

PAUL ROBESON AT BLAINE

Singing for Freedom at the Peace Arch

By Robert H. Keller

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Fifteen hundred people seemed to fill Peace Arch Park on a Sunday in May 2002. Yet it was a small turnout compared to the event these Canadians and Americans had come to commemorate—Paul Robeson’s first concert at Blaine on May 18, 1952—a gathering estimated at over 30,000. The 50th anniversary program included folksinger Ronnie Gilbert, the female vocalist of The Weavers, and the Total Experience Gospel Choir from Seattle. Over 50 unions sponsored the event, including the Canadian Labor Congress; the Washington, King County, and Whatcom County labor councils; the Canadian Auto Workers; the British Columbia Federation of Labor; and the International Longshoreman and Warehouseman’s Union and their Bellingham local. Even the 1952 piano was present.

Actor Danny Glover delivered Robeson’s speech, pointing out how the famous performer’s message remained pertinent a half century later. At booths away from the stage contemporary left-wing political groups from Canada and the United States sold books and handed out leaflets—socialists, pacifists, communists, labor unions, pro-Palestinian Jews. Many elderly individuals could personally recall the rancid political climate of the early cold war years, a climate that crippled Robeson’s astonishing career and gave rise to four rallies on the border at Blaine, 1952 through 1955.

Paul Leroy Robeson’s father, the Reverend William D. Robeson, was a Presbyterian minister who had been a runaway slave at age 15. William married Maria Louisa Bustill, a Quaker schoolteacher of black, white, and American Indian ancestry. The two created a strong, learned, supportive family, although Maria died in 1904 when Paul, her youngest, was only six years old.

After growing up in Princeton and Westfield, New Jersey, Robeson attended Rutgers University, among the first African Americans to do so. He excelled at debate, was elected Phi Beta Kappa, and became valedictorian of the 1919 graduating class. A tall and extremely strong man, he also excelled in sports. He was active in baseball, basketball, and track but received the greatest recognition for his participation on the Rutgers football team. He was twice named to the NCAA All-American football team, and went on to play for three years in the American Professional Football League. He used his earnings from playing professional football to bankroll his law degree at Columbia University, which he achieved in 1923, becoming the law school’s third African American to graduate and pass the bar.

Pervasive racism in the legal profession and awareness of his exceptional musical talent brought an end to Robeson’s vocation as an attorney. He turned instead toward a career as a singer who possessed one of the 20th century’s most remarkable bass-baritone voices. Eventually that voice sang out across five continents. Jerome Kern would compose *Showboat*’s show-stopper,

"Ol' Man River," specifically for this voice. Robeson's frequent concert tours across the United States included all major cities and such remote Northwest stops as Pocatello and Pullman.

By the 1930s his fame had spread to Great Britain where Robeson performed in film, on stage, and in operas as an actor and soloist, making him a wealthy man. Back in the United States he walked on stage before enthusiastic audiences: 160,000 in Chicago's Grant Park, a sold-out Hollywood Bowl, a packed Symphony Hall in Boston.

He studied ethnic history and gained proficiency in 20 languages, including Chinese, Arabic, and Russian. Together with his working-class roots, the Great Depression and the Spanish Civil War inspired Robeson to identify with the underdog and to understand society as a class struggle. Miners, he observed in Wales, shared no common interests with the mine owners who exploited them. He became one of the first black performers to refuse segregated engagements, and he insisted on speaking out for civil rights while in concert.

During World War II he sang to troops and supported government bond drives. He spent much of 1945 on tour, performing in 115 concerts in as many cities, some of which, like Los Angeles and Detroit, denied him public lodging. During this period he felt united with an American government allied with Russia against Nazi fascism.

Performing in the Soviet Union before the war had convinced Paul Robeson that Marxist principles could create a superior society for workers and minorities. Along with his friend, noted black scholar W. E. B. DuBois, he could see a sharp contrast between Marxism on the one hand and the American racial divide and economic system on the other. Robeson never admitted, nor could government investigators ever prove, that he was a Communist—he always called himself a "scientific socialist" and "anti-Fascist"—but his praise of the USSR, his winning of the Stalin Peace Prize, his close association with Communist Party members, his co-founding of the Progressive Party in 1948, and his outspoken criticism of racial segregation made few friends in the White House, the FBI, Congress, or the State Department. The country had emerged from world war into an era of loyalty oaths, the McCarran Act (the Internal Security Act of 1950), political blacklisting, and sweeping congressional inquiries into what was considered "un-American" dissent by private citizens.

