

## Paul Robeson

Paul Robeson was an African American athlete, actor and singer. He was also a writer and civil rights activist. Robeson was awarded the Spingarn Medal by the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) for outstanding achievement by a Black American and the Lenin Peace Prize, an international award to honor people who promote peace among all people. Robeson was able to communicate in 20 different languages, and he was fluent or nearly fluent in 12. However, much controversy surrounded Paul Robeson life because of his political views.

Paul LeRoy Bustill Robeson was born on April 9, 1898 in Princeton, New Jersey. His father was a run-away slave who escaped from North Carolina and later became a college graduate and church minister. In 1915, Paul graduated with honors from Somerville high school in New Jersey and went on to attend Rutgers University. In both high school and college, he was involved in singing, theatre and sports. At Rutgers, when Paul went out for football, he was beaten by other players. However, that did not stop Paul. He graduated a two-time All-American in football, and he earned varsity letters in baseball, basketball and track. Paul Robeson was not only a successful college athlete, but he also graduated first in his class! At the time, he was the only Black student on the Rutgers campus and only the third African American to ever be accepted by the university.

After graduating from Rutgers, Paul Robeson went to law school at Columbia University in New York City. To pay for school, he played professional football and coached at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He also found work as an actor. Robeson graduated from law school in 1923 and went to work for a law firm in New York. He quit after a white secretary would not take dictation from him because of his skin color.

## Paul Robeson (cont'd)

In the 1920's and 30's, Paul Robeson became famous as an actor and singer. He had an exceptional bass voice and could reach notes as low as the C below the bass clef, which, for those who know music, is very low! Paul appeared in a number of plays in New York, Los Angeles and London. His run in Shakespeare's *Othello* on Broadway from 1943-1945 still holds the record for the longest run of a Shakespeare play. Paul also appeared in eleven films between 1925 and 1942.

Paul Robeson and his wife moved to London in the late 1920's and stayed there until the start of World War II. After the war began, Paul sang in concerts for the United States World War II war effort, sang, and spoke out against racism.

In 1950, NBC refused to let Paul Robeson appear on former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's show, *Today with Mrs. Roosevelt*. This was probably because the network was afraid that Robeson was too outspoken against racism. They began to label him a "communist," which was a big problem in the 1950's. Government leaders became afraid of any American who might support people from communist countries in any way. Many people supported Paul Robeson, however, they felt that the communist label was just an excuse to keep him from speaking against racism. In fact, many people reported that one of the first things Paul Robeson did when he spoke to audiences was to urge people to register to vote, proof that he supported the democratic way of life. Of course, he was urging Black people to vote, something those with great prejudice would not have liked.

Paul Robeson did support the Soviet Union, however. He went there to perform in 1949 and found a country free of racial prejudice. He said of his experience in Russia, "Here, for the first time in my life, I walk in full human dignity." In 1950, after refusing to state that he was not a Communist, the United States took Paul Robeson's passport away. He was no longer permitted to travel outside the United States. The U.S. stated that Robeson's passport was taken away because he criticized U.S. treatment of blacks when he was in foreign countries.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Paul Robeson (cont'd)

They thought he should not be speaking badly about his country. Finally, in 1958, Robeson got his passport back after the Supreme Court ruled that it was not legal for the U.S. to force a citizen to state his political beliefs before being allowed to travel outside the country. However, because of all the trouble surrounding him, many of Paul Robeson's films and recordings became very difficult to find by 1970.

Despite everything, Paul Robeson was an important figure for a lot of people. When he turned 75, more than 3000 people gathered at Carnegie Hall in New York City to pay tribute to his life and work. He died in 1976 at the age of 77.

## Paul Robeson Questions

1. Paul Robeson was
  - a. a singer.
  - b. an actor.
  - c. a civil rights activist.
  - d. All of these.
  
2. Paul Robeson's father was
  - a. a minister.
  - b. a college graduate.
  - c. a slave.
  - d. all of these.
  
3. Which of these is not true of Paul Robeson?
  - a. His citizenship was taken away.
  - b. He could speak more than a dozen languages.
  - c. He was a lawyer.
  - d. He traveled throughout the world.
  
4. In the 1930's and 1940's, Paul Robeson was best known as
  - a. a high-priced lawyer.
  - b. a singer and actor.
  - c. a football player.
  - d. a writer.
  
5. NBC would not allow Paul Robeson on the air in 1950 because
  - a. he was so outspoken against racism.
  - b. he had declared himself a communist.
  - c. black people were not allowed on the air.
  - d. he was a racist.

### Paul Robeson Questions (cont'd)

6. What quote did Paul Robeson make about his experience in the Soviet Union?
  
7. The U.S. government took Robeson's passport away because
  - a. he would not say he was not a communist.
  - b. he spoke badly about the treatment of minorities when he was in other countries.
  - c. he had joined the communist party.
  - d. a and b
  - e. b and c
  
8. What happened to Paul Robeson's music and films in the United States as result of the trouble that surrounded him?
  - a. They became extremely popular.
  - b. They were difficult to find.
  - c. They were declared illegal.
  - d. There was no real effect on his work in the United States.
  
9. Robeson's passport was returned to him after
  - a. he finally signed a document swearing that he was not a communist.
  - b. people protested and forced the courts to reverse the decision.
  - c. the Supreme Court said it had been illegal to take it way from him.
  - d. he was too old to travel anymore anyway.
  
10. Where was Paul Robeson honored on his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday?

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Paul Robeson Answers

1. d
2. d
3. a
4. b
5. a
6. *Here, for the first time in my life, I walk in full human dignity.*
7. d
8. b
9. c
10. Carnegie Hall/New York City