

Paul Robeson: The Unheralded God-father of the Civil Rights Movement

Written by H. Lewis Smith
Saturday, 09 April 2016 16:55



“I ask again” he said so defiantly, “shall Negro sharecroppers from Mississippi be sent to shoot down brown-skinned peasants in Vietnam...to serve the interests of those who oppose Negro liberation at home and colonial freedom abroad?” – [Paul Robeson](#)

Preceding Malcolm X or [MLK](#) in the valiant struggle for civil rights was the perspicacious Paul Robeson, April 9, 1898 – January 23, 1976. Robeson was a singer, actor, [social activist](#)

, lawyer and athlete. His Alma mater was Rutgers College where he excelled as an all-around athlete, basketball, football, baseball and track & field. He became a transcendent international figure who inspired and touched the hearts and soul of people world-wide along with many high profile Black African-Americans. His being a cosmopolitan, larger than life figure abroad can be attributed to his multiple roles as political activist, artist, singer and actor along with his ability to converse in circa twenty different languages

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. He was a visionary leader who sacrificed tremendously because of his unyielding devotion to the causes of anti-racism, peace and socialism established him as the pacesetter...and God-father of the 60s Civil Rights Movement.

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As an actor Robeson once wanted to play the role of Joe Louis but was told by Hollywood it would never do for a colored man to be shown knocking out a white boxer. He did several movies two of which he became very distraught over, "Sanders of the River" and "Tales of Manhattan." The former triggered his crusade as a defender of his people—proving to be the turning point in his public career—as he felt he'd committed a faux pas doing that picture and passionately resented being part of it.

Thus, the higher calling of social injustice led him to abandon the theater and Hollywood to become one of the most important political activists of his generation. His advocacy of anti-imperialism, affiliation with communism and criticism of the American government caused him to be blacklisted during the McCarthy era. On September 1946 Robeson vehemently charged that it was hypocritical for America to take the lead in Nuremberg in indicting purveyors of race hatred, while lethargically engaging the same at home. He said: "What is happening in Nuremberg is a travesty on democracy, when people of America are murdered by the same kind of men on trial."

A few years later Robeson filed a petition with the United Nations charging America with genocide against African-Americans. At a moment when the U.S. was charging the socialist camp with human rights violations, his petition was trumpeted globally as yet another example of Washington's hypocrisy and brutality. It served to prod American authorities in response to ease the horrific maltreatment of African-Americans, setting the stage for what came to be called the "Civil Rights Movement." In this historic process, Robeson inadvertently played the role of a sacrificial lamb. His income, career and health eroded...as the people he sacrificed for...saw their fortunes improve as the bonds of Jim Crow slowly loosened.

He heartily endorsed the proposal of the Soviet Union to make race discrimination and hatred a crime, placing President Truman in legal jeopardy. Robeson was the most unrelenting critic of what was called the Truman Doctrine. At one juncture Robeson had a face to face meeting with Truman about numerous lynchings, and the maiming of black people in military uniforms. This exchange of angry words led Truman to angrily slam his fist on his desk reprimanding Robeson all at the same time, leading to Robeson's passport being snatched for several years.

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IN MEMORY OF
PAUL ROBESON
1898 - 1976

and the many black actors who
endured the humiliating process
of blackface in America



in *The Norton Companion of African American Literature*, 1988, pp. 457-458. The article
<http://www.oxfordjournals.org/abstract/doi/10.1093/acprof:oson/9780195138113.003.0001>
at USC and at the University of California, Los Angeles where he obtained a B.A.