

“IT’S GOOD TO BE BACK”

EXCERPTS FROM SPEECH BY PAUL ROBESON

WELL, I AM CERTAINLY PROUD and happy to be with you tonight. I’ve never had a reception anything like this at any time that I can remember. And there are friends in the audience, people who went to school with me, back in New Jersey. They seem to come from many sections of our land to say hello. And I certainly want to thank you all for being here, for what we just heard. I know that all of you understand the struggles that are going on and it’s been a wonderful evening to be sitting out there and listening to the beautiful singing, to the understanding of what our struggle means in this country today, and in other lands. I was also very happy to have Mr. Billy Taylor here; I felt like “getting in the jive.”

I want to thank *FREEDOMWAYS* for making this evening possible. This particular magazine is one which many of us have followed from the beginning. It is significant to note that *FREEDOMWAYS* came into being along with the thrust of the Negro Freedom Movement, to express, to record, and to contribute in this history-making activity in our country. This magazine is of particular importance to all American writers, and especially to the Negro writers who are playing such a splendid role in interpreting the struggle which is going on in our lives today in Harlem, in the deep South, all over the country, and also in Africa. Negro American writers in Africa, and Africans themselves give us direct and welcome insight into the activities on that continent. The magnificent special issues of *FREEDOMWAYS*, for example, the one devoted to the people of the Caribbean and notably the most recent one devoted to the life and contributions of our great teacher, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, already serve as points of reference as well as giving deep artistic satisfaction. We hope that the quality and scope of this magazine will be appreciated by growing numbers of people in all groups in our country and in other parts of the world.

I want to especially thank the artists who have taken time out from their busy lives to come here this evening. It has been very moving to see so many of the actors that I came up with (now a little older, maybe), down in the Village long ago, in the twenties. And someone is here who was one of the first concerts way back in 1925. It is a great joy, certainly, to see the tremendous talent and the development

of the growing numbers of our artists reaching, as they are, the highest levels. I would like for a moment to call your attention to an artist who has been closely associated with me in my career. I hope Larry is still here, my friend and colleague, Mr. Lawrence Brown, an authority on Negro and classical music who has been my partner in concerts for forty years. And I want to say, Larry, if you are still here, that when I came in and heard your protege take off there and sing, he sounded pretty good to me. Larry is teaching, and I felt when he came in, I'd better go on singing, "I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside, ain't gonna study war no more."

Recalling my own work in music and the theatre, as I said back in the twenties and thirties, it is encouraging today to see the ever-increasing opportunities and widening horizons for our Negro playwrights, actors and actresses in theatre, films, radio and TV; for our musicians in concert and in opera, and for our artists in almost every aspect of the cultural life of our country. It is also most interesting to see that these artists are becoming known all over the world, by records, TV and personal appearances. It is equally interesting to note that audiences all over the world understand and respond to the best of our art and our artists, even as we here appreciate the visiting artists who come from abroad.

Yes, our languages, our idioms, our forms of expression may be different, the political, economic and social systems under which we live may be different, but art reflects a common humanity. And further, much of the contemporary art reflecting our times has to do with the struggles for equality, human dignity, freedom, peace and mutual understanding. The aspirations for a better life are similar indeed all over the world and when expressed in art, are universally understood. While we become aware of great variety, we recognize the universality, the unity, the oneness of the many people in our contemporary world. In relation to this, in our travels we visited many peoples in Socialist countries. Today we know that hundreds of millions of people (a majority of the world's population) are living in Socialist countries or are moving in a Socialist direction. Likewise newly emancipated nations of Africa and Asia are seriously considering the question as to which economic system best fits their needs. Some of their most outstanding leaders agree that the best road to the people's goals is through a Socialist development, and they point to the advances made by the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of

China, Cuba and the other Socialist countries as proof of their contention.

The large question as to which society is better for humanity is never settled by argument. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. *Let the various social systems compete with one another under conditions of peaceful coexistence, and the people can decide for themselves.* It is very interesting to note the support which comes from the Socialist countries for the freedom struggles everywhere. At this historic moment, it is certainly wonderful and heartwarming to see the participation of our artists, Negro and white, in the Freedom struggle, and to note their brilliant contributions to the understanding so necessary for all sections of our American community. Yes, it's good to be back again!

