Paul Robeson

Let My People Go

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Paul Robeson, known over a huge area of the world as the Black American singer and actor — his signature song, "Ol' Man River" —, symbolizes the deepest urges of the twentieth century: the urge of peoples everywhere to liberate themselves from discrimination and oppression, whether racial or economic.

Physically a gigantic man well over six feet, remarkably endowed with intellect and talent, Robeson earned without exploiting anyone, you can say by the sweat of his own creative talent, the much coveted (in American terms) million dollars. Apart from his artistry, the most astonishing thing about Robeson is how, at the height of his career, he threw down the challenge to confront the Washington Establishment with the demand for racial equality. This demand for Black American equality was linked with a no less passionate defense of people everywhere seeking their own liberation. In short, Paul Robeson’s personal earning power had failed to constrain him.
With the intensification of independence movements, and the inception of the Cold War at the end of the 1940s, a campaign was launched in the United States to silence Paul Robeson and eliminate him from the American record. He was hounded as 'a communist', though what he was saying then has largely become accepted fact today. His passport was seized and he, systematically, deprived of his career. Only concerted and embarrassing international efforts finally regained his right to travel and perform in 1958, (not in the U.S. but in Britain, Europe and elsewhere). Early in the 1960s illness overcame him and for twelve years he retired into quietude, finally dying serenely on 23 January, 1976, at the age of seventy-seven. With his death, a wave of long suppressed appreciation of Paul Robeson was loosed and is still echoing in the United States, Britain and elsewhere. He had an innate quality of inspiring love in ordinary people, even in those who never actually saw him, or met him. His song recordings speak of the man behind the song. Something more than the beauty of his voice has always reached out making him unforgettable. It was an act of utmost stupidity to think that such a man could be silenced.

Paul Robeson, whom I met early in his career—1930, in London, at the time that he first acted Othello, and knew in Britain, the U.S., and on the European continent (moreover, his whole family, and that of his wife, Eslanda) was that rare phenomenon, a truly good, even noble human being. Incapable of pettiness, and even devoid of ambition in the personal sense, his loyalties were deep-rooted. He simply could not resist helping those who needed help. Yet in all the years I knew this man and in many different and difficult circumstances, I really believe it never entered his head that he was gifted with an exceptional character.

Before I attempt to depict Paul Robeson, the artist, let me explain it was his intention to visit India in the early 1960s. He never reached there on account of the onset of the illness which in the end killed him. Paul's interest in India began quite early in the 1930s when he met Krishna Menon in London and he, Paul, began to donate money and his singing to the India League. Then, late in 1934, he, his wife and I went to Moscow together (this was to discuss a film laid in Haiti with Sergei Eisenstein who dreamed to make a film with Robeson). We met a friend of mine, D. G. Tendulkar, who loved Paul on sight. Later, in London, it was Tendulkar who introduced Paul to Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira and Smt. Vijayalakshimi Pandit. They became friends and remained friends through thick and thin. In 1957-8, when the protracted persecution of Paul reached its crescendo in the U.S., Pandit Nehru wrote an Open Letter on Paul's sixtieth birthday to Justice Chagla, who formed a Robeson Committee in Bombay. I have always believed that it was this letter that jolted the U.S. State Department into restoring Paul and Essie Robeson's passports.

Paul Robeson's attitudes to life and his character were strongly influenced by his background. His father was born a slave in the state of North Carolina, ran away at the age of fifteen, fought in the American Civil War, gained an education and became a clergyman. William Drew Robeson
married a Quaker schoolteacher in Philadelphia, Maria Louisa Bustill, of Negro, Delaware Indian and English ancestry.

The couple moved further north to Princeton in New Jersey and William Drew became the minister of the black Witherspoon Presbyterian Church where their six children, one girl and five boys, were born. The youngest was Paul Leroy, born on 9 April, 1898. It is important to mention that, in general, black churches in America have always shown a greater degree of social consciousness, than white ones (a vivid example in more recent times being the role played by Dr. Martin Luther King). At the time of Paul's birth, the black churches up and down New Jersey were poor. As Paul later told me, "poverty was my beginning". Material poverty, yes. But there was no spiritual and intellectual poverty in the Robeson family environment. Very much the reverse. William Robeson set the highest goals for his children, especially the exceptional little Paul. His mother was accidentally burnt to death when he was six and soon he "was sleeping four in a bed" with his cousins from the depths of North Carolina. In order to survive, Paul, from his very early years up until he was in his twenties, worked at every conceivable menial job. He led, in fact, a double life for, under his father's guidance, he did well at school. Against odds, Paul landed one scholarship after another until he arrived at Rutgers University.

