

# **Pacifica Radio Interview**

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ANNOUNCER: Mr. Robeson has been known and loved as an artist all over the world for a good many years, but he has also, I believe, attracted a good deal of attention as a world citizen and as a person who has been very deeply concerned about the society in which he

lives. I wonder, Mr. Robeson, if we could kick off by asking: When did you first become involved in the political aspects of . . .

ROBESON: May I first say how happy I am to be with you here, and how deeply I thank this station for its kindness throughout the years. I've been on two or three others in this time, but I always know that I have a welcome here. So I want to thank you.

I would say, as I indicate in a recent book which is now out—it will be on the stands pretty soon—*Here I Stand*,<sup>1</sup> the story of my life, as I tell it—it's not too autobiographical. It began when I was a little boy in Princeton, New Jersey. Strange to say, technically this is the shaping of my views—a Negro boy, born in Princeton, New Jersey, in a college town, where the students mainly came from the deep South. Princeton—in Princeton, Harvard and Yale—was sort of the Southern university in the North, whether you know that or not. And so I grew up in Jersey, in a rather Southern atmosphere, and my father was a minister, and I was shaped against that background. Technically, I entered the fight for social justice for my people in a concert in St. Louis in 1947. It's in the *Post-Dispatch*. I was singing at the Kiel Auditorium, one of the big auditoriums there, and the NAACP asked me in St. Louis at that time to come on a picket line, because Negro people could not sit in the theater across the street. And so I grabbed a banner, and behold, I saw Walter Huston coming down the street. He was in the play—so Walter walked out and joined the picket line, too.

A few nights later, when I was doing the concert, I said that I could not quite resolve the contradiction between singing to an audience in St. Louis, where there was no segregation, of course, but also, to my mind, the same people were not fighting to see that they could sit in the theater. It's been corrected since. And so I said that I was giving up my career, technically, for the moment, to enter the realm of the day-to-day struggle of the Negro people, especially. . . .

ANNOUNCER: And this was your first political action?

ROBESON: No, that was within this context. It's very important to get it in context. My first actual involvement—to get back to your question—was in London in 1933. It isn't very well known, which I clarify in the book, but I went to play "Show Boat" in London in 1928. Kern was with me, and Oscar Hammerstein. We had a great success. Then I did concerts in 1928, and I became domiciled and lived in England—paid my taxes there—from 1928 until 1940, after the war began.

ANNOUNCER: Does this mean, Mr. Robeson, that you spent most of your time in England during this period?

ROBESON: It meant that I came back now and then for concerts. I was here in Oakland many times. But I went back and spent most of my time in Great Britain.

ANNOUNCER: Why?

ROBESON: I was there in 1930—played "Othello"—so again, this is extremely important. At that time I said, for the public to see, that I—I would explain it today in this light. We understand why many of my

people have come to Oakland and its vicinity from Mississippi, and from the South. There have been migrations into California, you understand, today from everywhere—but for many years, many of my people have left the South, because conditions in the North were better. I felt the pressure so much in 1928 that instead of stopping in New York, I just went on to London.

ANNOUNCER: But you felt no pressure there, in the racial sense?

ROBESON: I felt nowhere near the pressure. Now, that doesn't mean that you don't have the background of the English colonies, and so forth—but I say, it's the difference between right here, now, and the Mississippi of Mr. Eastland. This is quite different. America is quite different. There are great differences. So I found England that much more of a difference, that's all. I found Canada that way. When I was playing Othello some years ago, when we got to Toronto, the cast said to me after a week, "Paul, why are you so different? The play is much deeper. You seem to be freer." I said, "That's quite true—quite true. I mean, a country where—this is not a question—I'm in a theater, on a stage with many white actors. This is not a problem here. So obviously I feel freer. I don't feel the pressures that one would feel in the Deep South all the time." But it would interest you to know that I—and I feel that any Negro, if he were honest, would have to say that in our democracy at present, that he is never, for any one second, unconscious of the fact that he is a black American. He can never be unconscious of it in any part of the United States.

ANNOUNCER: Mr. Robeson, have you been back to England since the last war?

ROBESON: Oh, yes, I was back in '49.

ANNOUNCER: The point I wanted to get at is that when I was in England last year, we were aware of the large number of West Indians who were about in London, and I heard rather nasty overtones in my talks with some Englishmen that frightened me, about a change that might take place in England.

ROBESON: Again, if you want to go further, nothing could be worse than South Africa. I am only saying—and I put these things down—is that having lived many years out, and enjoying certainly the height of success in Great Britain, I decided that I must come back to my own country, to struggle in this, and to make the sacrifices that I have. That is most important in this regard, and I am here.

ANNOUNCER: Now wait—spell this out again for me. You left England because it was not as attractive, or because you have a greater mission in the United States.

ROBESON: No, no, no, no. Let's don't get into that. There are many places in the world where, personally, it would be much easier to live than in the United States, for an American Negro.

ANNOUNCER: In other words, your commitment is definitely to what you feel you can do in this country?

ROBESON: That's right. Langston Hughes, in a discussion before a book club in New York, just a while ago, said that every important

Negro novelist—not only Richard Wright, but many others—that 95% of them live in Paris or somewhere else in the world. Why? Because the pressures, personally, are much simpler.

ANNOUNCER: And yet in the foreword of your book that I have before me, you quote Frederick Douglass as saying, "A man is worked on by what he works on. He may carve out his circumstances, but his circumstances will carve him out as well." Is this part of the reason why you feel that you must be back in the United States?

