

A black and white portrait of Paul Robeson, looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark jacket.

Very Best of **Paul Robeson**

29 classics including

Ol' Man River
Swing Low Sweet Chariot
Canoe Song
Land of My Fathers
Negro Spirituals
Shenandoah
Deep River
All Through the Night
Joe Hill
The Riddle Song
Volga Boatmen Song
I'll Walk Beside You
& many more...

alto

Very Best of Paul Robeson

[1]	Jerome Kern: <i>Ol' Man River</i> from <i>Showboat</i> (Oscar Hammerstein II) ¹	03:51
[2]	Michael Spolianski: <i>Canoe Song</i> from <i>Sanders of the River</i> (Arthur Wimperis) ²	02:55
[3]	trad.: <i>Swing Low, Sweet Chariot</i> ³	02:44
[4]	Richard Rodgers: <i>Some Enchanted Evening</i> from <i>South Pacific</i> (Hammerstein) ⁴	03:51
[5]	trad.: <i>All God's Chillun Got Wings</i> ⁵	01:48
[6]	William Ross & Anne Campbell MacLeod: <i>Skye Boat Song</i> (Sir Harold Boulton) ⁴	02:28
[7]	trad.: <i>The Riddle Song</i> ⁴	02:06
[8]	Alan Murray: <i>I'll Walk Beside You</i> (Edward Lockton) ⁴	02:17
[9]	Jacques Wolfe: <i>Shortnin' Bread</i> (Clement Wood) ³	01:07
[10]	Hoagland Howard "Hoagy" Carmichael: <i>Lazybones</i> (Johnny Mercer) ³	03:17
[11]	trad.: <i>All Through the Night</i> ⁶	03:17
[12]	trad.: <i>Land of My Fathers</i> ⁴	03:02
[13]	Harry Woods: <i>River Stay Away from My Door</i> (Mort Dixon) ³	03:24
[14]	Clarence Muse, Leon René, Otis René: <i>When It's Sleepy Time Down South</i> ³	03:21
[15]	Carrie Jacobs-Bond: <i>Just a 'Wearyin' for You</i> (Frank Lebby Stanton) ⁴	03:02
[16]	trad.: <i>Down de Lovers' Lane</i> (trad.) ⁴	02:25
[17]	Jerome Kern: <i>I Still Suits Me</i> from <i>Showboat</i> (Oscar Hammerstein II) ⁶	02:48
[18]	Nathaniel Shilkret: <i>Lonesome Road</i> (Gene Austin) ³	02:49
[19]	Carmichael: <i>Rockin' Chair</i> ³	03:27
[20]	George Gershwin: <i>It Ain't Necessarily So</i> (Ira Gershwin) ⁶	02:29
[21]	Stephen Foster: <i>Old Folks at Home</i> "Swanee River" ⁶	01:27
[22]	trad.: <i>Song of the Volga Boatmen</i> ⁶	02:42
[23]	trad.: <i>Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho</i> ⁵	02:01
[24]	trad.: <i>Shenandoah</i> ⁵	03:09
[25]	Ethelbert Nevin: <i>Mighty Lak' a Rose</i> (Frank Lebby Stanton) ³	03:18
[26]	trad.: <i>Water Boy</i> ³	02:31
[27]	Earl Robinson: <i>Joe Hill</i> (Alfred Hayes) ⁵	02:41
[28]	George H. Clutsam: <i>Ma Curly-Headed Baby</i> (George H. Clutsam) ⁴	02:56
[29]	trad.: <i>Deep River</i> ⁷	02:22

¹ Drury Lane Chorus & Orchestra • Herman Finck, *conductor*

² Orchestra conducted by Muir Mathieson

³ Orchestra conducted by Ray Noble

⁴ The Williams Singers • Geoff Love Orchestra

⁵ Lawrence Brown, *piano*

⁶ New Mayfair Orchestra • Clifford Greenwood, *conductor*

⁷ with orchestra

NOTES ON THE ARTIST AND PROGRAM

Paul Robeson's voice had an extraordinary effect upon people: Alan Jenkins in his book *The Twenties* writes of the pleasures the London cast recordings of ***Show Boat***: 'I am allowed to wind the mahogany gramophone. I play, over and over again, the vocal gems from *Show Boat*: 'Why do I love you? The innocent soprano of Edith Day filters through the trees. I change the record over and in a moment my throat will tighten, for Paul Robeson's enormous bass will hit me in the solar plexus and my eyes will sting when he gets to the words 'Ah gits weary and sick of tryin'. Ah'm tired of livin' and feared of dyin'....'. Kathleen Ferrier and her sister saw the show and had to leave the theatre, unable to prevent themselves from crying. One of the warmest tributes came from the Broadway producer Crosby Gaige in his book *Footlights and Highlights* (1948). Gaige describes a post Sunday lunch session when his adopted son Jeremy persuaded Robeson to sing. Robeson walked some distance to a clump of trees so that he could make a 'grand entrance' but no sound came: "I can't hear you," Jeremy called. "You *can't*!" Paul pretended to be amazed. "Well, I guess I'll have to try it again." Once more he went behind the tree, and once more he repeated the pantomime. "I still can't hear you," Jeremy said. Grinning, Paul went through the whole performance a third time and Jeremy said: "I can't hear a sound; I don't believe you can sing at all." "Well, I'll have to try once more," Paul said. This time, he opened his mouth and let out that tremendous resonant voice of his to the last stop, and *Ol' Man River* echoed from the far hills around us. His voice filled the universe and we were carried with it to glorious heights. When he had finished, Jeremy could say nothing at all. Nor could the rest of us.'