On April 21, 1949, on his way to a Moscow concert, Robeson made a fateful speech to the World Peace Congress in Paris. He reportedly stated, in part:

We denounce the policy of the United States government, which is similar to that of Hitler and [his propaganda minister Joseph] Goebbels.... It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind.

Reports from Paris created a furor. At home he soon would be denounced as "the most dangerous man in the world." The September 1949 effort to hold an annual concert at Peekskill, New York, provoked rioters to injure hundreds of spectators as police looked on.

Considering him a treacherous subversive, the FBI placed Robeson under constant surveillance while pressuring theaters and churches to cancel performances. At the urging of government agents, recording companies and many newspapers blacklisted the singer as a disloyal outcast. A few months after Peekskill, and following a concert before 20,000 in London, the State Department insisted on reviewing all overseas speeches. When Robeson refused, the agency

revoked his passport, stunting Paul Robeson's career while reducing his income by over 90 percent for a decade.

Canada's Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers invited Robeson to appear at its Vancouver, British Columbia, convention in late January 1952. Canada had never required a United States passport, but President Harry Truman, through an executive order, invoked World War I and II "national emergency" powers to prevent Robeson from traveling to Canada and Mexico. When the singer rode north from Seattle toward Vancouver in a convoy of union bodyguards, he encountered federal officials at the border who denied him entrance to Canada. Turned back, he arrived at the Marine Cooks and Stewards Hall in Seattle to speak and sing over a telephone to the 2,500 union delegates assembled in Vancouver. "The refusal to allow me to cross the border," he said, "was an act of the American administration, not an act of the American people."

Attempts by labor activist Terry Pettus to hold a subsequent Seattle concert ran into opposition from the city government which, after a three-day hearing, won a court injunction against the performance. Reprisal against Northwest organizers included the firing of KIRO broadcaster Jack Kinzell. Meanwhile, Canadian Mine Workers' president Harvey Murphy arranged for the muzzled Robeson to appear at the Peace Arch in May, singing and speaking from American soil in Blaine to Canadians across the 49th parallel. Robeson agreed: "I want to sing to and for my people and the workers. No tickets over a dollar."

Sing and speak he did on May 18. That afternoon's crowd estimates varied widely: union organizers claimed that 40,000 Canadians and 10,000 Americans came, whereas the *Vancouver Sun* gave a much lower figure; American media reported that only 5,000 attended. Whatever the disputed numbers, parked automobiles and two dozen charter buses blocked the King George Highway for three miles to the north. Pedestrians clogged and then closed the international border crossing, irritating travelers who had little patience with radical social protest. Robeson spoke into a microphone from the flatbed of a truck parked within a foot of the border:

I can't tell you how moved I am at this moment. It seems that nothing can keep me from my beloved friends in Canada (applause). I stand here today under great stress because I dare, as do all of you, to fight for peace and a decent life for all men, women and children, wherever they may be. And especially today, I stand fighting for the rights of my people in this America in which I was born (applause). You have known me for many years. I am the same Paul, fighting a little harder.

As Canadians and Americans mingled back and forth across the invisible boundary, Robeson's rich, warm voice rolled into song: first a duet with pianist Larry Brown—"Every Time I Feel the Spirit"—then "Loch Lomond," "No More Auction Block," "Ol' Man River," and, of course, "Joe Hill," the union ballad to a tune composed by Robeson's good friend, Seattle-born Earl Robinson:

*I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,
Alive as you and me, says I,
But Joe you're ten years dead,
"I never died," says he....*

*From San Diego up to Maine,
In every mine and mill,
Where workers strike and organize,
Says he, "You'll find Joe Hill."*

Among the older folks in the crowd at the 50th anniversary concert in 2002 stood Mel and Rena Florence of Bellingham. Mel, who died in 2005, had been a union warehouseman; Rena, a nurse. They came for a variety of reasons. Famous people rarely visited remote Bellingham or Whatcom County, so they felt it was "a rare opportunity." As political progressives they strongly opposed racial prejudice and felt that Robeson had been badly mistreated by the government and the media. "He was a hero to us young guys who were a little radical," Mel recalled, to which his wife added, "We loved him, his singing—and we still do."