In 1915, nothing could have been a greater test of endurance than to be a black boy, and indeed Paul was truly black, in a dominantly white American university bristling with racial prejudice. In the face of his difficulties he still excelled academically and in sports. At Rutgers he was elected to America's highest scholastic honour, gaining the Phi Beta Kappa key. At a time when blacks did not exist in sports, save the boxing ring, the young Robeson was finally included in the University's noted football team, where he captured the attention of sportswriters. He became known as Robeson of Rutgers. His father, with a marked flair for oratory, coached Paul so that he joined the University's debating society and won many a prize. In 1918, William Drew Robeson died.

Graduating from Rutgers, Paul took himself to New York's black ghetto of Harlem where his football prowess was regarded as a collective black honour. But Paul was not dedicated to any sport. When overtures were made to him to become a boxer, an occupation that nauseated him, he refused. His dedication was to become a lawyer and so he enrolled at Columbia University Law School. There is little doubt that, but for racial discrimination, Robeson could have become an outstanding figure in the legal profession. When he finally graduated and attempted to practice, he ran into the barricade of the colour bar, which, at that time, the early 1920s, was so appalling that even Negro clients felt compelled to go to white lawyers if they wanted to win their cases, or be defended.

Being black, what was Paul Robeson to do in a society where colour was indeed a million times more important than merit? His future became even more complicated when, in 1921, he met and married the dynamic Eslanda Cardoza Goode, always known as Essie. Essie Goode
Robeson was a very remarkable woman, and when Paul met her, she was an analytical chemist, who, amazingly, had a job at the Presbyterian Hospital of Columbia Medical Center. She was the first Negro to hold such a post.

Two factors contributed to Paul’s future. The segregated Negro churches of America were extremely rich musically, so much so that the base of American music is largely founded on Negro Spirituals, the songs created during slavery, and on the singing of black choirs and individual musicians. Paul, to whom nature had given an extraordinarily beautiful voice, had always sung. The second factor was that sections of the American theatre, the experimental and also the commercial, were beginning to recognise that Negroes had dramatic talent, though the dramatic material open to them was limited in its scope. It is fair to say that Negroes were regarded as theatrical ‘curiosities’. They were dependent until very recently upon white producers and directors. In 1917 there came a small turning point in opportunity when the lyric poet, Ridgely Torrence, wrote *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre*.

One of these plays, *Simon the Cyrenian*, was revived in Harlem in February 1920 at the Young Women’s Christian Association. Simon was by tradition an African, and the man who was said to have carried Jesus Christ’s cross to Golgotha. Paul Robeson, though inexperienced in acting, except once in a school play, was persuaded to act Simon. He did not take the experience seriously. But in the audience there were a number of people connected with perhaps the most interesting theatre enterprise in New York, the Provincetown Playhouse, which had grown up around America’s most important dramatist, Eugene O’Neill. Provincetown was about to produce O’Neill’s play, *The Emperor Jones*, virtually a one-man play, and the one man, Brutus Jones, was a Negro. Two of the Provincetown people were so impressed by Paul Robeson’s Simon that they tried to persuade him to act Emperor Jones. He refused, the character being repellent to him. He was set on the law.

Almost by chance, he was induced to appear in another play, *Taboo*, with the English actress Margaret Wycherly. After a run in New York, the play attracted the famous and spectacular Mrs. Patrick Campbell, who decided to appear in it (in England) under the title, *Voodoo*. There being no Negro actor in England, Paul Robeson was invited to go. That was 1922. He went for the sake of £20 a week, plus expenses and a holiday. He had no sooner arrived in London than he met a fellow black American, Lawrence Brown, a consummate musician, who had lived in London for some time. Larry and Paul would end in forming a team which would last for more than thirty-five years.

Once *Voodoo* opened in Blackpool, Paul’s defect of being unable to whistle, as the play called for, meant that he substituted a hum. His humming so captivated Mrs. Pat Campbell that she kept whispering to him, “Sing another song”. Soon he was singing and singing, and upsetting the play’s action. Mrs. Pat, as she was called, was not a respecter of playwrights’ scripts. At the end of their tour, the strong-minded Mrs. Pat insisted to Paul that he must prepare himself to act *Othello*. Many years later, when
I was writing his biography, he told me; “I was enormously pleased — but baffled. I knew nothing either of singing or acting. Out of a summer pastime another career had loomed up...”

No man destined to become one of the world’s most famous singers, actors, and a personality known to millions, had such an engrained humility about his talents. He always claimed that his acting talent was limited, and he told me, what was hard to believe, that the range of his singing voice was also limited. The truth about him was that soon to be faced with great fame, he never became infatuated with himself. But, as his later life proved, he was profoundly in love and dedicated to the idea that through his natural and unselfconscious talents, he could serve his people, the Black People of the world, and, because natural compassion was part of his deepest make-up, the poor, struggling, much oppressed majority of the human race.