One can sum up the career and influence of Paul Robeson (1898-1976) by listing the subtitles of the many biographies and articles: 'Negro', 'Citizen of the World', '...goes to Washington', 'The great Forerunner', 'The life and times of a Free Black Man', 'Labor's forgotten champion', 'The Whole World in his Hands', 'Hero before His Time', 'A Voice to Remember', 'A Voice of Struggle' and 'Beleaguered Leader'. His own autobiography, published at the end of a period blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, was *Here I stand* (1958). Robeson once said: 'The artist must elect to fight for Freedom or for Slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative'. This statement, spoken during a rally for anti-fascist

supporters in Spain, was inscribed on his gravestone. Robeson's father made such a 'choice' as a 15 year-old when he escaped from a North Carolina plantation in 1860; he later attended university and became a minister in Princeton, New Jersey. Although the congregations there were African-American, the churches were controlled by whites and Robeson's father lost his job having disagreed with the church authorities. Paul Robeson's mother was a teacher who died tragically in a house fire when he was six years old.

His career might have taken, and indeed did take, several directions: whilst at Rutgers University in New Jersey he was a star football player. He graduated later from the Columbia University Law School (1923), where he met and married Eslanda Goode 'Essie' (later the first black woman to lead a pathology unit), but fell victim to bigotry in his first employment in a law firm when a white secretary refused to take dictation from him, after he was admitted to the New York Bar. He had made his first stage appearance in 1921 in *Simon the Cyrenian*. The following year he attracted good notices in *Taboo* and later in 1922 he appeared for the first time in Britain in that play (renamed *The Voodoo*) at the Opera House in Blackpool opposite Mrs Patrick Campbell.

Robeson was described by Eugene O'Neill in 1923 as 'a young fellow with considerable experience, wonderful presence and voice, full of ambition and a damn fine man personally with real brains'. O'Neill cast him in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924-5) as Jim Harris, a black lawyer who marries a white woman, which predictably raised the blood pressure of Ku Klux Klan activists. Robeson's years of playing American football at the highest level gave him an imposingly powerful physique which allowed him to portray characters quite unlike the usual Negro stereotype. He was even considered by some to be a sex symbol: one British critic wrote in 1931 'That Mr Robeson should be stripped to the waist is my first demand of any play in which he appears'. The pinnacle of Robeson's stage and screen career was his performance as Othello first in the UK and then in the USA, about which a critic wrote 'No white man should ever dare to presume to play this role again' (*Variety* 1943).

In New York in 1925 Robeson appeared in a hugely over-subscribed concert in which he sang a mixture of spirituals and folk songs. Many black Americans were perplexed by his decision to sing spirituals, as they felt that Robeson was drawing attention to a perceived

backwardness. However Robeson argued that the texts of the spirituals often spoke of the African-American's kinship with other minorities: 'Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel? And why not every man?'. His repertoire then expanded to include traditional songs from many different countries and also Songs of Struggle, most notably those composed by his friend Earl Robinson (1910-91). In 1928 he played Crown in DuBose Heywood's *Porgy* and sang in the London cast of *Show Boat* at the Drury Lane Theatre. During the run of *Show Boat* he gave matinee concerts in which he sang spirituals and after *Show Boat* had closed he toured the provinces giving recitals and concerts in a number of European cities. Back in America he played in the 1932 revival of *Show Boat*. Robert Benchley commented favourably 'Robeson makes *Old Man River* an even more thrilling experience than it was at first - which is saying just about as much as could be said without bursting a blood vessel'. Returning to London he played Othello at the Savoy and repeated the role in two productions between 1942-44 (the production at the Broadway Shubert Theatre ran for 295 performances, a record for a Shakespeare play in America).

