**Paul Robeson**

Paul Robeson was born on April 9, 1988 in Princeton, New Jersey to Anna and Will Robeson. The family experienced a great tragedy when Paul was just 6 years old, when his mother passed away. His father decided a change of scenery would be good for the family and they moved to Somerville, New Jersey. Paul grew to enjoy Somerville and participated in church while being an outstanding student. He was such a great student that he received a scholarship to attend to attend Rutgers University after winning a statewide writing competition at the age of 17. Paul was only the third African American to receive a scholarship offer to Rutgers. He would accept the offer and go on to become the valedictorian of his class while also competing for the football team.

After completing his degree at Rutgers, he would go on to attend Columbia University’s Law School. To pay for school he taught Latin and played and played professional football. While at Columbia he met Eslanda Goode, who he would eventually marry and have a son named Paul Robeson Jr. Once Paul obtained his law degree from Columbia, he tried his hand at being a lawyer but left his firm and the profession due to severe racism. Unsure on his next move, his wife encouraged him to pursue entertainment full-time and she would be his manager. In 1921, he received his first role in “Simon the Cyrenian” at the Harlem YMCA. The following year, he made his Broadway debut in the play “Taboo”. The play didn’t last long on Broadway, eventually moving to London. Luckily, Robeson was asked to join the Princetown Players. The group was a Greenwich Village theatre group that included Eugene O’Neil, who was a play writer, and he took a liking to Paul. In 1924, O’Neil asked Paul personally to star in his plays “All God’s Chillun Got Wings” and “The Emperor Jones”. Both plays garnered critical acclaim from fans and critics. As a result, Robeson’s name started to grow within the industry. In 1925, Paul had his first singing, recital and starred in his first film, “Body and Soul” by Oscar Mischeaux. The film was another success and Robeson name grew even more popular in the entertainment industry. The growing popularity helped him land roles in “Showboat” and Shakespeare’s “Othello”.

Paul moved to London for “Showboat” and “Othello” due to no US company being willing to hire him at the time. His role in “Othello” was controversial as well, as he played opposite of a white actress. Following “Othello”, he would star in a British film named “Borderline” which included strong racial themes as well. Over the next two years he continued singing and performing in plays in England. Then in 1933, he was given the opportunity to star in the film version of “The Emperor Jones”. He was given the same opportunity with “Showboat” in 1936 as it moved from stage play to film. This trend would continue for the rest of decade as he would star in “Sanders of the River”, “Song of Freedom”, “King Solomon’s Mines”, “Dark Sands”, and “The Proud Valley”.

While his entertainment career was blossoming during the 1930s, his passion for politics and social activism greatly expanded as well. In 1934, he visited the Soviet Union for the first time. He would return several more times throughout the decade while publicly praising their culture because he believed it lacked the racial biases he faced in America. He became popular in Wales due to the support of Welsh miners and his involvement in t their civil rights affairs. In 1943, he would play in “Othello” once more, this time on Broadway. He received critical acclaim for his performance as Iago. Despite the critical acclaim, he was being heavily criticized and hated by white America for his speeches against segregation and lynchings in America. To make matters worse, Paul helped found the Progressive Party. His party speeches and concerts started to ignite violence and he became a target for racist white Americans. In 1946, there was speculation that he was secretly apart of the communist party. Paul continuously denied the allegations, but the public denials were not good enough for his racist enemies. His passport was withdrawn due to the government’s unfounded suspicion of Paul’s association with the Communist Party. This suspicion only grew in 1952 when Paul was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize. He as unable to formally receive the award due to his passport still being withdrawn. After fighting for over a decade, his passport was returned to him in 1958 and he was able to finally receive his Stalin Peace Prize. Despite his passport being returned, his mistreatment in America continued and he was performing in America was very difficult for Paul. The appreciation he received in Europe, sparked him to return to Europe and believe his last appearance in “Othello” in England in 1959.

Paul’s health would deteriorate over the next couple of years causing him to return to America in 1963. Health problems would extend to his wife, as she would pass away due to cancer in 1965. Paul would pass away 11 years later in 1976. Robeson strongly believed in independence, freedom, and equality for all people. He believed artists and entertainers should use their talents to help people & causes around the world as he stated, “The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice” In 1958, the Supreme Court ruled that citizens could not be denied their right to travel because of political beliefs or affiliations. Robeson’s choice to fight freedom is a big reason why.

* <https://www.biography.com/musician/paul-robeson>
* <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/robeson>
* <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0732079/bio>
* <https://robeson100.rutgers.edu/about-paul-robeson>
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