In February 1924, Paul Robeson finally agreed to become ‘a real actor’ with the Provincetown Playhouse group. He appeared in the most controversial of O’Neill’s plays, All God’s Chillun Got Wings, in which a black boy and a white girl play happily together as children. But when Jim and Ella grow up, the racist spectre comes between them. The loyal Jim marries Ella only when she is deserted and destitute and brings her into the home of his mother and sister. Under pressure, Ella regresses to infantilism, but still Jim stands by her. It is a painful and powerful play, but under no circumstances could it be considered as a plea for intermarriage, though it is a plea against racism. Concerted efforts were made to prevent its New York production, which failed on account of the courage of the Provincetown Playhouse group, who refused to be deterred.

At the time Chillun appeared, twenty-five of the then forty-eight American States had statutes on their books prohibiting marriage between whites and non-whites. This was the racial climate against which Paul Robeson, or any other black actor, had to make his or her way. Almost ten years later, this climate prevented Robeson’s first Othello being transferred from London to New York.

In 1933, in London, Paul again played Jim, the noted British actress, Flora Robson, appearing as Ella. It was accident, but the 1933 production of Chillun in London coincided with the entrenchment of Adolf Hitler in supreme power. The play had barely opened when London was flooded with the Nazis’ first victims. Many were Jewish, many were destitute, some were young radical-minded students. Something had to be done, and it was. A committee was formed headed by the famous writer, H. G. Wells. The producer and director of London’s Chillun, Ronald Adam and Andre van Gysseghem, were only too willing to give a charity performance of Chillun in order to raise funds for Hitler’s first victims. The special matinee raised £2,000.

Up to this point, Paul Robeson had never, for all his feelings, engaged in any act that had any political connotations. But immediately after the charity performance of Chillun for Hitler’s victims, he told me that
during the performance he felt the parallel between his own people in the United States and Jewish people in Nazi Germany. He added that the majority of white people in the States, who had ever acted decently towards him, were Jewish. This was the day that Paul Robeson really began to study politics.

But I have leapt over several years. To go back to 1924 and the Provincetown Playhouse. Following the success of Chillun, against the odds, Paul agreed to play Brutus Jones in O'Neill's play, The Emperor Jones, the character he had originally rejected. Thus, at Provincetown Playhouse in 1924, Paul appeared in two extreme characters, the saintly Jim and the villainous Jones, neither, of course, representative of average black Americans of any class. But Robeson's two performances staggered the American drama critics.

Chance played a great part in the evolution of Robeson as an artist. One day in March 1925, when he was a Harlem hero, he was walking down Harlem's 7th Avenue and came to the corner of 135th Street. There, standing on the corner, was Lawrence Brown, the musician he had met in London. Paul persuaded Larry, a man of the deepest reticence, to go with him that night to a party at James Light's home down in Greenwich Village, saying they might play some songs together. The sensitive Brown noticed that Paul had not changed with fame, that he was "the same rather sombre, pondering young man" whom he had met. That night they sang a number of songs together, songs that Paul would subsequently make famous. There was such enthusiasm that Jimmy Light suggested to Brown that they should give a concert.

In American music there had never been a concert wholly devoted to Negro Spirituals and Work Songs. The only presentations of either had been in choral form. Three weeks later, at the Greenwich Village Theatre, the first Robeson concert was held with Brown as accompanist. It attracted an audience of the most artistically sophisticated New Yorkers. They sang, or rather Paul sang, sixteen songs. The New York Times critic wrote, "Mr. Robeson's gift is to make (the universal humanism of the Spirituals) tell in every line, and that not by any outward stress, but by an overwhelming inward conviction. Sung by one man, they voiced the sorrow and hopes of a people".

Eugene O'Neill had become known as a dramatist in London through his earlier play, Anna Christie. Consequently, the Provincetown Playhouse was invited to bring The Emperor Jones, together with Paul Robeson, to London. The play opened on 10 September 1925, the supporting cast being part English and the rest African, the Africans being mainly dockworkers.

A month after The Emperor Jones ended its London run, Paul and Essie headed for the South of France where, more or less accidentally, Paul found himself embroiled in his first film role. It was an experimental film called Borderline and it was directed by Kenneth MacPherson, the editor of the very influential cinema magazine, Close-up. Nobody has ever seemed to have seen this film, perhaps it was never released.

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Paul and Essie returned to the States towards the end of 1925. Had he been a white actor who had become a star overnight, dramatists would undoubtedly have written plays for him. But nothing of the kind happened. Had he not been able to sing, existence would have been harder than it was. It must be said that racism was wearing itself thin in the musical world since so much musical inspiration came from black sources to white musicians.

