

Paul Robeson: The story of how an American icon was driven to death to be told in film

Singer, actor, activist, athlete: Paul Robeson was a cultural giant, and now his story is to be told in film

by Jessica Duchen, Thursday 20 November 2014

The news that the British filmmaker Steve McQueen is to direct a biopic about Paul Robeson has been greeted with delight in many quarters – and yet with bafflement in others.

Half a century ago, Robeson was a household name: as singer, actor and activist alike, he bestrode his world. Yet his later life turned tragic and he died in near obscurity; today, it seems that a younger generation has scarcely heard of him.

McQueen, whose film *12 Years A Slave* was showered with awards, has apparently wished to tackle the topic for many years, but has said that only now has he the necessary “juice”. Sure enough, Robeson’s life, both public and personal, cries out for adaptation. And even 38 years after his death, he still awaits true recognition as the cultural giant and social idealist that he really was.

To most of us, Robeson is inextricably associated with the song “Ol’ Man River” from Jerome Kern’s *Showboat* – the first musical to tackle themes as serious as racism and miscegenation in the Deep South. The role of Joe, a barge worker by the Mississippi, was written for him; he starred in the show in London in 1928, taking the city by storm. His deep bass timbre, the eloquent power of his projection and the all-embracing humanity of his booming tone were captured in the 1936 film adaptation and make an unforgettable impression.

His prowess as an actor went equally far; not least, he played Othello with the young Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona in 1930. When he took the role to Broadway some years later, it ran for nearly 300 performances, the longest-

running Shakespeare in Broadway history.

McQueen has remarked, though, that his idea was sparked by a newspaper article he was shown aged 14; it described Robeson in Wales, campaigning for better pay and conditions for the miners. The bond between black American activist and Welsh coal pit workers was not as unlikely as it sounds: there, Robeson once said, he “first understood the struggles of white and negro together – when I went down into the coal mine in the Rhondda Valley, lived amongst them”. He joined their hunger marches in 1927 and 1928 and starred in a 1940 film, *Proud Valley*, about a black miner moving to the region.

Indeed, perhaps Robeson’s greatest legacy is as civil rights activist – one victimised by his own country for his socialist leanings, McCarthyism shattering his career in the 1950s. In a white man’s world during the Cold War, Robeson was considered a double danger: both black and red. Even now, one can’t help noting that it has taken a British filmmaker, not an American, to plan his screen biography.

Robeson was born in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1898. His father started life as a plantation slave in North Carolina, but escaped in 1860 and eventually become a pastor. Robeson recalls, in his book *Here I Stand* (1958), his father’s determination and loyalty to his convictions: “From my youngest days I was imbued with that concept,” he writes. His family’s longer history of activism is noteworthy, too; his maternal great-great-grandfather, Cyrus Bustill, became in 1787 a founder of the Free African Society, the first mutual aid organisation of African Americans.

Robeson was only the third black student to be accepted by Rutgers College, winning a scholarship in 1915. He was a fine athlete and joined the football team; but there his teammates tried to kill him, dislocating his shoulder, tearing away his fingernails and breaking his nose. He recalled his father’s stance that “I had to show that I could take whatever they handed out... This was part of our struggle.” The parallel between that incident and what the US’s McCarthy era later did to him is all too evident.

After taking a law degree at Columbia, Robeson began to work for a firm of lawyers, but resigned after facing racism within the company. Turning to the stage, spurred on by his wife, Eslanda (Essie), he shot to fame when Eugene O’Neill asked him to star in *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* and *The Emperor Jones* in 1924. *Showboat* in London followed four years later. Meanwhile, in 1925, he began his singing career in New York by becoming the first artist to give a recital consisting entirely of Negro spirituals.

The Robesons settled in London in 1927, living the high life of Hampstead thespians; in private, though, turbulence ensued. Their son, Paul Robeson Jnr, eventually wrote a memoir about his father that revealed a series of extramarital affairs – including one with Peggy Ashcroft around the time the pair performed *Othello*. Paul and Essie separated after she discovered the affair, though they were subsequently reconciled.

