



on my journey

Paul Robeson's
Independent Recordings

NATIONAL MUSEUM of
AFRICAN AMERICAN
HISTORY and CULTURE

on my journey

Paul Robeson's Independent Recordings

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* Tracks 19, 24, 30, and 31 were previously unreleased on compact disc; track 22 was previously available on the compact disc *The Odyssey of Paul Robeson* (Omega Classics, 1992), which is currently out of print.

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PAUL ROBESON: BEARER OF A CULTURE

by Paul Robeson, Jr.

Paul Robeson, in his vocal artistry and acting craft, embodied the quintessentially American cultural traditions of the Southern field slave. I believe that, ultimately, history will reveal beyond doubt that my father's greatest contribution to humanity was his inscription of the spiritual core of this culture into the permanent historical record. This signature CD, *On My Journey: Paul Robeson's Independent Recordings*, is a vital part of that record.

Paul established his early artistic career in 1925–1926 with traditional black spirituals and worksongs, sung in a unique style that captured their original spirit. Beginning in 1927, he took this musical heritage to Europe and ultimately to the world. During an artistic odyssey lasting thirty-five years, accompanist Lawrence

Brown's expert assistance enabled him to add to his repertoire a vast array of folk-songs from around the globe. By mining this musical treasure, Paul discovered the links between the songs of his own people and those of all the peoples of the world. It was with this inspiration that he grew to become the peoples' bard of faith, hope, and freedom—a worldwide symbol of victory over despair, transcendence of fear, and defiance of oppression.

From 1949 through 1958, Paul fought an epic battle to survive, artistically and physically, in the teeth of an unprecedented assault unleashed against him by the U.S. government and mass media. Throughout that period, acutely aware that he was nearing the end of his artistic career, he was determined to leave behind a recorded col-



lection of the best artistic performances of which he was capable. He spared no effort to expand his musical knowledge and improve his mastery of folk and classical music theory.

Previous page: **Robeson addresses a Welcome Home rally at Harlem's Rockland Palace on June 19, 1949.**

Photo by Ira Rosenberg

Left: **With his passport reinstated, Robeson arrives in Great Britain, July 10, 1958.**

Courtesy of UPI/Bettman Archives

For the past-fifty seven years, the mainstream media of the United States have systematically attempted to reduce Paul Robeson's public image to that of a naive if noble "entertainer." But despite the unremitting suppression of the truth about him, these efforts have failed miserably under the crushing historical weight of his ineradicable artistic achievements.

Paul Robeson's voice could not and cannot be stilled. Instead, it has become a voice of the ages.

ON MY JOURNEY: PAUL ROBESON'S INDEPENDENT RECORDINGS

by Robert H. Cataliotti

Singer of songs of freedom,
Touched by your deep devotion,
Touched by your undying love
A sacred trust for you and us, Paul Robeson

—from *Paul Robeson, Renaissance Man* by George “Big Nick” Nicholas & Archie Jefferson

INTRODUCTION

The journey of Paul Robeson, a genuine 20th-century Renaissance man who distinguished himself as a scholar, athlete, singer, actor, activist, and intellectual, is rooted in the foundations of the American experience. His father escaped slavery at the start of the Civil War, and his mother traced her ancestry to African Americans who had purchased their freedom before the Revolutionary War (Brown 1997:6). He and his people embody the mythos of the self-made man; their story is the stuff from which the American Dream is made. Robeson's journey, however, with its innovative, pioneering spirit, with its self-reliant determination, with its against-all-odds triumphs, met with trials and tribulations that challenged the validity and integrity of America's foundational principles. It led him into battle with the anticommunist, McCarthy-era witch-hunt, the Red Scare of the 1950s. He was spied upon, harassed, attacked, blacklisted, and denied the right to travel abroad. Yet, like his forebears who sang of both a spiritual and physical journey to the Promised Land, he refused to submit. A song that had been forged in slavery and that he sang throughout

his career declares this impulse to journey on, despite the odds and without regret: “On my journey now, Mount Zion / Well I wouldn't take nothing, Mount Zion / For my journey now, Mount Zion.” During the 1950s, one of the ways that Robeson showed his commitment to his art and his beliefs was through a series of independent recording sessions, which are the source for the material on this compact disc. *On My Journey: Paul Robeson's Independent Recordings* provides powerful testimony that he would continue down the road he had chosen and “wouldn't take nothing” for his journey.

EVOLUTION OF ROBESON'S MUSICAL JOURNEY

Born in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1898, Robeson experienced a home-life where he was immersed in black sacred music; his father was a former slave and a minister. In *Here I Stand*, Robeson recalled: “Yes, I heard . . . my people singing!—in the glow of the parlor coal-stove and summer porches sweet with lilac air, from the choir loft and Sunday morning pews—and my soul was filled with their harmonies. Then, too, I heard these songs in the very sermons of my father, for in the Negro's speech there is much of the phrasing and rhythm of folk-song” (1958:15). As an undergraduate at Rutgers University, Robeson was a member of the Glee Club, but only for “home concerts”; he was not allowed to travel or participate in social affairs with the white members of the group. He put up with this intolerance because he used the performances as a way to set up private concerts, which provided him with additional income for his education (Duberman 1989:24). In 1919, after graduation, he moved to Harlem. He attended Columbia University Law School, from which he graduated in 1922. His acting career had begun, and he took roles in Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun* and *The Emperor Jones*. After a brief run of a drama named *Voodoo* in London during 1922, a chance meeting with expatriate African-American

pianist, arranger, and musical folklorist Lawrence Brown became “a turning point in Paul’s life,” according to friend and biographer Lloyd Brown (no relation to the musician) (1997:120). Within three years, the singer and pianist would be central to the blossoming of African-American culture known as the Harlem Renaissance.