By 1928, the Robesons had a five months old son, Paul. Moreover, a popular novel by Edna Ferber, *Show Boat*, a romance set along the Mississippi river on a steamboat, had been turned into a musical play, the music being by the well-known Jerome Kern. There was a black character, Joe the Riverman, who tooted cotton bales. Kern wrote a song for Joe, *Ol' Man River*. Everything in *Show Boat*, except Joe and this song, is a puppet show, pretty, tuneful and, in commercial theatre terms, popular.

Its second production was scheduled for London’s large, opulent Drury Lane Theatre with Robeson invited to play the character of Joe. Joe was really a very minor character (slightly expanded when a film was made), but Robeson made such an astounding impression with his singing of *Ol' Man River* that he dominated *Show Boat*. There was never anything quite comparable to his sudden success in *Show Boat*. It struck me as rather distasteful—with people scrambling to go to a musical play because it had a Negro actor. I had no intention of going to *Show Boat*.

Then, decidedly unexpectedly, the billboards outside the Albert Hall, London’s largest concert hall devoted to classical music and the world’s most important instrumental performers, conductors and singers, announced a Paul Robeson concert. A friend of mine bought tickets (they were very close to the platform) and invited me to go.

I have never forgotten that first Robeson concert, sitting just below the platform so that Robeson and Lawrence Brown were very much in close-up. The first most striking thing about Robeson was not so much the pleasure of his bass-baritone voice (at this early stage it did not possess the intensity and depth it later gained) but, unlike any singer I had ever heard, every word he sang was distinctly articulated. In short, he spoke in song. And the words of Negro Spirituals and Work Songs were wholly unfamiliar. The second impression was no less surprising, that of an enormously tall, massive black man attired in a formal black suit like any concert artist. But this massive man employed none of the technical tricks of other singers. He sang simply and what came through was a most extraordinary sensitivity. The audience, totally unfamiliar with the songs, which included Spirituals which were to become very famous—*Go Down Moses, Steal Away Home, Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*. These, and all the other Spirituals, are expressive of a deep religious feeling, of faith in God as protector against the cruelty of the world. But the words and form have none of the formality of white Christian hymns. The concert ended with the duet arrangement of *Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho* in which Lawrence Brown joined in; all the arrangements were his work. The applause was thunderous. Robeson and Brown had captivated the Albert Hall audience.
The concert led me to go to Show Boat, which unfolded according to the traditional mechanics of romantic musical plays. There was no dramatic build-up for the entrance of the new star, Robeson. Only when the scene shifted from the steamboat to the Mississippi wharf, there appeared a black figure, like an extra. Still, this was Joe the Riverman and, suddenly, he stopped and out poured the now long-famous song, Ol' Man River, flowing like the river it spoke of. Its crescendo came:

"... Tote that barge and lift that bale,
You get a little drunk,
And you lands in jail.
I gets weary and sick of tryin',
I'm scared of livin' and feared of dyin'...
"

The pathos, the sad passion of Robeson's naked sincerity communicated to the cross-section audience in a most extraordinary way. At Drury Lane, the applause was deafening. But, in accepting the applause, he stood as if his naked spirit was receiving the response. He seemed to have no greed for applause (it had been the same at the Albert Hall) and he appeared to be a man stripped bare of all mannerisms.

It was not long before Paul, acutely sensitive to cultures other than his own because he was sensitive to people, fell in love with a song by the very English composer, Roger Quilter, to whom Larry Brown introduced him. And he sang this, and some old English songs, as if they were of his own heritage. The two he was to sing most often were the gently amusing Oh, John, No! and Quilter's Over the Mountains.

It was the folk song genre that attracted him and he came to believe that there was a great common link in character between all folk music. (Because he had a phenomenal gift for languages, and came to master twenty-five grammars, he could learn any song and sing it, at least in part, in its original language. One of his most profoundly moving interpretations was the Hebrew 'Kaddish'. When he sang it, one thought one was hearing a Jewish kantor singing.)

During Show Boat, and subsequently, many of England's most interesting people, ranging from Lord Beaverbrook through Parliamentarians to George Bernard Shaw, sought to meet and know Paul and Essie Robeson, who had become certainly the most famous Americans in England. They decided to stay on. Yet during all the years they stayed in Britain, the American Embassy ignored them. Not once were they ever invited to any Embassy party, because they were black.

In 1929, following the run of Show Boat, Paul, and Essie who had more or less become his manager, went on a European concert tour—to Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. In Berlin, he played The Emperor Jones at Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Kuenstler Theater and it was the first time that a German theatre presented an American play in English.