Show Boat, Paul Robeson, 1936 (Courtesy Everett Collection/REX)

Essie was a powerhouse in her own right. At first, she served as Paul's manager; later, she became an author, anthropologist and activist, campaigning against colonialism in Africa and racism in the US. She made a lengthy journey to Uganda and South Africa in 1936; and later, with Paul, to the front lines of the Spanish Civil War in 1938.

Robeson's own travels took him to the USSR several times during the 1930s; in Moscow, he said: "Here I am not a Negro but a human being for the first time in my life... I walk in full human dignity." He espoused many of communism's apparent ideals, noting that "the power of the Soviet Union... would become an important factor in aiding the colonial liberation movement". The Robesons returned to the US on the outbreak of the Second World War; and during this era Robeson's American recognition reached its apogee. Critics lauded him as an "artistic and social genius" (Theodore Dreiser) and "gifted by the gods as musician and actor" (Walter Damrosch). But now his activism, too, intensified. He met President Harry S. Truman to demand anti-lynching legislation, supported the rise of trade unions and campaigned in 1948 for the election of the Progressive Party's candidate Henry A. Wallace as president.

It was perhaps inevitable that with the onset of the Cold War both Robesons were forced to testify before the McCarthy committee. Defiant, they refused to sign an affidavit declaring that they were not communists – though it seems that neither ever joined the party.

Paul was blacklisted and all doors for work closed against him; furthermore, his passport was revoked, leaving him unable to travel and his income reduced to a trickle. His voice was known and loved all over the world; he had done nothing illegal; he was never arrested, or put on trial; yet the powers that be were determined to destroy him nonetheless for his political beliefs. "I care nothing – less than nothing – about what the lords of the land, the Big White Folks, think of me and my ideas," Robeson later wrote, in *Here I Stand*. "For more than 10 years they have persecuted me in every way they could – by slander and mob violence, by denying me the right to practice my profession as an artist, by withholding my right to travel abroad. To these, the real Un-Americans, I merely say: 'All right – I don't like you either!'"

But even the great Robeson was not strong enough to withstand the psychological effects of blacklisting. After his passport was restored in 1958, he attempted comeback tours, but severe depressions gripped him; in 1961, he tried to take his own life after a party and was subsequently treated with ECT in London. Much later, his son considered whether the "attempted suicide" might perhaps have been a drug-induced incident in which the CIA could be implicated.

A lingering thought: if only. Most of Robeson's recorded legacy consists of the Negro spirituals with which he grew up and which he helped to bring to an international audience; plus *Showboat*, of course, and songs from Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*, which demands an all-black cast – Robeson briefly

played the role of Bess's boyfriend, Crown, in 1927.

But think of the operatic roles and art songs that he might have tackled, had he lived in a different era – or had his own been more open-minded. A recording exists of him singing a deep bass aria from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* – Sarastro's "O Isis und Osiris". It is in English, transposed down a tone, and was recorded in 1961 when he was past his peak, but it remains breathtaking nonetheless. A world of Beethoven, Mahler, Mussorgsky, Shostakovich and more could have been his, and ours.

The losses from the suppression that he suffered in the Fifties go further still; a decade of potential artistry was obliterated. In his introduction to the 1988 edition of *Here I Stand*, the historian Sterling Stuckey declares: "In modern history, no one of comparable artistic ability has been denied freedom for so long. That denial is today a major form of persecution to be considered in discussing violations of human rights in the United States."

Robeson died in Philadelphia aged 77, reclusive, but not forgotten. Unable to attend Carnegie Hall's tribute concert on his 75th birthday, he sent a recorded message, declaring: "I want you to know that I am the same Paul, dedicated as ever to the worldwide cause of humanity for freedom, peace and brotherhood."

Nineteen years after his death, Paul Robeson was finally inducted into the Rutgers College Football Hall of Fame. If Steve McQueen can bring Robeson's legacy to a new generation, he can bring, too, the inspiration that such a figure can carry. And, equally valuably, he can make us question those forces that set out to devalue and destroy him. Robeson's story shows us that one can never be too aware. He must never be forgotten.