During this era, a number of African-American intellectuals articulated theories of art that clearly identify the black artist as a representative figure who will open the doors to full acceptance and participation in American society. Harlem Renaissance artists—in music, visual arts, and literature—were finding the source of their modern art in their own cultural and historical roots. The music produced by the collaboration between Paul Robeson and Lawrence Brown came to embody this artistic rebirth. On April 19, 1925, Robeson and Brown performed a concert at the Greenwich Village Theater. The program “was divided into four parts: three groups of Negro spirituals and one group of secular and dialect songs” (Schlosser 1970:310). This was a groundbreaking artistic moment because it represents “the first solo vocal concert that was made up entirely of music from African-American culture” (McGinty and Shirley 1998:105). The collaboration with Brown also marks Robeson’s discovery of the most significant field of endeavor he would pursue in his life’s journey. The two men declared that they would perform African-American folk material only for the next five years. For Robeson, performing the spirituals and secular songs that emerged from the African-American experience was an expression of black pride and an assertion that African-based expression was equal to Western forms; he wanted to free his people from assimilationist racist notions and to illustrate the majesty of black culture. The month after his Greenwich Village concert, he signed his first recording contract with Victor Talking Machine Company and shortly thereafter recorded four double-sided discs. They were all bestsellers, and Paul Robeson was certainly “on my journey now.”

Despite urging from some white music critics and, ironically, members of the black



Robeson formed a groundbreaking partnership with accompanist Lawrence Brown in 1925. The duo worked together until the pianist stepped aside due to the threat of violence following the Peekskill, NY mob attacks in 1949.

middle class, Robeson resisted adding “legitimate” concert material to his performances for the initial five years of his concert career. He and his wife, Eslanda, spent most of the 1930s living in England, and he and Brown performed throughout Europe. Eventually, they began to expand the repertoire. As McGinty and Shirley assert, Robeson began a “direct onslaught on the central repertory of classic Lieder songs”; the pieces included works by such composers as Beethoven, Schumann, and Purcell; later, he added pieces by Mussorgsky and “English recital songs” (1998:116).

Robeson began to include folksongs from throughout the world in his repertoire because he saw a connection between oppressed people through their folk expressions. His experiences in Europe had heightened his political consciousness. He identified with British union workers, was exposed to socialism as a response to fascism and capitalistic exploitation, and admired the Soviet Union’s official prohibition against racial discrimination. Music continued to be the conduit through which he expressed his evolving

consciousness. During a 1937 radiobroadcast in Moscow, he stated: “When I sing the ‘Spirituals’ and work songs of the Negro people to Soviet audiences, I feel that a tremendous bond of sympathy and mutual understanding unites us” (Foner 1978:115). Eventually, this affinity for the Soviet Union and its people would lead to a formidable obstacle to the journey Robeson had undertaken.

Perhaps the most significant influence on Robeson’s artistic vision while in Europe was his study of African languages and cultures, his association with African students and future leaders Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, and his eventual trips to Africa. He discussed the impact of studying African culture in *The Spectator* in 1934: “It was to me like a home-coming, and I felt that I had penetrated to the core of African culture when I began to study the legendary traditions, folk song and folklore of the West African Negro” (Foner 1978:86–87).

In addition to his career as a concert singer, Robeson embarked on a career in film, in Hollywood and England. Ultimately, he renounced the film industry because, despite his efforts, he could not thwart the racist stereotypes that permeated the representation of black people. The films provided him an opportunity to gain widespread recognition for his singing skills. He expanded his recording career to include popular tunes, some of which feature the demeaning racial stereotypes he grappled with in his films. The single song that is, perhaps, most closely associated with Robeson is Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern’s “Ol’ Man River,” which entered his repertoire through his appearances in the 1928 London production of *Showboat*. His rendition in the 1936 film is considered a Hollywood musical classic, yet like the roles to which he often was relegated in films, “Ol’ Man River” perpetuates a negative racial stereotype and posed an artistic dilemma for the socially and politically conscious artist. The original lyrics express a world-weary resignation: “I gets weary and sick of tryin’ / I’m tired of living and scared of dyin.” Robeson

eventually changed the words to reflect his determination to the struggle for freedom: “I keeps laughin’ / Instead of cryin’ / I must keep fightin’ / Until I’m dyin.”

In 1939, after performing for Loyalist troops in Spain, Robeson returned to the United States. He quickly became a leading voice in the antifascism campaign and eventually a supporter of the American war effort to defeat the Axis powers. During this time, he recorded Earl Robinson’s “The Ballad for Americans,” one of the era’s most popular patriotic songs. Robeson played a significant role in shaping its final form. As Lawrence Brown recalled: “As we worked[,] Paul impressed his personality on it. He breathed life into it. It aroused his enthusiasm because at the time it reflected his own great belief in what he thought was American democracy” (Schlosser 1970:360). Broadcast on CBS radio on November 5, 1939, Robeson’s performance was a smash hit. During World War II, as much as any other American performing artist, the internationally acclaimed Robeson was a genuine national hero.