By this time, the first of three different Robeson productions of Othello was in the offing. For several years there had been in London an American theatrical couple, Maurice Browne, actor and producer, and his wife, Ellen van Volkenberg, a director. The couple had the ambition to produce Othello, with Maurice Browne playing Iago and Paul, the Moor. Paul took a very long time to make up his mind and he embarked upon not only an intensive study of Shakespeare's tragedy, but of the English language of Shakespeare's time in order to shed any trace of an American accent. Just once before, in the 1860s, a Negro actor from America, Ira Aldridge, had appeared in London as Othello. Among the people Robeson consulted about Othello, was the grand-daughter of Ira Aldridge who lived in London; also the doyen of Shakespearean actors, Sir Frank Benson. When he conceived of the Moor moving like a panther, he went to study panthers in London's zoo. Finally he agreed and the play went into rehearsal at the Savoy Theatre. Two exceptional actresses were to play Desdemona and Emilia respectively, Peggy Ashcroft and Sybil Thorndike.

The play opened on 19 May, 1930. On the previous day Paul Robeson gave an interview to the New York Times. What he said was very interesting, "I find the lines come to life at every point. I feel the play is so modern, for the problem is the problem of my own people. It is a tragedy of racial conflict, a tragedy of honour rather than jealousy. Shakespeare presents a noble figure, a man of singleness of purpose and simplicity. Desdemona loves him, he marries her, but the seed of suspicion is sown. The fact that he is an alien among white people makes his mind work quickly. He feels dishonour more deeply." 

As a person, Paul was a gentle man, and especially so at this time. His performance as Othello had nobility and tenderness about it, but this first time, it did not contain the rage latent in Othello when he felt the sting of dishonour. This only came in the second production in the States. This production would have gone to the States, but fear of prejudice held it up for a whole decade.

By the time Othello opened at the Savoy Theatre, I had become a budding drama critic working for a magazine. I went into his dressing-room after a performance, and I got something of a shock for I found myself in a relatively small space with far and away the quietest, yet the most massive actor I'd ever met. When I said I liked his Othello, he did not react with the pleasure common to actors, but said very quietly, slowly, "I tried to do the best I could". He did not want to talk about himself. Long afterwards, he told me that had I said I liked Shakespeare, he would have talked for at least an hour. When I came to the stagedoor to leave, there was Paul about to leave, too. We walked down the Strand together. The instant we were out of the theatre, on the street and in the May sunshine, it was as if a cloud lifted from him and he talked easily—about the pleasures of London.

By the time the American Othello took place, I knew Paul and Essie very well (indeed the three of us had come very close to being lynched by
the Nazis in Berlin, that was 1934, and an experience which deepens any relationship beyond the bounds of ordinary friendship). And I was in the States with a great deal of personal experience of American racism. Paul, despite being something of a hero, largely because of his international connections and the fact that, with war, racism, at least on the surface, had to be fought, the climate was potentially right for Othello to be played on Broadway. Still, it was not an easy project. Probably, Paul's American Othello would never have been possible but for the efforts of two women, the American, Cheryl Crawford, and the British actress turned director, Margaret Webster, the daughter of two greatly respected British actors, Dame May Whitty and Ben Webster. The two stalwart women persuaded a talented married couple to take the risk with them; the actor José Ferrer, to play Iago, and he was a most striking one, and his wife, Uta Hagen, to play Desdemona.

Their plan was to try out the production as 'summer theatre' at Cambridge, Massachusetts, in Brattle Hall. When the final curtain fell, the audience yelled its head off and within twenty-four hours there were New York offers. Again Robeson made the most intensive study of the play. He took the play bit by bit, studying every authority on Shakespeare. But he decided upon his own interpretation. He told interviewers what he believed, that he was not a great actor, like José Ferrer, his Iago. "All I do is feel the part. I made myself believe I am Othello, and I acted as he would act... I'm calm, I'm quiet through all the early part. I don't make an unnecessary move..." By contrast José Ferrer was the most physically active of Iagos. In the interval of years, the rage that had lain dormant in Paul had come again to be within his own experience. What had been, seemingly, lacking in London, was present in the American production. It proved to be the longest run of a Shakespeare play in New York in the history of the American theatre. Then Paul Robeson went for a long tour with it through America and Canada. Honour upon honour was bestowed on him, and during the whole of this time, he never compromised in his demand "to let my people go" beyond the pale of discrimination.

The last phase of Paul Robeson's saga with Othello was in 1959 after he had suffered ten years of gruelling political persecution. The Royal Shakespeare Company had been anxious for him to play Othello at Stratford-on-Avon, but the seizure of his passport in the early 1950s had held this up. He had not acted since the close of the American Othello tour, which coincided with the end of the Second World War, 1945. He was over sixty.