Robeson gave concerts throughout the 1930s whilst continuing his film career which had begun in 1925 with *Body and Soul* and *Borderline*. His next films some time later *Emperor Jones* (1933), *Sanders of the River* (1935) directed by Zoltan Korda, *Song of Freedom* and *Show Boat* (both 1936) and *King Solomon's Mines* (1937) all succeeded in bringing his great presence and powerful personality to a wider audience. His greatest screen role was undoubtedly that of David Goliath in *The Proud Valley* (1940) in which his character arrives in a Welsh coal-mining community as a vagabond having jumped ship. He becomes the pride of the male voice choir and eventually martyrs himself to save others less worthy in a mining accident. Such was its success in the UK that long after his death Robeson is still regarded with enormous affection by the public in South Wales. Despite his efforts to find dignified roles he was inevitably stereotyped. Brutus Jones was an escaped labourer and common criminal from the South who becomes a despotic Caribbean ruler. In *Sanders of the River* he played a petty thief who escapes from the authorities in Liberia and, by kowtowing to the British, becomes an African chief. In *Song of Freedom* he returns to Africa to find his roots, having found fame from humble beginnings in England. As

Umbopa in *King Solomon's Mines* he travels with white fortune-hunters to his homeland and again becomes the chief. However Britain and Hollywood rightly believed his singing voice to be a powerful draw with audiences and consequently songs (often however with inferior lyrics) were added to a number of his films such as *Emperor Jones*, *Sanders of the River*, and *King Solomon's Mines*. Jerome Kern was persuaded to add music to his already large score for the film of *Show Boat* and music plays an important role in *The Proud Valley*.

Between 1927 and 1939 Robeson was mostly resident in the UK. In his autobiography *Here I Stand* he acknowledged that although there were many who made capital from 'plundering the colonial peoples, there were also the many millions who earned their bread by honest toil. And even as I grew to feel more Negro in spirit, or African as I put it then, I also came to feel a sense of oneness with the white working people whom I came to know and love'. Robeson's friend Earl Robinson had moved to New York in 1934. Robinson was blacklisted in the 1950s but was rediscovered in the following decade by Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Woody Guthrie and others. His *Ballad for America*, premiered via radio in 1939 by Robeson, reached a huge audience but perhaps his best known song was *Joe Hill*, composed in 1935 to Alfred Hayes' poem about the Swedish born labour and union martyr wrongfully convicted of murder and executed in 1915. The song, as performed by Robeson, became a moving anthem for oppressed peoples the world over.

Elsewhere Robeson inspired many through his outspoken political activity; he was an anti-imperialist who fought for the liberation of many African states. He brought the whole of Spain to a standstill on the day of a concert in the middle of their civil war. In 1934 Robeson first visited the USSR at the invitation of film maker Sergei Eisenstein, where, impressed by the apparent racial equality he found there, he remarked that he 'walked for the first time as a human being'. Having returned to the USA from Britain in 1939 Robeson continued to campaign for workers' rights, and for social and racial justice to the extent that in 1943, while receiving accolades for *Othello*, he was secretly placed on the Custodial Detention List by the FBI (ie the list of those to be interned in the event of a national emergency). Unaware of his surveillance by the FBI, Morehouse College decided to honour Robeson for his 'championing the cause of the common man'

through his popularisation of 'the folk songs composed by the oppressed peoples of the earth'.

Following the Second World War Robeson became increasingly concerned at the growing coldness between the USA and the USSR. Tales of black American soldiers being lynched whilst still in uniform resulted in Robeson petitioning President Truman in support of an anti-lynching law, warning him of potential civil unrest as blacks might take up arms in order to defend themselves. He campaigned on behalf of Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party activist, and received death threats from the Ku Klux Klan. Robeson had already performed in Peekskill, NY on behalf of the Civil Rights Congress; more concerts were booked for the late summer in 1949. Amid high security the concerts passed off peacefully; however the concert-goers were later pelted with rocks by right-wing protesters whilst police stood idly by.

Shortly afterwards the House Un-American Activities Committee 'persuaded' three black Americans to testify against Robeson. Despite strenuously denying membership of the Communist Party, his passport was revoked and he was unable to travel outside the USA until 1958. The patience of the USA authorities was further tested in May 1952 when Robeson sang to an estimated 40,000 people on the US - Canadian border, the truck on which he stood having been parked one foot inside the US border. That same year he was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize by the Soviet government. With performances now strictly controlled Robeson's income plummeted and his mental and physical health suffered. Robeson performed his sold-out farewell concert at Carnegie Hall in 1958.

In 1960 he visited Australasia, where he found time to give an impromptu lunchtime concert to construction workers at the unfinished Sydney Opera House and also campaigned on behalf of the aborigines. The arduous tour exhausted him and thereafter he sang less in public but continued to write and speak with all his former passion. Although honoured in some quarters (he was admitted to the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame in 1974) there is little doubt that his talents were devalued in Hollywood and Britain, and he was treated shamefully by the US government. He died in Philadelphia in January 1976.

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Alto ALC1256

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Recorded in 1928 ([1](#)), 1929 ([18](#) and [25](#)), 1931 ([5](#), [13](#), [14](#) and [19](#)), 1933 ([3](#), [9](#), [10](#) and [26](#)), 1934 ([21](#)), 1935 ([12](#)), 1936 ([17](#), [23](#) and [24](#)), 1937 ([11](#)), 1938 ([20](#) and [22](#)), 1940 ([29](#)), 1942 ([27](#)), and 1960 ([4](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [12](#), [15](#), [16](#) and [28](#)).

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Bach cover image: Robeson (left) with W. E. B. Du Bois (center) and Vito Marcantonio, 1951, courtesy **Wikimedia**

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