The last major evolutionary stage in Robeson’s repertoire came in the early 1940s, when he recorded his first album for Columbia. He called the album *Songs of Free Men*, and it included such songs as the Spanish Loyalist “The Four Insurgent Generals”; “The Peat Bog Soldiers,” a song sung by Nazi Germany’s concentration-camp prisoners; and the union activist ballad “Joe Hill.” As Paul Robeson Jr. wrote concerning the album’s program in the liner notes to the compact disc reissue: “Recorded in 1942, just two months after America’s entry into World War II against the Axis, these songs of Russian, Spanish, German and American origin reflected a growing American mood supporting the defense of freedom against the fascist onslaught and identifying the hopes of the ‘ordinary Joe’ for a better future” (2001:9). Before the decade had come to a close, this son of an ex-slave, who became the voice of the American “ordinary Joe,” would encounter an ugly detour on his journey.

DETOUR AHEAD: ON THE RED-SCARE BLACKLIST

With the emergence of the Cold War, Robeson's career was disrupted, as he was caught up in the wave of anticommunist paranoia and repression spearheaded by Senator Joseph McCarthy. The backlash against Robeson, who openly supported the Soviet Union and refused to answer questions about his possible affiliation with the Communist Party, gained momentum when he challenged President Harry Truman to support federal antilynching legislation. When Truman refused, Robeson backed the Progressive Party candidate in the 1948 presidential elections. His support for African independence movements added to the backlash and eventually became the official reason for which the State Department revoked his passport. In Paris in 1949, at the World Congress of Partisans of Peace, Robeson made the statement: "It is unthinkable that American Negroes will go to war in behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations . . . against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to full human dignity of mankind." The quote was "distorted" and "reported out of context" in the American press, and the floodgates of red baiting were opened upon Robeson (Foner 1978:37).

Robeson soon became the target of anticommunist repression, and he was denied the opportunity to travel abroad, and to perform and to express himself in public forums that had formerly welcomed him. In the documentary *I'll Make Me a World*, his friend Helen Rosen testifies to the effects of the blacklisting on Robeson: "That was a dreadful time. It was not just a way of making a living; it was a way of fulfilling himself. And not to be able to give a concert, not to be able to do a recording when he wanted to, not to be able to travel freely was a terrible blow to him." Despite unrelenting efforts to silence Robeson and sidetrack him from his journey, he stood his ground, a remarkably resilient and determined man. On August 27, 1949, rioters attacked an outdoor concert in

Protected by a phalanx of union members, Robeson returned to perform at Peekskill, NY on September 4, 1949, after his concert there had been cancelled the previous week due to mob violence.



Peekskill, New York, and Robeson was unable to perform. He remained undeterred and returned to Peekskill the following week, on September 4th and performed with a phalanx of union members protecting the stage. Although he departed safely after the concert, his audience was attacked by a mob, and one hundred and forty people were injured (Foner 1978:38). Unable to travel to perform abroad for his worldwide following because his passport was no longer valid, he developed strategies that enabled him to journey on despite the roadblocks. In May of 1952, he was not allowed to enter Canada. He refused to submit and performed in the Peace Arch Park in Blaine, Washington, on the Canadian border; the stage was set up facing Canada, and about 5000 American listeners joined together with 35,000 Canadian listeners just across the border to hear him sing (Schlosser 1970:377). He performed at Peace Arch Park four times between 1952 and 1955. In May 1957, when he was unable to travel to England to attend a National "Let Paul Robeson

Robeson testifies before the House Un-American Activities Committee on June 12, 1956. Attorney Milton Friedman is on the left.

Courtesy of UPI/Bettman Archives



Sing” Committee conference, he spoke and sang through a transatlantic telephone cable from New York (Foner 1978:42). Banned from bookings in formal concert halls throughout the United States during much of the 1950s, he reached his audience through performances at union halls and black churches. He would not allow himself to be silenced and was determined to continue his journey.

A flesh-and-blood example of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Robeson virtually disappeared from mainstream American press coverage for most of the decade; his response was to help found a newspaper, *Freedom*, which from 1950 to 1955 regularly featured his column, “Here’s My Story.” The attempts to isolate and silence him extended to his recording career; his response was to found an independent record label, Othello Records. The label eventually became Othello Associates and published his part-memoir–part-manifesto, *Here I Stand*, in 1958 (Brown 1997:135). A passage in the book cap-

tures the essence of his defiance of the fascism he perceived behind the blacklisting and harassment that he endured throughout the 1950s. Called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956, he responded to the question of why he had not stayed in Russia: “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 part of it, just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?” (Brown 1997:48).

THE INDEPENDENT RECORDINGS

With access to commercial recording companies and even display space in record stores denied him, Robeson, with the assistance of Lloyd Brown and Paul Robeson Jr., decided that the only way he could reach his record-buying audience was by making records on his own. Housed in the same Harlem office space as the *Freedom* newspaper and the Council on African Affairs, Othello Records was his answer to the recording industry’s blacklist (Brown 1997:132–133). He announced the new venture in a letter that appeared in the December 1952 issue of *Freedom*: “There is a way to explode the silence they would impose on us. An independent record company has just been established that will make new recordings for me.” He goes on to ask for advance subscriptions to finance the project and concludes: “I am determined to defeat those who would imprison my voice. Your subscription will help to break through the barriers” (Foner 1978:336). An article from the same month in *Sing Out! Magazine* echoed his sentiments:

The peace movement has found the way to crack this “cold war curtain” through by-passing the usual standard concert managements and presenting Robeson in concerts throughout the country under the auspices of people’s organizations. Now, through the medium of phonograph records, Paul Robeson’s voice will again be reaching

into American homes with its message of peace and good will and brotherhood.
("Robeson on Records Again!" 1952:2)

