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“And You Know Who I Am”: Paul Robeson Sings America



IT'S AN ICONIC IMAGE of an iconic man: Paul Robeson standing amongst the workers at the Moore Shipyard in Oakland, California, singing “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The year is 1942, the midpoint of World War II, a time when national loyalty oaths were used to isolate and dismiss Communist Party members or sympathizers, to maintain industry function during the war effort, and to discipline the increasingly strike-ready (and interracial) union workers. The oath was but one strategy to enforce unity during the Popular Front, which, according to Michael Denning, was composed of “not simply New Deal Liberalism and populism. It was a social democratic culture, a culture of ‘industrial democracy’ and ‘industrial unionism’” (*The Cultural Front* xvii). An advocate of organized

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labor and internationally renowned artist of stage and screen, Robeson was poised to document that moment with his incredible voice.

Yet he did so most definitively, not with the national anthem, but with “Ballad for Americans,” a dynamic song that, with its first performance on November 5, 1939, had announced the dawn of U.S. involvement in World War II. Robeson was in perfect form that day, commanding a chorus on CBS radio, to whom he sang as they also sang to him, punctuating his narrative history of the nation. From the battle for U.S. independence to the industrial age that formed them as a class, the song demonstrated the innovations of the *people* who make up the nation. This hallmark moment in the development of the Popular Front was also a defining moment in Robeson’s career; he continued to sing “Ballad for Americans” for years after, with students at summer camps and union choruses on major stages. Yet “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the national anthem of his native land, was not a noticeable part of his catalogue or performance career. These two songs in juxtaposition tell us something of Robeson’s distinctive relationship to and pride in his citizenship and suggests the reasons why we continue to struggle over the national anthem as representative of a nation still at war.

Identity is at the core of each of these songs but in strikingly different ways. As *All Things Considered* host Robert Siegel puts it, “Ballad for Americans” is an “operatic folk cantata”; it contains moments of detailed recitative that provide depth in a song that otherwise labors for historical comprehension. The song dramatically slows at the entrance of Robeson’s repeated line, “And you know who I am,” which over the course of the ten-minute song is questioned regularly by the chorus (“No. Who are you, mister?”). In response, Robeson proudly announces that he is the “nobody who’s everybody”: the mechanics, musicians, teachers, and farmers whose belief in the nation is informed by their identities as Negro, Russian, Czech (and double Czech) as well as Jewish, Methodist, and atheist. This diversity of perspectives is not a liability in “Ballad”; it is instead the exceptional contribution and wealth of this nation’s citizens, suggesting that the work of the nation is ongoing, but more perfect with each new arrival.

Such dynamism and flexibility is absent in the U.S. national anthem, which is charged with cohering a nation not in the making but already made. The photograph of Robeson singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” with the Oakland workers (the “nobodies”) just a couple of years after his performance of “Ballad” is, in some respects, a perfect portrait of his relationship to that song—an anthem which is today (thanks to NFL

quarterback Colin Kaepernick and numerous other athletes) open for interrogation in dramatic and increasingly public ways. The stark simplicity of the black-and-white image in *Oakland* is a freeze-frame without sound; though his mouth is poised with verse, the luscious voice that marked Robeson's career is absent. We do not know what Robeson sounded like singing the U.S. anthem; he never recorded it nor was he filmed singing it. For a man whose studied repertoire is marked by the inclusion of national songs from around the world—including the anthems of the former Soviet Union and China—the absence of “The Star-Spangled Banner” tells us a great deal about how he as a Black man imagined his role in the performance of nationalism.

Robeson's committed attention to Black communities, workers, and immigrants was the foundation for his song catalogue, which was built from the unique heritage and gift of enslaved Africans: Negro spirituals. From the beginning of his concert career in 1925 to its end in 1963, the core of his programs revolved around the songs that he described as “com[ing] from the very depth of the struggle of my people in America,” songs like “No More Auction Block,” which lamented: “No more auction block for me / No more, no more / No more auction block for me / Many thousand gone.” As the child of a formerly enslaved minister, these were the songs that filled his spirit and sustained him as he traveled around the world, communing with and listening to everyday people so that he might know them better through their music. His relationship to the U.S. nation was always filtered through his chosen identity as an African, his awareness of and activism against labor exploitation, and his travels abroad, where he witnessed the damaging effects of U.S. and Western colonialism. This is why the nobodies of “Ballad for Americans” called to him more than the soldiers of “The Star-Spangled Banner”: while “Ballad” announces the diversity of the nation and labors to document the multiple allegiances that inform our citizenship, “Star” attempts to isolate that identity (“citizen”) in a particular time and place devoid of other relationships and affinities. “Ballad” is dynamic and antiphonal, while “Star” is calcified and performed (in popular venues) in unison or with a soloist who is not spoken to but revered in silence by the masses of witness-participants. The juxtaposition that Robeson provides explains why we continue to fight over the national anthem; as a rigidly controlled and ritualized performance, “The Star-Spangled Banner” cannot account for the ways in which our histories of enslavement and genocide recur, again and again, and the ways in which new performers will seek

to adjust, negotiate, or corrupt the performance, so that it might better reference or reflect the ideals and realities of their citizenship.

In his famed appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Robeson perfectly situated the dynamics of allegiance and belonging. His multiple visits to the committee during the 1950s, for alleged Communist activity, signaled the coming end of his career, but, in the process, his testimony also exposed for an international audience the clarity and determination of his thoughts about the nation and its government. After recalling that his experiences in Russia made him feel “for the first time like a full human being,” Robeson is provoked by the committee when member Gordon Scherer asked, “Why did you not stay in Russia?” This line of questioning is part of a long echo chamber of parochial nationalism and can still be heard today. In August 2016, Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump suggested that Kaepernick—who has committed to taking a knee during the playing of the national anthem at NFL games in protest of ongoing racial injustices—“find a country that works better for him.” Offered sixty years earlier, Robeson’s own response continues to characterize the complicated nature of citizenship for those whose rights remain compromised. To the question of why he chose not to leave the U.S., Robeson replied, “Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay here, and have a part of it just like you. And no Fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?”

His father’s bondage was but one element of Robeson’s relation to the institution of slavery; his ability to live and love in a post-Emancipation world was made possible by the sounds produced by and through that experience: the spirituals. To him, they sounded like freedom and were the best expression of who he was and could be in the United States. “Ballad for Americans” references that distinguished musical genealogy; the chorus sings a line of the spiritual “Let My People Go,” to which Robeson responds, “That’s the idea.” That “Ballad” was sung at both the Republican and Communist Party conventions during the 1940 election year highlights the ways in which more complicated musical narratives provide opportunities for recognition even in difference.

As the contemporary moment continues to broadcast, “The Star-Spangled Banner” is ill-equipped to engage or reflect the complexities of a citizenship like Robeson’s—a curious citizenship that remembers. For Black communities who live under the terror of longstanding forms of violence—from segregation to unemployment to policing—coerced

performances of unity silence those dreams that do not sound like the national anthem, but instead sound like the hopeful visions of James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson's "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" or the piercing screams of Abbey Lincoln on "Triptych" or, perhaps, the bass loops of Kendrick Lamar's "Alright." These songs are not forced on participants, they are actively sought out, making listening to or performing them democratic in ways that "The Star-Spangled Banner" cannot produce. As Robeson knew and demonstrated with each performance, the histories and futures of those labeled "American" are numerous; they sound different depending on whom you listen to. Thus, it only makes sense that we, like him, sing multiply, choosing our own songs in order that we might regularly create anew the nobodies who become everybody.