I find it difficult to measure the difference in Paul's own performance between the American performance and the final one at Stratford; but I think that in the climax of the play there was less fire, less passion. If this is a correct assessment, it was due to the director, Tony Richardson, allowing the set-designer to build a platform bedroom in the air, midway between the floor of the stage and the ceiling. This platform looked flimsy and its proportions were too small for free movement in a scene culminating in violent action and passion. As Peggy Ashcroft recently commented to me, "I held my breath lest the platform collapse". Paul was too massive a man to play with ease on such a structure. It was a stage architectural
error. It has also to be said that the Iago of Sam Wannamaker was a very pale shadow of Ferrer’s Iago, which was a superb interpretation. The tremendous impact of Margaret Webster’s production in the States was not only the greatness of Paul Robeson’s performance, but that he and José Ferrer were perfectly balanced foils for one another. Margaret Webster, who had been nurtured on Shakespeare, approached the direction of the play with a passion for perfection equalling Paul’s. The total result of correct casting was a theatrical masterpiece.

It was, when you think of it, a dreadful predicament for an actor of very high ideals, to know throughout his career that there was only one great role that he could obviously act. This was Paul Robeson’s situation from the first moment he stepped upon the stage — there was Othello and only Othello.

The awful situation of Paul Robeson, the actor who found himself extolled in whatever plays he appeared in, was that the roles existing were, as he recognized at the outset, too few and too far between.

Apart from the plays I have discussed here, he acted in only four others during his whole career—a not very successful ‘folkish’ play, *John Henry* in the States, and three in London: *Toussaint L’Ouverture* by C. L. R. James, a Trinidad playwright; the American play, *Stevedore*, directed by André van Gyseghem with a wholly black cast composed of West Indians, Africans and Paul and Larry Brown and, lastly, another American labour play, *Plant in the Sun*.

*Plant in the Sun* was a unique theatrical event for all the actors in it were London trade unionists interested in amateur theatricals. The group, calling themselves Unity Theatre, converted the disused chapel near St. Pancras Station into a theatre. Paul, who at this time earned something like £500 for every concert he gave in England, and they were nearly constant all over the country, and very much more for his U.S. tours, offered to play for nothing at all, in order to help Unity Theatre get on its feet. Among the many people who came to see the play, perhaps the most interesting from Robeson’s point of view was Jawaharlal Nehru. This was June 1938. It was a time when many people, including those in Britain, had been deeply stirred up by what was called the ‘dress rehearsal of the Second World War’ — the Spanish Civil War. Paul, like Jawaharlal Nehru in the company of Krishna Menon, had gone to see for himself what was happening in Spain. He and Essie had gone to Barcelona in January. They had seen almost the whole human race trying to help the Loyalists. He had sung to the international volunteers in Barcelona and in besieged Madrid. He had stood on platforms on behalf of Spain with such diverse people as Clement Attlee and Lloyd George. So great was the admiration for him that he was asked to stand as candidate for the Lord Rectorship of the University of Edinburgh. He declined; it did not appear quite seemly to him. He was still an American citizen.

But the whole of Paul Robeson’s career was shot through with irony for no other reason than the colour of his skin. He was a great singer; a
seemingly great actor (though he never agreed with this assessment of himself) and he was, in the opinion of everyone who ever had contact with him, a wonderful human being.

It was inevitable that he should be asked to appear in films. He appeared in several—the film of The Emperor Jones, Show Boat, Korda’s Sanders of the River, in which he had some hopes which were cruelly dashed in the end; King Solomon’s Mines, Jericho, for which he went to Egypt for the shooting. To some extent, he was ashamed of these films. Except for two: Song of Freedom which fused together a character based on Paul himself and an African story and the other, Proud Valley, set in a Welsh mining village with Paul as a black miner.

Almost all of the actors in Proud Valley were local people belonging to the impoverished Rhondda Valley; these miners and their families stirred very deep emotions in Paul Robeson. They were people so very closely akin to the ordinary American Negro worker in the United States, that Paul felt the pull to return to his native land. So, in September 1939, less than a month after the outbreak of war, Paul, Essie and Lawrence Brown returned to New York—to face, first, unprecedented success which was from 1949 onwards, to turn into no less unprecedented vilification of a man who would not renounce his honest beliefs.

The America to which Paul, Essie and Larry returned in 1939 was not exactly the same politically, sociologically or economically to what it had been when they took up residence in England. It had suffered a shattering shock with the great Depression of 1929. In order to try to recover, a wave of liberalism had swept Franklin Roosevelt into the Presidency. But for the hope that lay in the New Deal and the reforms instituted by Roosevelt, it is very possible that Paul Robeson would never have returned to live in his native land. One of the features of the New Deal—and the New Deal embraced all the arts—was that it aimed to open entirely new opportunities to Negroes. In short, the ideas that Paul had developed in Europe and the general climate of the New Deal appeared to be very much akin.

