



Hero or Villain?

Paul Robeson

What? Paul Robeson on a U.S. postage stamp? Everybody knows he was a commie. One of Stalin's little creatures. He caused a riot in Peekskill. And now we're honoring him with a stamp? What is this country coming to?

OK, let revanchist McCarthyites have their say. They certainly did during the lifetime of Paul Robeson (1898-1976).

Robeson grew up in Princeton, NJ, as a golden boy, smart, with a friendly, open face and effortless charm that brought him startling success as a Black man in the Jim Crow era. He graduated from Rutgers, where he was two-time consensus football All-American and class valedictorian. Afterwards he played three seasons with the fledgling national football league. He went on to earn a law degree from Columbia, then chose a career in music and theater, where his earth-shaking bass-baritone gained him instant acclaim.



As audiences flocked to hear Robeson's sing "Ol' Man River" in "Showboat," or to watch him play Othello on Broadway, anti-communists in and out of government were already campaigning to get him blacklisted from show business.

The anti-communists had a point. Whether or not he was actually a member of

the Communist Party USA, Robeson was a dedicated fellow traveler for most of his life.

Communism gained a toehold in America during the tough years of the Depression, then briefly during the U.S.-Soviet alliance in World War II. By the 1950s, the economy was booming. The Cold War was raising



Robeson as Othello, Uta Hagen as Desdemona

specters of communist expansion abroad and subversion at home — even as the U.S. communist party was disintegrating after revelations of Stalin’s appalling crimes. Until 1957 you could still be arrested for being an active member of the CP USA.

Today, Robeson’s uncritical endorsement of Stalin’s brutal regime is hard to take. Less so is his support for the communist-allied Republicans in Spain who were battling Franco and his fascists. After Hitler broke his “peace pact” and attacked Russia in 1941, Robeson switched from pacifist to pro-war, just like the CP USA. His denunciation of the Trotskyite Socialist Workers party was right down the party line. Robeson supported Mao’s takeover in China, and vocally opposed U.S. intervention in Korea. Amid the hysteria of the McCarthy era, Moscow awarded Robeson the International Stalin Prize. As late as 1956, he was supporting Moscow’s crackdown on the freedom-fighters in Hungary.

Through it all, Robeson was completely unrepentant, unwilling to renounce his communist sympathies, name names and sin no more. Instead, he continued to champion civil rights, anti-colonialism and, coincidentally, the communist agenda. He once declared: “One reverently speaks of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin—the shapers of humanity’s richest present and future.” This kind of talk drove the anti-communists wild: When he scheduled a public concert in Peekskill, N.Y. in 1949, veterans groups staged a protest that turned into a riot, complete with injuries and arrests.



A wild day in Peekskill

Robeson paid a steep price for his principles. J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI and the blacklist shadowed his career, forcing him to go abroad to earn a living. When the State Department voided his passport in 1950, arguing that his advocacy damaged America’s reputation, Robeson’s yearly income plummeted from \$150k (about \$2 million today) to \$3k (\$40k today). Not only was he trapped and virtually unemployable in the USA, but he became an official non-person. His movies and records were withdrawn from distribution. The U.S. press turned against him. His efforts to end lynching earned him the enmity of the Truman administration (bad timing, they said), and was widely ignored; as was his attempt in 1942 to persuade Commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis to allow Blacks to play major league baseball. (Jackie Robinson got the job done in 1947.) He was shunned. In 1949, after the Associated Press falsified a transcript of Robeson’s speech to the Paris Peace Conference, so as to suggest he thought the USA was a fascist state. The State Department picked up the false story and spread it abroad. When Robeson published his autobiography,

“Here I Stand,” in 1958, not a single mainstream U.S. newspaper mentioned it. When he was called before congressional investigators, he was denied permission to enter a statement on the record. Rutgers went so far as to erase his name as a two-time football All-American.

Despite his years in the shadows, Robeson never lost his allure. When he scheduled a concert in London in 1957, to be transmitted through the new transatlantic cable, all 1,000 tickets sold out in an hour. Another 5,000 fans heard him broadcasting to Wales months later. After his passport was returned in 1958, Robeson immediately resumed his lucrative touring schedule abroad. Not long after, his health began to fail. Many factors contributed to his decline — no doubt including the constant drumbeat of confrontation, surveillance and other harassment from the red-hunters.

So why did the USPS issue a stamp honoring Robeson in 2004? Did this mean all is forgiven? That it was OK for Robeson to be a communist?

Of course it was, and is. (Robeson never said he was, and there is no documentation of his membership in the CP USA.) By the way, the communists never came close to being a threat to this democracy or its republican form of government. Indeed, American marxists could also love their country. Patriotism knows no party. Here you are free to believe. Contrary to Mao’s claim, this country, not China, is where a thousand flowers bloom.

However, during the era of fear and paranoia that gripped America at mid-century, Paul Robeson was punished for his beliefs. If only he could have flowered in his career, if only we could have enjoyed the full measure of his talents, in his own country, we all would be the richer.

By the way, don’t confuse Paul Robeson with William Warfield (1920-2002). Both were charismatic Black men in the pre-Civil Rights Era with mesmerizing baritone-bass voices. Their separate versions of “Ol’ Man River” have never been equalled. Like Robeson, Warfield was startlingly cosmopolitan for his time. He developed a brilliant career as singer-diplomat, engaging in seven cultural tours for the U.S. State Department that took him around the world. (To date there is no stamp for Warfield. Why not?)



Warfield

An alternative history footnote: What if Robeson had chosen a course more like Warfield’s? Parlayed his racial breakthroughs into a very different kind of career? He was a successful athlete, both in college and professionally. He was a culture influencer during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. With his BA from Rutgers and law degree from Columbia. imagine what this bright, handsome, charismatic man might have achieved — in sports, in the arts, business, perhaps even in politics.

But no. Being the only Black student at Rutgers did not erase the color line. He would not practice law because of rampant racism. He stopped entertaining white-only audiences, and ended his movie career because of racial stereotyping.

It was racism — both at home and in the imperial territories of Africa — that drove him toward socialism and communism. On visiting Moscow in 1934 he observed: “Here I am not a negro but a human being for the first time in my life. I walk in full human dignity.” When an angry inquisitor later demanded to know why he didn’t go live in Russia, Robeson replied: “Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay right here and have a piece of it, just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?”



Robeson during a visit to Moscow.



Socialism and its communist practitioners affirmed equal rights, which made all the difference to Robeson. “The artist must take sides,” he once said. “He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.”

TO BE CONTINUED