Others took a different view. Letters to the *Vancouver Sun* soon after the 1952 concert ran pro and con, with some readers complaining about the "Red-led" miners' union trying to cause turmoil in Canada. Others described the United States as a "typically Nazi" police state. Earlier in the year the British Columbia Federation of Labor and the Vancouver business community agreed that a ban on travel was "strictly a matter for the U.S.,...a private matter...[the visit] a communist set-up."

Earlier, on February 4, a *Sun* columnist had labeled American suppression of Robeson "a dark omen," but the same day's editorial castigated the singer under the headline "Robeson—Born 30 Years Too Soon." This matter was of no concern to Canada, the column continued: "Let there be no mawkish sympathy wasted on Paul Robeson," the editor advised, describing a man bitter about "fancied or real" race discrimination in college and the legal profession, and who had become a propagandist for the USSR. The editor argued that this disloyalty made the travel ban, although an unwise tactic by the American government, entirely understandable. Instead of attacking his own country while in Paris, the editorial chastised, Robeson should have emulated the quiet, respectful behavior of baseball star Jackie Robinson.

Vancouver Sun coverage of the May 18th Peace Arch rally appeared in a late edition at the rear of the paper, mainly addressing the traffic jam at the border: "Crowds Swarm to Hear Robeson.... Border Closed." *Sun* reporting, sparse and belittling as it was, exceeded the nearest United States newspaper in Bellingham, south of Blaine. The *Bellingham Herald*, a paper that routinely ran headlines about "Reds" and "Commies," carried front-page stories about a mountaineering accident on Mount St. Helens and sailing deaths near Lummi Island, but no reports, photos, or editorials about thousands gathered at the Peace Arch. Even the border closure was ignored.

An article in the *BC District Union News* gleefully observed that by blocking a local Canadian performance before an audience of 3,000, the United States had inspired a turnout of over 30,000 before the whole world. The net effect was "to slap the Pentagon dictators with the wham of a boomerang." As he returned to Seattle, Robeson told attorney John Caughlan that "this is the first time since Peekskill that I've sort of felt that the atmosphere has changed. This is an experience that wipes out Peekskill in my mind." Peekskill, New York, was that scene in 1949 of vigilante violence in response to a Robeson concert that took place there.

Later, in his autobiography, Robeson referred to the Blaine events as one of the great joys of his life. At the end of the 1952 concert Paul Robeson promised a cheering crowd that he would return to Blaine every year for as long as the government banned his travel to Canada. The black

singer came back to the Peace Arch the next three years, until the prohibition to enter Canada was lifted in 1955.

On August 16, 1953, he kept that vow before a smaller gathering but one still large enough to foul traffic. Robeson again assured everyone that he was "the same Paul," still seeking social justice around the world, but with his civil liberties severely curtailed:

Whenever I go into a city like St. Louis...the wrath of all the powers that be descends on one single, poor minister who wants to give me his church, or descends on the one who rents the hall. They are told by...all the strongest business forces, that the banks will no longer honor their mortgages. Just to keep one person from appearing in concert.

Robeson, in this rare recorded speech, recalled his earlier experiences in England and Wales, and told how the United States government had also prevented W. E. B. DuBois from speaking out for colonial liberation around the world, a mission that he passionately shared:

I stretch out my hands to the brave people of [Communist] China, as they build a new life... I shake the hand of the brave Soviet people and of the new people's democracies. That is my right as an American.

I speak as one whose fathers and mothers toiled in cotton, toiled in indigo, tobacco, and helped to create the primary wealth of this land upon which the great land of the United States was built...from the blood and suffering of my forefathers. I have the right to speak out on their blood.... I'm telling you now that a good piece of that American earth belongs to me.

My people are determined not to be second class citizens, but to be full citizens, to be first-class citizens. That is the rock upon which I stand. From that rock I reach out across the world because I know there is one humanity, that there is no basic difference of race or color, no basic difference of culture, but that all human beings can live in friendship and in peace. I know it from experience. I have seen the people. I have learned their languages. I sing their songs.

I am going to live my life down among the masses of the people, not as a great artist up there on top, but right here in this park, in many of the picket lines, wherever I can help the struggle of the people. And I will never apologize for that.

I shall continue to fight as I see the truth. And I tell you here, I hope to see you next year. No matter where I am in the world, I'll come back (shouts of approval). I want everyone in range of my voice to hear, official or otherwise, that there is no force on earth that will make me go backward one-thousandth part of one little inch!