On his return to the States, Robeson was stamped upon the consciousness of Americans by singing a kind of cantata, Ballad for Americans, on the radio programme of the Columbia Broadcasting System. The date of the first broadcast was 5 November 1939. It reflected the hopes of the New Dealers, above all else it reflected what Paul himself believed to be true of the composition of his native land. It began:

Who are you?
Well, I’m everybody who’s nobody.
I’m the nobody who’s everybody.
What’s your racket?
What do you do for a living?
Well, I’m an engineer, musician,
Streetcleaner, carpenter, teacher,
How about a farmer?
Also!
and then comes a question and answer covering all occupations.

. . . . Are you an American?
I'm just an Irish, Negro, Jewish,
Italian, French, and English,
Spanish, Russian, Chinese,
. . . . And Czech and double-check American:

Out of the cheating, out of the shouting,
Out of the murders and lynching,
. . . . It will come again — our marching song will come again,
Simple as a hit tune, deep as our valleys . . . .

The dominant sentiment was:

For man in white skin can never be free
While his black brother is in slavery.
Our country's strong, our country's young
And her greatest songs are still unsung . . .

And the final words:

For I have always believed it,
And I believe it now,
And you know who I am
A-m-e-r-i-c-a.

The reaction to Ballad For Americans, which was the combined work of people who believed in Roosevelt's New Deal, was unprecedented. Its appeal swept the United States and very quickly it was being sung by choirs and schools all around the country. Paul Robeson sang it far and wide after its second broadcast in the Spring of 1940. I was present in the C.B.S. studio for the second broadcast. It was the first time I had seen Paul in his native land. At the end, I saw people surge towards the platform and surround him. One could have supposed that racial prejudice was wiped out.

When the clamour of appreciation ended, I went round and found Paul and Essie and asked them to come to lunch with me the next day at the Elysée Hotel which was just round the corner from the studio. I had chosen it because it was a residential hotel largely occupied by people in the arts, some of whom I knew, including two well-known people who were admirers of Paul. They had known him for years.

Paul and Essie arrived and we went upstairs to the apartment I had. We had barely sat down when the telephone rang. It was the Hotel Manager. He said to me, "If you take Mr. and Mrs. Robeson to our restaurant, you will not be served. You can eat upstairs." Paul sensed what was happening, and he said, "Let us eat up here". We did eat our lunch upstairs, and we did not discuss this incident. I went downstairs with Paul and Essie to see them off. I then went to the Management and said that I was leaving the hotel. I felt a profound contempt for the residents of the hotel, especially the two who also knew Paul, and accepted it was perfectly natural to invite Paul, as they had done before, and have him eat with them in the seclusion
of their apartments. I give this incident in detail because it illustrates how being an artistic hero and earning the much coveted million dollars was no protection against insulting behaviour if a person was Negro in the city of New York in 1940. This was Robeson’s situation. What, therefore, was the predicament of the black millions?

Paul Robeson, and every other ‘coloured’ American—indigenous Indians, Mexicans, and others, the largest group being Negroes (roughly ten percent of the whole American population)—faced in essence a colonial situation within the nation to which they belonged. ‘Coloured’ Americans are a minority, a massive minority, but still a minority.

Paul Robeson’s endeavours were bent, really from his earliest youth, to somehow break down the barriers deliberately maintained and protected by U.S. laws, to keep black (or ‘coloured’) people separate from ‘whites’. At the time of his return in 1939, struggles were going on to break the ‘colour-line’ (termed Jim Crow) in trade unions, on buses and trains operating in Southern States, literally everywhere and in every occupation.

Paul’s first stand was to refuse to sing concerts on the basis of segregated audiences anywhere, north or south. Under Roosevelt, this stand, along with all the others Paul took as long as Roosevelt lived, were in the line of the Government’s own reforms. Universities, schools and unions scrambled to honour Paul. But in the background there were always those Congressmen who had an eye on Robeson for he was active in supporting several organisations that were suspect of being Left. Most suspect of all was the Council of African Affairs of which he was one of the founders and served as Chairman.

After the end of the war in Europe and after Roosevelt’s death, on 6 June 1945, Robeson spoke at a rally in New York at Madison Square Garden. It was sponsored by the Council. Robeson declared:

“The Negro—and I mean American Negroes as well as West Indians and Africans—has a direct and first-hand understanding, which most other people lack, of what imperialist exploitation and oppression is . . . .