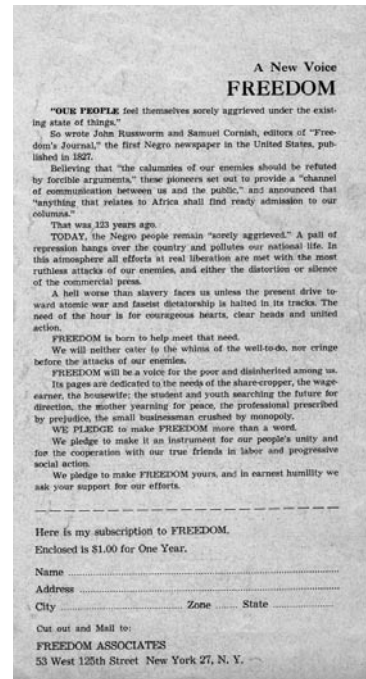
Othello Records released three albums: *Robeson Sings*, *Solid Rock*, and *Let Freedom Ring*. Some of the tracks on the first release featured an orchestra and vocal chorus with arrangements intended to reach out to a popular audience. Robeson Jr. felt that his father was straying from his artistic strength and convinced him to go back to the piano accompaniment and material that was the foundation of his worldwide renown. The second album was focused on African-American sacred music, and the third album was mostly progressive songs. Robeson Jr. states that they found an audience in the progressive left community and especially black churches and trade unions: "Independently, we did three albums, big circulation. And I think I did three or four foreign contracts, so actually we made some money for him, not a lot, but more than walking-around money" (2006: Interview 9-11).

A Cornell graduate in engineering, Paul Robeson Jr. found his professional career path blocked by the U.S. government's blacklisting campaign, so he turned his knowledge to sound engineering and produced his father's recordings during the mid-1950s. Initially, it was a somewhat daunting position for the son of a larger-than-life artist:

It wasn't bad actually because he was wonderful to work with, contrary to all the mythology. But I was the one who had to say, "Ah, dad, you've got to do that one over, goof here or goof somewhere." I have perfect relative pitch, so after the first session, he never questioned me again, but it was kind of scary the first time around. I'd say, "By the way, on that last take. . . ." There was definite silence, and it was like, do I have to look for an exit or not? Because I was all of, like twenty-three or something. I was good at what I did, but I had credentials zero. (2006: Interview 9-11)

Although Robeson Jr. did the audio engineering himself on a few sessions, he developed a production system that included a succession of sound engineers that he considered the best in New York during that era. They included Tony Schwartz, Peter Bartók (son of Hungarian pianist and composer Béla Bartók), and David Hancock. The association with Hancock brought, in addition to engineering expertise, the benefit of a ribbon microphone he invented, which proved far more effective in capturing the full range of Robeson's bass-baritone than condenser microphones. Robeson Jr. edited all the master tapes.

For a period in the mid-1950s, Robeson was unable to rent recording studios for his independent sessions because of the government's blacklisting campaign. Robeson Jr. recalls a meeting with Goddard Leiberson, who was the head of Columbia Masterworks: "He came back to us almost in tears and humiliation and said, 'The board told me flatly, not only can't I give you access to our studio, I can't let you



Freedom, a journal which Robeson helped found, provided him with an outlet to reach his audience from 1950-1955.

get your records pressed in any facility that we control” (2006: Interview 9-1). As was typical of Robeson’s responses to the roadblocks aimed at silencing him, they set up their recording equipment in the apartments of friends who had grand pianos in their living rooms. Robeson’s friends Dr. Sam and Mrs. Helen Rosen’s East Side Manhattan apartment was the preferred location during this period. Robeson Jr. states: “They had the biggest living room and a magnificent piano that was in tune because their daughter was quite a good amateur pianist. Judith Rosen, actually, accompanied dad on a few tracks” (2006: Interview 9-11). They eventually found suitable facilities, including two independent studios in New York: Nola and Esoteric, and Carnegie Recital Hall, a small hall next to the renowned concert hall. Working with Robeson, however, had its risks. Years later, the owner of the Esoteric Studio related to Robeson Jr. that he had stood up to the FBI when he was being harassed for renting his facilities to Robeson: “He could have been ruined; he wasn’t political at all. He was just a guy who really believed in the Constitution. We were lucky that way.” The blacklisting also affected the recording process in terms of the implications that performing with Robeson could have had on musicians’ careers. Robeson Jr. states: “Whenever we had union people, they had to do it off the books and not get credit because they’d lose their union card if they were musicians. So we really couldn’t get groups until finally we got [Robert] Decormier and Vanguard to do it legitimately, and by then the worst of the McCarthy thing was over” (2006: Interview 9-11).

After nearly a quarter century of accompanying Robeson, Lawrence Brown stepped aside, following the mob violence that took place in Peekskill in 1949. Robeson Jr. recalls the conditions that often confronted his father and Brown during that time: “After Peekskill and the post-Peekskill tour, which was like singing under siege in an armed camp wherever they went, not knowing is there going to be a riot and some shooting, Lawrence Brown, and dad fully understood, said, ‘I can’t deal with this’” (2006: Interview 9-11).



Pianist Alan Booth accompanied Robeson throughout the 1950s and is featured on the lion’s share of the independent recordings.