Since we've been away, we've been to many countries: Britain, Hungary, France, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, the German Democratic Republic and as far away as Australia and New Zealand. Everywhere we found a warm welcome for our music, and especially for the songs expressing a deep desire for friendship, equality and peace. There was an opportunity to appear at the birthplace of Shakespeare in Stratford-on-Avon in a warmly received production of *Othello*; also to appear on television in music and drama; to sing in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and with miners in Wales and in Scotland; and in many cities to sing for and with students from various parts of Africa. There was also occasion to participate in great rallies for peace in Paris, Moscow, in London's famous "Trafalgar Square" and in many other capitals of the world. All the while that we were abroad we kept in touch with the remarkable progress of the Freedom struggle here at home. The struggle for "Freedom Now" in the South and all over this land is a struggle uniting many sections of the American people, as evidenced in that great March from Selma to Montgomery, where thousands of black and white citizens of this country marched for the freedom of our people in the deep South and for a new kind of America. Also uniting many sections of our people is the struggle for peace, this demand to avoid any chance of nuclear war, rather to live in peace and friendship. This was evidenced by the recent march to the United Nations and the students' March on Washington. It is clear that large sections of the American people are feeling and accepting their responsibility for freedom and peace. It also is clear that from the Negro people has come a tremendous initiative and dynamic power in the forward thrust of our march

toward freedom. It is clear that the Negro people are claiming their rights and they are in every way determined to have those rights and nothing can turn us back!

Most important is the recognition that achieving these demands in no way lessens the democratic rights of white American citizens. On the contrary, it will enormously strengthen the base of democracy for all Americans. So, the initiative, the power and independence of the Negro Movement are all factors which strengthen the alliance between the Negro people and the white citizens of our country at every level in our society. Now we must find and build a living connection, deeper and stronger, between the Negro people and the great mass of white Americans who are indeed our natural allies in the struggle for democracy. In fact, the interest of the overwhelming majority of the American people as a whole demand that this connection be built and that the "Negro question" be solved. It is not simply a matter of justice for a minority. Just as in Lincoln's time the basic interests of the American majority made it necessary to strike down the system of Negro enslavement so today these interests make it necessary to abolish the system of Negro second-class citizenship.

In all of our struggles (on the marches, in the demonstrations, at the mass meetings) we see and feel that the part played by *music* is of extraordinary importance. How wonderful to hear these songs tonight and to hear the songs that serve to inspire, encourage, sustain and unite the thousands of participants, particularly the beautiful old songs which were a part of the Negro's long struggle during Slavery and Reconstruction. Today these old songs, sometimes with new words, serve the same high purpose as do the beautiful songs newly composed in the heat of the day. Songs like "We Shall Not Be Moved," "Freedom," "Ain't Gon' Study War No More," and "This Little Light of Mine, I'm Gon' Let It Shine, Let It Shine, Let It Shine, Let It Shine . . ." and "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." I remember always being taken by that song as a boy. We *are* climbing "Jacob's Ladder," rung-by-rung, higher and higher, until we find our Freedoms, our complete equality in the lands of our birth. I could go on with many songs from other parts of the world. They liked our music (as our artists have found out when they went), so we sang in many of the languages in the countries we visited. We saw the unity of the struggles. There is one song that I have always said comes from struggles of the peoples, like we sang "Go Down Moses," there is another song from these great peoples that goes:

*"Never say that you have reached the very end,
When leaden skies a bitter future may portend:
For sure the hour for which we yearn will yet arrive
And our marching steps will thunder 'We Survive!'"*

And for all of my family I want to thank you again, Ossie, Ruby, all who have been so kind. I'm happy to be with you and hope that we can act again (can't tell), sing, move again.

Be sure that you are subscribing to this wonderful magazine, *FREE-DOMWAYS*. I certainly go home knowing and feeling more and more deeply, *We shall overcome, deep in my heart I do believe, We Shall Overcome some day.*"

SPARTACUS

KEITH E. BAIRD

(For the Armies of Liberation)

I spend much time contemplating, hating to death
This horrible condition, oft with that furious ire
Of frustrated craving whose fire drives men to madhouse or to grave,
And yet I do not rave, I do not reel, but rather
Silently and grimly and skillfully (thus cold steel slits a gullet),
I gather and grasp, shape and hold my secret thoughts together.

Tyrant foe,

Note well the flashing teeth I show and bare in smiling;
If for a while, or in a certain place, or for some special reason,
My hand restrain itself, and even in some season fail
To heed the brain's brash bidding, be not deceived . . .
—No, *be* deceived, sleep on and take your rest,
For so best I may bestow the fine and fitting gift I keep for you,—
My benison for your unsolicited kindness that relieved me
Of self-responsibility, and manhood dignity.
Which is better? To give, or to receive? No, such a gift as this
To give is glorious (There falls one fetter!) . . . Peace,
It is wonderful, foeman, wonderful, enjoy it . . . while you live!

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