ROBESON: I made this decision some years ago. I say certainly that I sprang essentially from here. Like you heard the other day about the Indians in North Carolina—if you recall, that was in Robeson County. Now, this is a very interesting thing, which I point out in my book and which explains a good deal, too, of how I feel. Now, I was born on the edge of Robeson County and my father is a Robeson, and was a Robeson, because he was a slave. My own father—a slave of the Scottish Robesons, who still control Robeson County in North Carolina. So I approach these problems from a very close point. But I have a home and my people are tobacco workers and sharecroppers today on plantations in that county, but a part of that soil belongs to me. These are my roots in this country. On the other hand, I felt that I could make some contributions from my background, traveling about the world. However, I never expected, I am quite willing to say, that I would be restricted from traveling.

ANNOUNCER: Tell me, Mr. Robeson, was your commitment to the political scene, then, largely as a result of your feeling about your own people, or our own people, let's put it, or did it have other overtones, or political convictions?

ROBESON: First it starts as an American Negro, interested in my own people. The other great change is very constant in my mind. I was in the Welsh valley, and the Welsh people sing very much like we do—the Negro people—in many of our songs—beautiful songs. And I was one of the few outsiders who sang at their national festival, which has gone on since the time of the Druids. And I went down into the mines with the workers, and they explained to me, that "Paul, you may be successful here in England, but your people suffer like ours. We are poor people, and you belong to us. You don't belong to the bigwigs here in this country." And so today I feel as much at home in the Welsh valley as I would in my own Negro section in any city in the United States. I just did a broadcast by transatlantic cable to the Welsh valley, a few weeks ago, and here was the first understanding that the struggle of the Negro people, or of any people, cannot be by itself—that is, the human struggle. So I was attracted by and met many members of the Labour Party, and my politics embraced also the common struggle of all oppressed people, including especially the working masses—specifically the laboring people of all the world. That defines my philosophy. It's a joining one. We are a working people, a laboring people—the Negro people. There is a unity between our struggle and those of white workers in the South. I've had a white worker shake my

hand and say, "Paul, we're fighting for the same thing." And so, this defines my attitude toward Socialism and toward many other things in the world. I do not believe that a few people should control the wealth of any land—that it should be a collective ownership in the interest—

ANNOUNCER: Is that a democratic Socialism—or—?

ROBESON: It would have to be a democratic Socialism. There are many ways, however, to struggle toward democracy, as I see that—in a place like China, for example, today, or the Soviet Union, or many other places, or take our own problems of Negroes. If we were free in the South tomorrow, to carry our weight, to vote, and do everything, would we now look around and try to find the ten billionaires among our people? Would we attempt to build them up, or would we try to answer the needs of the great millions of our people? And so I see other ways of life—Socialism—as trying to solve the problems of millions, and tens of millions of peoples, at once, in a way, instead of—we would start from the individual to the masses. They start from the masses this way. Now, there are two ways, and there are difficulties each way. I have made the decision to join in a collective struggle, and the reason that my personal sacrifices mean very little, in one way, when you see the children at Little Rock—what does not giving a few concerts mean, when you can make some contribution? It's in that context. So nothing is perfect in the world. We're going toward it from different angles. I feel there's a great burden of proof on every society—on our own, as well, today.

ANNOUNCER: Mr. Robeson, some years ago, I was talking to a French member of the Communist Party, and in the course of our discussion, he said to me: "You, Mr. Winkler, are a Jeffersonian Democrat. You can afford it in your rich land. But in my land, and in other lands, we must give up our freedom now to certain men in order to achieve freedom for our children in the future. This is an act of faith for me," he said, "giving up my freedom now." Do you find yourself sympathetic with—?

ROBESON; I don't think that is—I would put it quite differently—no—nor do I think that's any part of any Socialist philosophy or Communist philosophy, as far as I know. We struck it during the war, under Roosevelt, for example. We had to give up many privileges. They're practically telling us we have to do that again—in any war economy. In England, for example, they have not eaten eggs almost for years and years, because of certain pressures. It seems to me in the Socialist lands—the Soviet Union, China, and many places—that's quite true. It's one thing to say today they don't have as shining apparel as we do, but they have made tremendous scientific progress and within one generation—so to speak—within 40 years, have become one of the most powerful countries in the world, and have done it by great sacrifices, and not by—to my mind, they feel that the country, in one sense—the man in the street—it may not, in every essence, belong to him, but he feels it's much more his than, say, I do in Charleston, South Carolina. When a Southern American Negro ex-

plained to me that I was in the state of *our* great plantations, I said, "Are you sure about that? *Our* great plantations? I don't feel that they're *my* plantations." But in one sense, some of the people of the Socialist lands feel that the country does belong to them, in a real sense. Now there are—as far as the basic concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and so forth, I would say again, bringing it back to our own history, there was, as we know, a dictatorship of the North over the South in the days following the Civil War. When that dictatorship was removed, the colored people reverted into a kind of servitude. I could have conceived of a dictatorship over the South for quite a longer period, from my point of view, quite frankly. So this is understandable.

ANNOUNCER: In your book, Mr. Robeson, *Here I Stand*, you have a chapter entitled "The Power of Negro Action."<sup>2</sup> What are some of the specific acts which you recommend, and perhaps in the order of priority?

ROBESON: Well, it seems to me rather startling to many of my friends. Nobody would be startled, say with taking the vote—the power of Italian action, or Polish action in Detroit, or Catholic action in New York, and so forth. I mean that the vote would be a bloc. And the power of the Negro vote in the North in certain states—this is one very important aspect. We have tremendous economic power in this land today. There should be tremendous support of Negro business, of Negro banks, loan associations, and so forth.

ANNOUNCER: Taking this last illustration of yours, have you not found that as Negro bankers become richer, that they grow away from your people? Or do they remain a part of Negro action?

ROBESON: There is no way, as I said before, for any American Negro, however wealthy, however famous, to be anything at this period of our history, at some point, than an American Negro. If he doesn't know it, he'll find it out.