Brown occasionally reunited with Robeson for major concerts and participated in some of the early independent recording sessions, including the tracks “Witness” and “Vi Azoi Lebt der Keyser.” Alan Booth, a young African-American pianist from the Bronx, succeeded Brown. As Robeson Jr. states: “The myriad concerts in churches, union halls, meetings—all that kind of thing that dad did because they were the only venues he could get—he did with Alan Booth” (2006: Interview 9-11). Juilliard-trained and rooted in the music of the black church, Booth could move comfortably among diverse genres—spirituals, classical, world folk, and jazz. Robeson Jr. describes the artistic relationship that developed between his father and Booth:

He was an ideal person for dad to work with, young, intelligent, tough, had a good sense of himself, dignity. So dad couldn't push him around; dad couldn't stand sycophants. Alan would always say what he thought and find some way of accommodating what dad needed. He wasn't about to do stuff he wasn't comfortable doing or didn't think he should be doing. So it was a fine combination, and they worked together from the end of 1949 to the time dad left the country, which was about nine years. (2006: Interview 9-11)

Booth is featured on the lion's share of the independent recordings.

Two of the tracks on this compact disc, "Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees" and "I'm Gonna Let It Shine" come from an informal session that featured Judith Rosen accompanying Robeson on the piano in the living room of her parents' apartment. Robeson Jr. recalls the evening:

Those tracks were recorded by yours truly one extraordinary evening at the Rosen apartment. He was fooling around singing whatever with Judith Rosen accompanying him, and I had portable equipment in the car. I said, "Look, why don't you all take a break. I'm going to get my equipment and let's see what comes out of the session." And lo and behold, these were some really beautiful records. Dad was in a relaxed voice and could go deeper than he normally could in a totally relaxed way with this ribbon microphone I had. So I just set up the thing and let it rip! (2006: Interview 9-11)

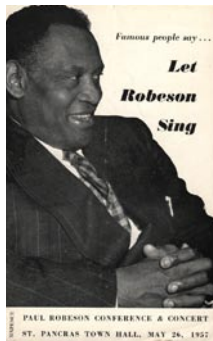
Another truly unique independent recording session took place when Robeson joined musical forces with the country-blues duo of harmonica player Sonny Terry and guitarist Brownie McGhee. "Hammer Song" is one of the fruits of this session. Robeson Jr. was put in touch with Terry through a mutual friend:

I called up Sonny Terry and said, "Would [you] like to do a recording session with my father?" And he said, "I thought you'd never ask." I said, "Really, you know there's some risk attached to that." Dad had just been down to Washington to the House Un-American Activities Committee, so it must have been 1957, about six months after that, and it was still a risk for any musician who was a union member to be recording with Robeson. You could lose your union card. Sonny said, "The hell with 'em. I've got no problem. I'd love to record with him. I work with Brownie McGhee; I'll bring him." So we hooked up at Esoteric Studios with Hancock, set the thing up and the rest is history. (2006: Interview 9-11)

Taken as a whole, Robeson's independent recordings stand as a stunning accomplishment by one of the most profound and talented American artists of the 20th century. There is no rival to the achievement that this body of work represents when the conditions under which this music was produced are considered. As Robeson Jr. asserts:

He was, among other things, a hunted man. He's out there surviving and singing these songs and, at the same time, defending himself and going to meetings and all that stuff. Plus, he was, as performers go, by that time, an old man. The youngest he was on any of those recordings was fifty-six. He was battered around for a solid five, six years by the government of the United States, which is not the best for your physical and mental state. So if you factor that into the result, it's quite impressive. (2006: Interview 9-11)

A roadblock was thrown up, and Robeson met the challenge head-on. He transformed *can't* to *can*. The blacklisting of him by record companies added to the burden of a man trying to survive both artistically and financially, yet, in another way, it resulted in an unforeseen blessing. These independent recordings provide a fascinating look into



Concert and benefit programs from Great Britain and the Soviet Union testify to the appeal and support Robeson maintained during 1950s despite the blacklisting in America.

the artistic interests and impulses of the mature Paul Robeson. He is not hindered or influenced by commercial restraints, corporate marketing strategies, or trendy gimmicks. The pop material and show tunes that were once part of his recording repertoire are left behind; however, the range of the material is stunning in its scope. He is reinterpreting and expanding the African-American spirituals and worksongs that were his rock, the art songs and classical compositions that he mastered, and the international folksongs and activist anthems that testified to his vision of all men and women unified through music. Robeson is on his own, choosing the material that is dear to him, that expresses an artistic vision integrally linked to the cause of human liberation.

During the years 1954 to 1958, Robeson recorded more than one hundred tracks, which were produced and edited by Robeson Jr. and his engineers Schwartz, Bartók, and Hancock. A number of the recordings finally appeared on an established, commercial label when Robeson Jr. licensed a selection of previously released Othello tracks and unreleased tracks to Monitor Records in 1958. Founded by Michael Stillman and Rose Rubin in 1956, Monitor, which initially focused on Russian music, released *Favorite Songs* (MPS 58) and *Encore Robeson* (MP-581) in 1959. As Robeson Jr. recalls: “I have to give Monitor credit; they were the first up, and they were still taking a risk, although it wasn’t the same as before. And Rose [Rubin], she was gutsy. I mean, after all, they weren’t revolutionaries; they were businesspeople. So, you know, I was forever grateful” (2006: Interview 9-11).

