

Paul Robeson

- Early 20th Century actor, entertainer, and athlete
- Dedicated Stalinist

Born in Princeton, New Jersey on April 9, 1898, Paul Robeson was the fifth and last child of Maria Louisa Bustill and William Drew Robeson, the latter of whom was a former slave. Paul attended **Rutgers University**, where he earned Phi Beta Kappa honors, and lettered in football, baseball, track, and basketball. He graduated as the valedictorian of his class in 1919.

Robeson went on to earn a law degree from **Columbia University** Law School in 1923. Deeply influenced by the Harlem Renaissance and the black cultural awareness that it had sparked in African Americans, he pursued a career in music and drama rather than jurisprudence. In 1924, he was cast by Eugene O'Neill in his play, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, and would later star in yet another O'Neill play, *Emperor Jones*. Robeson's most important role was that of Othello in the Broadway play of the same name. His films included *Emperor Jones* (1933); *Sanders of the River* (1935); *Showboat* (1936); *Song of Freedom* (1937); *Jericho* (1938); *Proud Valley* (1939); and *Tales of Manhattan* (1942). From the 1920s through the 1940s, he was one of the world's leading stage and film performers.

From 1927-1939, Robeson lived in London, where he was introduced to socialist ideals by his friend Bernard Shaw and several leaders of the British Labour Party. He read the classic Marxist writings and became a devoted Communist, though he never formally acknowledged being a Communist Party member.

In 1935 Robeson and his wife Eslanda Goode visited the Soviet Union, where they encountered William Patterson, a leader of the American Communist Party. The Robesons also met with two of Eslanda's brothers, John and Frank Goode, who had decided they preferred life under **Joseph Stalin** to life in America. Said Robeson of his stay in the USSR: "Here, for the first time, I walk in human dignity." He soon became a dedicated Stalinist, the first world-renowned performer to become a political activist during the peak years of his show business career.

Like other Communists, Robeson condemned British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain for his appeasement of Adolph Hitler in 1938 but vigorously defended Stalin's signing of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact, whose terms divided Poland between Stalin and Hitler and allowed the Nazi dictator to begin World War II.

In 1941, Robeson joined Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Vito Marcantonio in a campaign to free Earl Browder, the leader of the American Communist Party and the head of a Soviet espionage ring, who had been imprisoned for passport violations.

At the beginning of World War II, Robeson argued against U.S. intervention in the conflict. But his opinion made an abrupt about-face on June 22, 1941, when Germany launched a surprise invasion on the Soviet Union; his first loyalties were to the Soviets.

In 1948 Robeson worked for the presidential campaign of Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace, who had served in the cabinet of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

During a concert tour of the USSR in 1949, Robeson learned of Stalin's planned liquidation of Soviet Jews (a liquidation that would be aborted by Stalin's death in 1953). He asked to see with the imprisoned (and soon-to-be-executed) Russian Yiddish poet Itzhak Feffer, who he had met in the United States six years earlier. When Robeson saw Feffer -- in a room bugged with Soviet government listening devices -- Feffer, without speaking aloud, drew his fingers across his throat, indicating that he and others would soon be murdered (which they were).

Robeson chose not to tell anyone about Feffer's fate or what he had learned about Soviet anti-Semitism, since to do so would have hurt the Soviet cause in the Cold War. Upon returning to America, he told the press that he had seen Feffer in good condition; that he had seen "Jewish people [living freely] all over the place"; that he had heard "not one word about" Soviet anti-Semitism; and that the rumors of Yiddish writers being executed were utterly false. He did not even tell his comrades in the American Communist Party what he knew of the USSR's treatment of Jews.

Stalin recognized Robeson's loyalty and thus awarded him the Stalin Peace Prize in 1953. After the dictator died later that year, Robeson wrote him a tribute entitled "**To You, Beloved Comrade**," which included these sentiments: "Forever will his name be honored and beloved in all lands. In all spheres of modern life, the influence of Stalin reaches wide and deep. ... his contributions to the science of our world society remains invaluable. One reverently speaks of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin -- the shapers of humanity's richest present and future. ... Yes, through his [Stalin's] deep humanity, by his wise understanding, he leaves us a rich and monumental heritage. ... How consistently, how patiently, he labored for peace and ever increasing abundance, with what deep kindness and wisdom."

During a Soviet-sponsored World Peace Congress meeting in Europe, Robeson asserted that black Americans -- because of their bitterness over the racism they faced on a constant basis -- would refuse to fight on the side of their own country if the United States and the Soviet Union ever went to war. This claim became the subject of a House Un-American Activities Committee hearing, where baseball legend Jackie Robinson openly condemned Robeson. Eleanor Roosevelt also criticized Robeson, whose passport was taken away during the Cold War years so that he could not perform abroad.

One night in 1961 Robeson attempted suicide by slashing his wrists with a razor blade in his Moscow hotel room, but he survived. His son, **Paul Robeson, Jr.**, alleged that this event was caused by CIA operatives who had slipped some synthetic hallucinogens into his father's drink at a party -- and thereby had caused him to become delusional.

In April 1973, more than 3,000 people gathered in New York's Carnegie Hall to celebrate Robeson's 75th birthday, though Robeson himself was unable to attend, due to illness. Among those on hand were **Ramsey Clark, Pete Seeger, Angela Davis, Dolores Huerta, Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, James Earl Jones, Zero Mostel, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Coretta Scott King.**

Paul Robeson died of a stroke in Philadelphia on January 23, 1976.