

PAUL ROBESON



PAUL LEROY ROBESON was born at Princeton, New Jersey in 1898. His father escaped from slavery on a plantation and eventually became a Presbyterian minister. His mother, from a distinguished Quaker family, was almost blind. Paul was the youngest of four brothers and one sister. In 1901 his father resigned over what may have been in part racial issues. As a result the family income was severely reduced, his father being able to find only menial work. In 1904 his mother died in a fire. In 1912 he went to the Somerfield High School, New Jersey.

In school plays he took the parts of Julius Caesar and Othello, and led the school at sports, choosing to ignore racial remarks. He sang first in the Presbyterian Church of his hometown and then at the African Methodist Episcopal Churches of Somerville and Westfield nearby. In 1915 he won a scholarship and enrolled at Rutgers, the third black student ever to do so. Again he excelled at

sports. There were difficulties because visiting teams would not play a team with a non-white member.

The Great War focused his mind on racial issues: Black soldiers were good enough to fight beside white soldiers, but were not good enough to occupy equal positions at home. He left Rutgers with every possible distinction. In 1920 he joined the Columbia Law School. He was awarded a state diploma and set up as a lawyer. In the following year he married Eslanda Cardozo Goode, a research chemist. With "Essie"'s encouragement, he forsook the law to become an actor. In London Mrs. Patrick Campbell adapted *Taboo* to make a feature of his singing. When *Taboo* came off he returned to America, completed his law degree and gave up football.

In 1924 Robeson achieved remarkable successes in Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun got Wings* and *The Emperor Jones*. At this time Essie gave up her job to become his agent. The first result of her efforts was a part in his first film, a silent film with a "race" content, *Body and Soul*. His first concert, entirely of Negro spirituals, was at the Greenwich Village Theatre in 1925. The following year he undertook an extensive concert tour in North America. He was accompanied, on the piano and vocally, by Lawrence Brown, who he had met in England. In 1926 he made his first records. In 1929 his performance in the Hammerstein-Kern musical *Show Boat* of the song "Ol' man river" made him and the song world-famous, though some objected to the occurrence in the song of the word 'nigger'. His career developed simultaneously as a stage actor and as a concert singer. His rendition of Shakespeare's Othello with Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona was considered remarkable. A relationship developed offstage as well as on it. When Essie came to know she wanted a divorce. Friends made clear to Robeson that divorce from Essie followed by marriage to Peggy would ruin his career. He heeded their advice and returned to Essie, but their marriage was never what it had been.

Robeson believed that demonstrating a black man's abilities and achievements was more powerful than making political speeches. To become more knowledgeable of his ancestry, in 1934 he studied at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

His political opinions were already moving towards the left when the film director, Eisenstein invited him to visit Russia. In Berlin on the return journey he became aware of Nazi racism.

He appeared mainly in London from 1929, but in 1935 he returned to the United States. His career now broadened and included work in the film studios of Hollywood, but he never appeared, as might have been expected, in oratorio or opera. The film *Sanders of the River* made him internationally known as a film star, though his playing, however good, of a stereotype colonial African provoked considerable adverse comment. He learned to become more critical in accepting roles. Indeed, subsequently he gave up film appearances as he found the parts he was being given were offensive to black people.

Robeson went to Spain in 1938 and saw for himself the battlefront conditions of the Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War. The effect on him was to move him into left wing political activism; in spite of repeated warnings from Harold Holt that continuing political activity would damage his career. What he

thought of the political show trials of 1936, 1937 and 1938 is unclear. He returned the United States at the start of the Second World War and participated in numerous fundraising events for the Allied cause. At the same time, he began publicly to press for civil rights legislation by Congress. As a result in the years 1940 to 1943, he was subject to increasingly hostile surveillance by the FBI under its director J. Edgar Hoover.

In artistic terms, amongst the most significant events of his career were his performances of Othello in Shakespeare's play. He first took on the part in 1930, but reviews and comments were not particularly good. In London at any time a black Moor was no problem, but in New York in 1942 it could not be risked. However, after much worried discussion two smaller companies, in Cambridge and in Princeton, agreed to put it on. Despite only limited rehearsal, Robeson's lack of experience and acting ability, and a heatwave, it was a resounding success and subsequently it was a success also in New York.

He returned to England after the war, but a highly successful tour of the Soviet Union in 1945 resulted in him being drawn towards communism to such an extent that in 1947 he declared that he even wished to leave his concert career in order to espouse the communist cause. His political declarations led to the award by the Russian government of the Stalin prize in 1952. As a result, when he next returned to United States, it was the era of McCarthyism, his passport was withdrawn, films in which he appeared were withdrawn and his records were withdrawn from the shops. Only in 1958 was his passport returned, enabling him once more to travel.

His last years were not happy. Essie was diagnosed with cancer and he attempted suicide. In 1963 as a result of depression he retired completely from public life. In 1965 Essie died and in 1968 he moved to live with his sister, Marian Robeson Forsythe in Philadelphia where he died after a stroke in 1976.

Paul Robeson's voice was amongst the select few which are instantly recognisable; an attribute shared with no less than Caruso and Chaliapin. Also remarkable is that he seems to have undergone little or no tuition. Indeed, throughout his career Robeson worried about his lack of musical foundations, he was unable to sight read, knew nothing of scoring, went only rarely to concerts, scarcely ever associated with musicians and, perhaps most remarkable of all, sang through a long and arduous career with little or no voice training.

Starting in 1925, shortly after the electric recording process was introduced, records of Robeson's voice began to appear, published in turn on the Victor, His Master's Voice and Columbia labels. Robeson tended to avoid the lower reaches of his voice in concerts as he felt they were not the best part of his register. However, in the recording studio they could be managed to great effect. Later there were records for various smaller companies, the last of them on the Othello label, created by his son in an attempt to provide him with an interest in his retirement. In the course of a recording career lasting a third of century we hear the voice, at first soft and velvety, harden and change to have a hint of iron, but always arrestingly beautiful and, as we have said, instantly recognisable. The enunciation was always exemplary, but the repertoire somewhat limited. We have tried to include in this album as many facets as possible.

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