In Africa, in the West Indies, and in Asia, the colonial peoples wage a desperate struggle for recognition simply as human beings—as human beings to whom rights are due . . . .”

Paul Robeson was stating facts. He was not inciting the creation of independence movements, for they already existed full-blown, or in embryo. But his statements were interpreted as ‘subversive’.

Roosevelt died on 12 April 1945. That was two days after the opening of the last date on Othello’s tour, which was in Chicago. I was in Chicago. I saw many people, especially Negroes, standing on the street weeping when they saw the headlines. I walked up two streets and entered an office
in the main business area. In that, and many other office blocks Roosevelt's enemies, the opponents of the New Deal, had called for bottles of champagne to drink to Roosevelt's death. They were so jubilant.

The story of this campaign against Robeson is very complicated and protracted. But as the U.S. Government went back on the New Deal policies at home, Paul became ever harsher in his criticism and he was pushed leftward. In 1948 he, in company with Roosevelt's Vice-President up to 1944, Henry Wallace, founded a third political party, the Progressive Party, which almost immediately was smeared as 'communist inspired'. It was the first time in American history that Negroes had a say in the founding and policy of a party.

Presumably the most disreputable figure in future American history, will not be the witch-hunting Senator McCarthy and a good many others of his ilk, but Richard Nixon who ended as America's most disgraced President. It was immediately after the Progressive Party was formed that the ambitions of Nixon first caught attention. Nixon and a certain Karl Mundt, were minor Congressmen, and they brought forth the Bill known as the 'Mundt-Nixon Communist Control Bill' aimed at not only outlawing the Communist Party, but curtailing opposition to Government policy, whether domestic or foreign. Paul went to Washington to speak against the Bill. It touched off a number of investigations by Un-American Activities Committees in various states. One in California called Paul, and on the first such questioning, he said he was not a Communist. Thereafter, for the sake of all innumerable people who were called—a few were actually Communists, the majority were not—Paul refused to answer. And he kept on refusing.

The climax to Paul's professional career as a singer came in the summer of 1949. He was due to give a concert, an open air one, in upstate New York on 28 August (he had given one there the year before) in a place called Peekskill. There was a determined effort to stop this concert, ending in a very brutal riot, with concert-goers being attacked. The only defense of Paul Robeson at this point was a letter in the sober magazine, The Nation, signed by twenty-three leading personalities in American theatre and literature. The letter said in part:

"This is a tragic moment for America, as it was a tragic moment sixteen years ago for Germany and the world."

Against these sober words were scurrilous attacks in papers across the country. They were led by two of the most popular columnists. The chips, as they say in America, were down. It was not long before Paul and Essie Robeson's passports were seized; they could not go abroad, even if that would have been their salvation. Paul never sang another professionally organised and paid-for concert in the United States. He sang only in union halls and in those Negro churches that had the courage not to be politically bludgeoned into closing their doors to him. The powers that be at Rutger's University scratched out his name as ever having been a member of their famous football team.
The pressure was terrible. But there was no way to compel Paul Robeson to retract one word he had ever said. And he never breathed one word of personal complaint. He had acted in accord with his conscience and because he had, he went through the years of persecution with a certain degree of serenity. For the oppressed of the world he had done his best. It was in the winter of 1951-52, when on any day it was possible he could be arrested on some trumped up charge, that I had the impression of Paul as being akin to the ideal of the ancient Roman, the symbol of the honourable man. It was when I was revising his biography and I met him nearly every day for three months. The only thing he ever asked of me was to tone down, or eliminate instances of discrimination and brutality against himself, for every other black person in the States had suffered worse things than he had.

*Demonstrating against segregation at the American Theatre, St. Louis on January 26, 1947*
Any person, who in these years had dared to put a Robeson programme of records onto any radio station, would have been sacked instantly. But it was never possible to suppress the playing of his records in Britain and other countries, so his voice was still heard.

Very recently I heard a tape of Paul which I think is the most beautiful recording of his voice that was ever made. It was made in the early 1960s and, at that time, his voice had taken on a depth and a meaning it never had earlier, wonderful as it was. The tape was made in St. Paul's Cathedral in London when he was asked to come and read the Lesson—it was from Isaiah—and sing eight Spirituals. Paul was not in any accepted sense a religious man, but when he sang Spirituals, he was the voice of the spirit. In the course of his evolution as what may be called the Voice of the People—in his case, all peoples—he changed the last line of the song that made him famous—Ol' Man River—from I'm scared of livin' and feared of dyin' to I must keep fightin' until I'm dyin'. While illness forced him into retirement twelve years before he actually died, he must be remembered as the man who never gave up what he believed in. And he lived to see a great many people win their freedom, and that was some comfort in a very hard life lived with nobility of purpose.