The Monitor albums were a sign of the beginning of the end of the United States government’s campaign to silence Paul Robeson. In May of 1958, he appeared at Carnegie Hall for two sold-out concerts, and at the close of the second night announced that his passport had been returned. Vanguard Records recorded the concerts and also recorded Robeson in the studio with an orchestra arranged by Robert Decormier. Robeson had successfully navigated the blacklisting detour and was about to revive his career with a worldwide comeback. In a 1958 article in the *Pittsburgh Courier* hailing his return, he reaffirmed his commitment to struggle: “All my life I have been fighting to prove that ALL men are Brothers. I am still fighting to prove it. And I intend to continue fighting to prove it the rest of my life” (Schlosser 1970:382). *On My Journey: Paul Robeson’s Independent Recordings* testifies to the fact that, despite all the detours and roadblocks thrown in his path, he “wouldn’t take nothing” for his journey.

THE SONGS

The information on recording locations and dates in the following track listings comes from the recollections of Paul Robeson Jr. (Note: Originally called Chamber Music Hall and later Carnegie Chamber Music Hall, the room in which Robeson recorded was renamed Carnegie Recital Hall in 1941. It was renamed Weill Recital Hall in 1986.)

The sequencing of these selections reflects the manner in which Robeson programmed his concerts. Robeson Jr. states, “He always tried to think of how you bring the audience along.” His father considered two factors in arranging his set lists, a variety in key, “so you get a feel that’s varied” and a variety in tempo. (2006: Interview 9-11). In addition to these factors, the concert programs often both grouped together thematically or ethnically related material and juxtaposed songs from diverse sources.

1. ON MY JOURNEY: MOUNT ZION

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

This spiritual was central to Robeson’s repertoire, and its lyrics—of a traveler to the “Promised Land,” characterized by determination and no regrets—are emblematic of Robeson’s life journey. It was among the eight songs that he recorded with Lawrence Brown for the Victor Talking Machine Company in 1925.

2. SCANDALIZE MY NAME

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

The arrangement of this spiritual by renowned African-American composer and arranger Harry T. Burleigh (1866–1949) brought it into the concert repertoire. While Burleigh played a role in shaping Robeson’s early approach to the concert performance of spirituals, the singer moved away from his Eurocentric style and eventually found Lawrence Brown’s more authentic, folk-oriented approach

suitable to his voice and what he hoped to accomplish with traditional material. This arrangement is Brown’s modification of the Burleigh arrangement.

3. DIDN’T MY LORD DELIVER DANIEL?

Alan Booth, piano; recorded at a private apartment, Bronx, NY, 1955

Robeson recorded this spiritual numerous times during his career. The lyrics illustrate the coded, double meanings of the spirituals; they articulate the impulse toward freedom that enslaved African Americans clearly understood and cleverly masked from white listeners. The Old Testament figures had been delivered, and the implication is that the enslaved spiritual singer will be liberated too. This recording was Robeson Jr.’s first session as a producer and sound engineer.

4. HASSIDIC CHANT: KADDISH

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

Sung in Hebrew and English, the “Hassidic Chant: Kaddish” seems to have entered Robeson’s repertoire in the late 1930s.

According to Jonathan Karp’s “Performing Black-Jewish Symbiosis: The ‘Hassidic Chant’ of Paul Robeson,” the composition “is a version of the *Kaddish* (Memorial Prayer) attributed to the Hasidic *rebbe* (master), Levi Yitzhak Berdichev (1740–1810).” Robeson learned the piece from the arrangement by the Russian Jewish folklorist Joel Engel (1867–1927) (Karp 2003:53). Robeson clearly saw the piece as evidence of the affinity between the music of two oppressed ethnicities.

5. WE ARE CLIMBING JACOB’S LADDER

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1955

This recording of the spiritual first appeared on the Othello Records release *Solid Rock*. Robeson, emphasizing his militancy, often transformed the lyrics from “soldiers of the cross” to “soldiers of the fight.” He delivers the traditional lyrics here because the *Solid Rock* album was aimed at his black church audience, and, according to Robeson Jr.: “He didn’t fool with the words when he did them in church” (2006: Interview 9-11).

6. SONGS MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME

Alan Booth, piano; recorded at the Rosen apartment, late 1953 or early 1954

Czech composer Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) wrote “Songs My Mother Taught Me,” which was the fourth of “Seven Gypsy Songs” (1880). The lyrics, sung in English, were from a poem written in German by Adolf Heyduk. Dvořák came to the United States in 1892 to become director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York, where Harry T. Burleigh was a student. He learned African-American spirituals from Burleigh and incorporated “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” into his “New World Symphony” (1893). Dvořák’s use of folk motifs in classical compositions made his work appealing to Robeson.

7. THE MINSTREL BOY

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

The lyrics of an Irish ballad that achieved popularity throughout the United Kingdom, “The Minstrel Boy,” were composed by Thomas Moore (1779–1852).

They were a tribute to Moore’s friends who participated in the 1798 rebellion of the United Irishmen, and the melody is a traditional Irish air, “The Moreen.” Once again, Robeson identifies with a song that represents the liberation struggle of an oppressed people.

8. THE ORPHAN

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

Russian composer Modeste Mussorgsky (1839–1881) is renowned for integrally melding elements of folksongs into his operas, which contributed to Robeson’s admiration for his work. Robeson Jr. asserts: “He had a Mussorgsky repertoire as part of his standard concerts throughout the ’30s and ’40s; he was considered to be the world’s number-one concert singer of the Mussorgsky cycle” (2006: Interview 9-11)

9. SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT

Alan Booth, piano; recorded at the Rosen apartment, late 1956 or early 1957

This classic spiritual entered the concert tradition through the repertoire of the

Fisk Jubilee Singers during the 1870s. The fabled chariot and journey home have been interpreted as cloaked references to the Underground Railroad and an escape to freedom. Robeson recorded “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” numerous times.