Then he went forward, singing "Go Down Moses," "Scandaliz' My Name," "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes," and "Joe Hill."

Before the 1953 concert, unlike the previous year, Robeson did receive some heckling on the American side, but no real violence or trouble occurred. Organizers claimed that the crowd was larger than in 1952, but Royal Canadian Mounted Police reports estimated the gathering at only 3,000. The *Vancouver Sun* devoted a front-page headline to a visit by Hollywood's Jimmy Stewart, and gave more space to war in Korea, gambling, beauty pageants, car accidents, strikes in Canada, and the Kinsey report on human sexuality than to the Peace Arch concert. The event had been poorly promoted in the United States and ignored by the American media, including the *Bellingham Herald*, which found space for a ceremony dedicating a drag strip and daily reported on Senator Joseph McCarthy's hearings and exposures.

The crowds dwindled in following years as pressure against left-wing organizations intensified. In 1954, the same week as the Peace Arch concert, the United States Senate voted 72-0 and the House 265-2 to outlaw the Communist Party, an event announced with a huge headline in the *Bellingham Herald* as the editor praised "giving Communists the works." The paper found space to report a bank robbery by three blacks in Maryland, but it allowed not an inch for Robeson in Blaine. Seattle newspapers, which gave front-page coverage when the singer was blocked at the border in February 1952, followed the *Herald* by ignoring the Peace Arch concerts except for printing a small notice in 1955.

That final concert took place on July 24, 1955. By then the federal government had rescinded its six-year Canadian travel ban, but Robeson came to Blaine regardless. The *Bellingham Herald* finally reported an appearance in Blaine by "this outspoken admirer of the Soviet Union," but the Old Settlers Picnic in Ferndale merited much more space on the paper's front page. Robeson's first actual trip across the border into Canada was to sing at an overflowing Massey Hall in Toronto, followed by the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers convention in Sudbury, Ontario, on February 27, 1956. Yet, by April the Canadian government had denied him a visa, thereby canceling 17 concerts scheduled by a national labor organization.

Two years later, on June 28, 1958, the United States Supreme Court ruled that revocation of Paul Robeson's American passport had been unconstitutional and illegal. Other vindication was slower in coming. A full 77 years after he had graduated from Rutgers and nearly 20 years after his death, Paul Robeson was admitted into the National Football Hall of Fame. Three years later, in 1998, admirers and family celebrated the 100th anniversary of his birth by issuing a compact disc recording of the 1952 and 1953 Peace Arch concerts, including speeches by Robeson and Harvey Murphy. (Audio recording from a flatbed truck severely limited production quality, but that flaw was more than compensated for by excellent album notes and bibliography by Ian Shaw.) Then came the 2002 Peace Arch reunion, with Danny Glover appearing almost as imposing as "the same old Paul." Among the organizers that year was Robeson's rugged Canadian friend—the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union.

In the early 1990s I traveled around Washington state giving Inquiring Mind lectures on the life of Paul Robeson for the Washington Commission for the Humanities (now Humanities Washington). From time to time a vocal anti-Communist would speak up to question me or condemn Robeson. One Sunday morning as I was about to begin at Blaine's Unitarian Church, an older man in a gray suit and tie appeared and sat alone in the last pew. He frowned, intent and serious, as I delivered an address interspersed with recordings of Robeson singing "Shenendoah," "No More Auction Block," Hasidic chants, "Ol' Man River," and concluding with "Jacob's Ladder." As the service ended, the man in the gray suit stood up and asked if he could come forward to speak. I said, "Certainly," but as he approached down the center isle, I thought, "Here comes a tirade about communism." The mysterious visitor turned, faced the congregation, and said:

In 1951 I was a young man just out of school, unemployed, with a new family. Then the City of Blaine hired me as an engineer, a job that brought satisfaction to me and income for my family. The next year Paul Robeson came to the Peace Arch. I had deeply admired this great man and desperately wanted to hear him in person, but I feared losing my job. I did not go. Nor did I attend the following concerts.

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For forty years now I have felt guilty and ashamed. To protect my family I betrayed a brave man. Today I want to apologize to him, and to you, for being a coward. I hope that you can forgive me. Thank you.

It takes an exceptionally courageous man to make such a confession. I hope he was in the crowd honoring Paul Robeson on May 18, 2002.

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