent.

In 1921 Robeson married Eslanda Cardozo Goode who was the first black analytical chemist at Columbia Medical Center. Their marriage lasted forty-four years until Eslanda's death in 1965.

After practicing law for a time, Robeson became a stage actor and in 1924 starred in two Eugene O'Neill plays: *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, a drama about a black man married to a white woman, and *The Emperor Jones*, another drama about a black man who is an emperor on a Caribbean island. Defending his decision to cast Paul Robeson, a black actor, in a lead role opposite a white woman in *All God's Chillun*, O'Neill said: "Mr. Robeson, I believe, can portray the character better than any other actor could. That is all there is to it. A fine actor is a fine actor. The question of race prejudice cannot enter here."² In 1928 Robeson traveled to London where he starred in the Oscar Hammerstein-Jerome Kern musical, *Show Boat*. Commenting on Robeson's commanding presence in the show, Sir Alfred Butt, manager of the Drury Lane playhouse, asserted that "if for any reason Robeson had to leave the company, the whole production might as well cease."³ While in London Robeson was a guest at a luncheon at the British House of Commons where he met Ramsey MacDonald, the former Prime Minister.

Robeson also appeared in twelve motion pictures, including the 1933 film adaptation of *The Emperor Jones* and the 1936 film version of the

² "All God's Chillun' defended by O'Neill," *The New York Times*, March 19, 1924, p. 19

³ "Robeson Contract Upheld," *The New York Times*, October 5, 1928, p. 7

Jerome Kern – Oscar Hammerstein II musical *Show Boat*. In *The Emperor Jones*, directed by Dudley Murphy and featuring Dudley Digges, Rex Ingram, Harold Nicholas and Moms Mabley in the cast, Robeson reprises his stage role as Brutus Jones, the emperor; in *Show Boat*, directed by James Whale and co-starring Irene Dunne, Allan Jones, Helen Morgan and Hattie McDaniel, he delivers a stirring rendition of the song “Ol’ Man River,” which became his signature song. Upon hearing and seeing the “Ol’ Man River” sequence in the film, the director, James Whale, said: “The spine-chilling effect of that one song is something I shall never forget.”⁴

In 1943 Robeson starred in the Broadway production of *Othello*, costarring Jose Ferrer. Robeson’s dominating performance as the tragic figure Othello helped to bind people of all races together. *Othello* ran for 300 performances, making it the longest running Shakespeare play in Broadway history. In 1944 Robeson was awarded the gold medal by the National Institute of Arts and Letters and in 1945 was awarded the prestigious Spingarn Medal of the N.A.A.C.P.

In the mid-1930’s Robeson joined the fight against fascism, giving benefit concerts to aid the struggle to free Ethiopia, which had been occupied by fascist Italy in 1935, and in 1937 founded the Council on African Affairs, an organization dedicated to assisting black African nationalist liberation movements. Robeson also played an active role in the Spanish Civil War, traveling to that country where he sang for the

⁴ “James Whale,” www.imdb.com

Republican troops and for the members of the International Brigades who were battling the army of Francisco Franco who was backed by Hitler and Mussolini. For Robeson, the purpose for his involvement was clear. He said, "The artist must fight for Freedom or for Slavery. I have made my choice. I have no alternative."⁵

Regarding the reason for his interest and involvement in social and political causes, Robeson explained: "I saw the connection between the problems of all oppressed people and the necessity of the artist to participate fully."⁶

Paul Robeson was also an outspoken advocate for racial justice. He opposed every form of racism. In 1946 he called on President Harry S. Truman to push for strict laws against lynching. He also spoke out against South Africa's apartheid policies and strived to create a movement for racial equality. Robeson called upon blacks to fight back against terrorist attacks by the Ku Klux Klan and demanded that major league baseball end the practice of not hiring black players. He also spoke forcefully against racism directed at American Indians, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans and Asian-Americans. He was also the first American to refuse to sing before a segregated audience.

In addition to his activities as a civil rights activist, Robeson championed the cause of the working class. In 1934 he visited the Soviet Union and later publicly expressed his belief in the principles of

⁵ Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Beacon Press, Boston), 1958, p. 52

⁶ John Henrik Clarke, "Paul Robeson, the Artist as Activist and Social Thinker," www.nbufront.org - online

scientific socialism, to which he remained committed for the rest of his life. During World War Two he waived his recital fee to sing for Russian War Relief, The Ford Workers Victory Chorus, the Labor Victory Rally at Yankee Stadium and the Concert for Negro Soldiers. He also spoke and sang at the North American Aircraft plant in Englewood, California, at the invitation of the local United Auto Workers union and praised it for attempting to end discriminatory hiring practices.

After World War Two, Robeson continued to be an outspoken advocate for civil rights and other social issues. In July 1950, Robeson led an open-air rally in New York City protesting against U. S. involvement in the Korean War. A month later the U. S. State Department cancelled Robeson's passport, even though he had committed no crime. As a result, Robeson was prevented from leaving the United States and therefore could no longer travel abroad to perform, which had a devastating impact on Paul, both professionally in terms of his career and personally. For Paul Robeson, the whole world was his stage and now, for purely political reasons, he was denied access to that stage. After an eight-year legal battle to regain his passport, the U. S. Supreme Court in 1958 ruled, in a 5 to 4 decision, that withholding a passport without due process "was not authorized."⁷ After his passport was restored, Robeson gave concerts in England and Australia.

After his wife passed away in 1965, Robeson moved from Harlem to Philadelphia where he lived with his sister, Mrs. Marion Forsythe, and spent

⁷ *Kent v. Dulles*, 357 U. S. 116 (1958), www.caselaw.lp.findlaw.com

his last years in retirement. In 1971 *Ebony* magazine proclaimed Paul Robeson one of the ten most important black men in American history. Robeson died in Philadelphia on January 23, 1976. More than five thousand mourners attended the memorial service. He left a legacy of commitment to justice which firmly established his place as one of the outstanding leaders in the struggle for equal rights.

In 2004, as part of the Black Heritage series of stamps honoring outstanding African-Americans, the United States Postal Service issued a stamp commemorating Paul Robeson's life and accomplishments.

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