10. VI AZOI LEBT DER KEYSER

Lawrence Brown, piano; recorded at the Rosen apartment, early 1950s

Sung in Yiddish, this 19th-century Russian folksong, according to *Sing Out! Magazine*, “dealt with the satiric attitudes on the part of the peasants towards the mysteries of the private life of the Royalty.” An example of this humorous critique is found in the second verse: “How does a czar eat potatoes? / You raise up a wall of butter, / And a soldier with a cannon / Shoots a hot potato through the butter / And right into the mouth of the czar, / And that’s the way the czar eats potatoes!” (1964:12-13).

11. WITNESS

Lawrence Brown, piano & supporting vocal; Nola Studio, 1955

A staple of Robeson’s repertoire, this spiritual features the distinctive call and response of Robeson’s bass-baritone and Brown’s tenor. In the essay “My Brother, Paul,” the Reverend Benjamin C. Robeson asks, “Have you heard Paul sing ‘Witness?’” He goes on to identify the commitment to which his brother is a witness: “He visions himself breaking down the barriers that have imprisoned his race for centuries. He knows hidden away in the teeming millions of African extraction there are others who, if favored by fortune, would be out there in the swim, making a healthy contribution to the progress of humanity” ([1958] 1988: 113).

12. HAMMER SONG

Sonny Terry, harmonica, Brownie McGhee, guitar; Esoteric Studios, 1957

Worksongs, as well as spirituals, were a part of Robeson and Brown’s original commitment to the concert presentation of

African-American folk music. The concept of bringing Robeson together with these authentic practitioners of the folk-blues idiom was a brilliant stroke and clearly answers the oft-repeated comment from William “Count” Basie, that, “It certainly is an honor to be working with Mr. Robeson, but the man certainly can’t sing the blues.”

13. WATER ME FROM THE LIME ROCK

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

“Water Me from the Lime Rock” was an obscure chain-gang song discovered by Lawrence Brown. This performance echoes the opening of the more familiar “Water Boy,” which Robeson performed and recorded throughout his career. Robeson Jr. comments: “Lawrence Brown found such stuff; he was a genius at folk music of all kinds” (2006: Interview 9-11).

14. LET US BREAK BREAD TOGETHER ON OUR KNEES

Judith Rosen, piano; Rosen apartment, 1955

Captured on portable tape equipment by Robeson Jr. during an evening

among friends, this is probably the only Robeson recording of the spiritual. The relaxed nature of the gathering clearly comes through in the mellow warmth of Robeson’s delivery.

15. AMAZING GRACE

Alan Booth, piano; Nola Studios, 1956

This version is, somewhat surprisingly, probably Robeson’s only recording of the classic hymn. The Reverend John Newton had written the lyrics in England in 1773, reportedly drawing upon his salvation from a storm at sea aboard a slave-trading vessel. The familiar melody seems to have evolved in America during the first half of the 19th century. Robeson’s “Amazing Grace” first appeared on the Othello Records release *Solid Rock*.

16. SHLOF, MEIN KIND

Alan Booth, piano; recording location unknown, 1956

Another traditional Yiddish song, “Shlof, Mein Kind” — “Sleep, My Child,” is a lullaby. Robeson dedicated his performance

of the song at Carnegie Hall in 1953 to the children of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Robeson Jr. comments: “Throughout the ’50s, he had a significant Yiddish repertoire. He also had a significant Yiddish-speaking audience, especially in the New York area, where he was exceptionally popular throughout the ’40s and ’50s. That had to do with his artistic constituency. The only place you could go safely outside the black community was the progressive Jewish community” (2006: Interview 9-11).

17. SKYE BOAT SONG

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

Although “Skye Boat Song” is widely considered a Hebridean folksong recounting the escape of Charles Edward Stuart after his defeat at the battle of Culloden in 1746, the words were written by Sir Harold Boulton and set to an adapted Gaelic rowing song by Miss Annie MacLeod in the 1870s. Robeson performed it throughout his career; however, this is probably the only studio recording.

18. WANDERER

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

Sung by Robeson in English, “Wanderer,” a classic prodigal-son tale, is a Finnish folksong arranged by lyricist and composer Selim Palmgren (1878–1951). Most likely, the only other studio recording by Robeson was in 1937.

19. I’M GONNA LET IT SHINE

Judith Rosen, piano; Rosen apartment, 1955

This is another recording from the informal session at the Rosen apartment, with Judith Rosen accompanying Robeson. Recalling the evening, Robeson Jr. states: “He was totally relaxed, and his voice just went way down there with perfect ease. He would caress the notes and phrasing, so it was wonderful” (2006: Interview 9-11). Alternately known as “This Little Light of Mine,” this spiritual illustrates that the enslaved African-American composer, like Robeson battling oppression, is “determined to be a beacon. He will never let his light go out, die down, or be hidden” (Lovell 1972:288).

20. STAND STILL, JORDAN

Alan Booth, piano; Rosen apartment, 1955 or 1956

Robeson probably recorded this spiritual only one other time—in the 1930s for EMI. “Stand Still, Jordan” reflects the spiritual composer’s attraction to the Old Testament heroes, who provided enslaved African Americans with the hope for immediate divine intercession and relief from oppression within their lifetimes.

21. TAKIN’ NAMES

Alan Booth, piano; recorded at the Rosen apartment, late 1956 or early 1957

“Takin’ Names” was probably recorded only once before by Robeson—for EMI in the 1930s. The song was collected in *The American Songbag* by Carl Sandburg, who comments: “A true instance of the poetry ‘to be overheard rather than heard,’ it keeps for those of long acquaintance with it, an overtone of a reverie on the riddles of death and the frail permits by which any one generation walks before the mirrors of life” ([1927] 1990: 447).

