

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, and in 1922 played for the Milwaukee Badgers, in the newly formed National Football League, where he was a team mate of Fritz Pollard, who in 1921 became the first African-American to coach a professional football team, and Duke Slater, another black football player, who later starred for the Chicago Cardinals.

Robeson turned down an offer to fight the heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey. Robeson, who was six feet three inches tall and weighed 219 pounds, and who 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 Children Got Wings*, which is a drama about a black man married to a white woman, and *The Emperor Jones*. O'Neill, accused of presenting a theme in *All God's Children* which would cause racial ill feeling, defended his choice of Paul Robeson to play the lead male role opposite a white actress, saying: "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." O'Neill made these comments at a time when the Ku Klux Klan was at the height of its power, Jim Crow characterized the nature of race relations in the United States and the doctrine of "separate but equal" was the law of the land.

In 1928, Robeson traveled to London where he starred in the Oscar Hammerstein II - 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."

Robeson also appeared in twelve motion pictures, including the film versions of the *The Emperor Jones*, released in 1933, and *Show Boat*, released in 1936. In *The Emperor Jones*, directed by Dudley Murphy and

featuring Dudley Digges, Rex Ingram, Harold Nicholas and Moms Mabley in the cast, Robeson plays Brutus Jones, a Pullman porter who becomes a ruler of an island; in *Show Boat*, directed by James Whale and co-starring Irene Dunne, Allan Jones, Charles Winninger, Helen Morgan and future Academy Award winner Hattie McDaniel, Robeson delivers a stirring rendition of the song “Ol’ Man River,” which became his trademark. 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.” In both films explicit depictions of race relations are a main part of the story.

In 1943, Robeson starred in the Broadway production of *Othello*, costarring future Academy Award winner Jose Ferrer. Robeson’s dominating performance as the tragic figure Othello, which earned him an ovation that was one of the most prolonged and wildest in the history of the New York theater, 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 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.

Explaining the reason for his interest and involvement in social and political causes, Robeson said: “I saw the connection between the problems of all oppressed people and the necessity of the artist to participate fully.”

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 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.

Although a strong advocate of working class causes, Robeson was never a member of the Communist Party.

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 the withholding of the passport was illegal. After his passport was restored, he gave concerts in England and Australia.

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

Forsythe, and spent his last years in retirement. In 1971 *Ebony* magazine proclaimed Paul Robeson one of the 10 most important black men in American history. Paul Robeson died in Philadelphia on January 23, 1976. More than 5,000 mourners attended the memorial service. Paul Robeson left a legacy of commitment to justice, which firmly established his place as one of the outstanding leaders in the struggle for equal rights.

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