Certainly for Robeson, just one generation removed from slavery, the song would reflect an urgency to accomplish all that was possible in liberating his own and all oppressed people during the time he had in this world.

22. DANS LE PRINTEMPS DE MES ANNÉES

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1958

“Dans le Printemps de Mes Années” was composed by Pierre-Jean Garat (1764–1823), a French singer who gave vocal lessons to Queen Marie Antoinette and was imprisoned in 1794 for composing a song lamenting the treatment of the royal family. The song entered Robeson’s repertoire in the early 1940s, when Robeson’s material was beginning “to encompass a broader geographic and political area” (Schlosser 1970: 357).

23. PASSING BY

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

“Passing By” was one of the classic recital songs that Robeson added to his repertoire at the beginning of the 1930s. It had been

composed by English composer Edward C. Purcell (1853–1932), to lyrics from an anonymous poem collected by Thomas Ford in *Musicke of Sundrie Kindes* (1607).

24. MISTRESS MINE

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

The lyrics to “Mistress Mine” come from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and were originally set to music by English composer Arthur S. Sullivan in the early 1860s. In the early 1940s, Robeson added the song to his repertoire, along with several other Shakespeare selections arranged by English composer Roger Quilter (1877–1953).

25. NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

Roger Quilter’s song, with lyrics from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem, was composed in 1904 and entered Robeson’s repertoire in the 1930s. Robeson and Quilter were friends and worked together during Robeson’s time in England. Robeson Jr. comments: “Dad met him when he was living in England in 1927. When he went

over there to stay, he did a lot of Quilter songs, and Quilter produced a couple of his popular programs at the Palladium” (2006: Interview 9-11).

26. LI’L GAL

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1956

“Li’l Gal” was one of songs Robeson chose for his 1925 Victor Talking Machine Company recordings. The composer was J. Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954), an African-American musicologist who played a significant role in shaping Robeson’s early approach to black folk music. The lyrics come from a dialect poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906). Johnson had featured the song in his 1907 musical *The Shoo-Fly Regiment*.

27. KEVIN BARRY

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1956

Originally released on the Othello album *Let Freedom Ring*, “Kevin Barry” is a song commemorating an Irish freedom fighter, who was hanged for his participation in an attack on British soldiers in 1920. The mel-

ody comes from “Rolling Home to Dear Old Ireland.” This is probably Robeson’s only studio recording of the song.

28. ZOT NIT KEYNMOL (SONG OF THE WARSAW GHETTO)

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, late 1956 or early 1957

Hirsch Glick (1920–1944?), a Lithuanian Jew who was a member of the underground movement in the Warsaw ghetto and a concentration-camp prisoner, composed “Zot Nit Keynmol,” which is sung here in English and Yiddish. Robeson learned this song in May 1949, when he visited the site of the Warsaw Rebellion. Arranged by Lawrence Brown, it was performed by Robeson for the first time the following month in Moscow at the legendary concert he gave after learning of the Soviet repression of Jewish citizens.

29. JOE HILL

Alan Booth, piano; recording location unknown, mid-1950s

Joe Hill, a Swedish immigrant, was a union activist and songwriter in the International Workers of the World (Wobblies) during the first decades of the 20th century. He was convicted and executed (shot by a firing squad) for the alleged murder of a former policeman in Utah in 1915. His case garnered attention from unions worldwide. His life was memorialized in 1930 through a poem written by Alfred Hayes and set to music by Earl Robinson six years later. Robeson included “Joe Hill” on his 1942 activist collection *Songs of Free Men*.

30. ZVORNOST

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1957

Sung by Robeson in Czech and English, “Zvornost,” a Hussite song of rebellion, was arranged by Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884). Like Mussorgsky and Dvořák, Smetana incorporated his national folk music into his operas and classical compositions. According to Robeson Jr., his father

learned the song from the wife of the Czech ambassador to the United Nations, who was a folklorist and musician.

31. BEAR THE BURDEN IN THE HEAT OF THE DAY

Alan Booth, piano; Rosen apartment, 1955

The lyrics are simple and repetitive, but Robeson’s voice fills them with strength, warmth, and resonance. In his 1931 recording, he delivers the lyrics in dialect, while in this version he employs standard English.

32. NO MORE AUCTION BLOCK FOR ME

Alan Booth, piano; Carnegie Recital Hall, 1956

One of the most militant spirituals, “No More Auction Block for Me” is a traditional African-American antecedent of the activist songs to which Robeson was drawn. The lyrics are an indictment of the Middle Passage and firsthand testimony against the brutality of slavery. Alternately known as “Many Thousand Gone (or Go),” it may be a source for the 20th-century protest song, “We Shall Overcome.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert H. Cataliotti, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Humanities at Coppin State University in Baltimore, where he teaches American and African American literature. He is a music critic/historian, the recipient of a 1983 ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award, and has been published in *Downbeat*, *USA Today*, *The Rocky Mountain News*, *New Orleans Times Picayune*, *New York Newsday*, *Sing Out!*, and *Wavelength*. He wrote *The Music in African American Fiction* (Garland, 1995) and *The Songs Became the Stories: The Music in African American Fiction, 1970–2005* (Peter Lang, 2007). He is the producer and annotator of *Every Tone a Testimony: An African American Aural History* (SFW CD 47003, 2001) and the CD which accompanies *Call & Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

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