

From Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy

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Remembering Peekskill, USA, 1949

HOWARD FAST

The difference between myself and practically every other author in this collection, except for Henry Foner and Lester Rodney, is—I would guess—some thirty-five years. I know that my subject is Peekskill, but I cannot resist one story about Paul Robeson which only I know, because it occurred at our dinner table many years ago.

It was a matter of a week before he was to go down to Washington with a subpoena from the House Un-American Activities Committee. He was morose. I had already made the journey to Washington with my own subpoena.

"Tell me what can I say?" Robeson asked.

I said: "It's very simple. You're not a Communist."

He said: "You do not understand. I can't do that. I sang in France to members of the resistance, and they were Communists; and I sang in Italy to the guerilla movement, and they were Communists; and I sang in the Soviet Union to the people who defeated the Nazis, and they were Communists. And I go to

Washington and that bastard asks me whether I'm a Communist and I say to him I'm not. How do I face anyone? How do I explain?"

So he went there and he said nothing at all. He said: "I refuse to answer your questions." He took his chances with jail, but they were not ready to jail Robeson. It is an interesting historical sidelight on a period.

When he was barred from every concert hall, when he was barred from every university except the black colleges—and if I am not mistaken, several black colleges barred him, too—he nevertheless sang at every black church that asked him to sing, every public meeting for civil rights, every public meeting when the cause was peace. He never refused. He would sing for twenty people; he would sing for a thousand.

So it was natural that sometime that summer—1949—the people who spent their summer months in upper Westchester County, New York, decided that they would have a great concert and that they would ask Paul to sing to them. These

people were from workers' communities, summer cottages, very inexpensive little homes.

They formed a committee and they got some help from the Fur and Leather Workers' Union. They found a beautiful picnic ground in a sort of natural round hollow near Peekskill, and they telephoned me and asked me whether I would chair this concert. Paul Robeson would speak and sing there.

"Absolutely! I would be delighted to," I responded.

That's how I came to be at the concert. Women and children arrived an hour early in a big bus from northern Westchester, and what happened then, before the other concert-goers arrived, was an attack by a mob of hoodlums, joined by local police and Governor Thomas Dewey's state troopers, both groups willingly assisting and joining the hoodlums. This mob of about a thousand people closed the roads into this picnic ground about an hour before the concert was scheduled to begin. Paul never got there. The busload of women and children was there, about twenty people from the neighborhood had come early, and a handful of people from the Fur and Leather Workers' Union. I don't want to dwell on the concert because — as I said — Paul never got there. But it was a horrible, ghastly night where the intent and the purpose was to kill Robeson. And a new slogan was coined by the mob of hoodlums and police — an interesting new slogan. They threw it at us. They called us "white niggers." And that cry went on and on all through the night.

This was a terrible scene. There was a stone bridge that led into these concert grounds, and for some hours we were able to hold the bridge, about twenty of us. They were throwing a barrage of rocks at us. The fight went on all through the night. Finally, an FBI car rolled in. They had been there all the time watching this, and they

finally decided to end it. So much for that first concert that never took place. It was a battle, not a concert.

The Fur Workers and others had a meeting the next day, and it was decided that this was a challenge to all decent people. And we scheduled a second concert. This time we got solid trade union backing. The second concert, curiously enough, was also in a picnic grounds, in a similar hollow. There are many such hollows in Westchester County, with a ridge of forested hills backing up the picnic grounds. We got there early. I say we, but not myself; a group of the trade unionists got there early. And they flushed out of the hills two men with high powered rifles who were posted up there to kill Robeson. We got rid of them. Then the trade unionists came in and they made a fantastic wall that was [about] two miles long of men standing shoulder to shoulder with arms linked. It was a show of discipline that was simply marvelous to see.

Robeson, who read everything that had been written about the first concert — the papers were full of it — eagerly and willingly agreed to speak and sing at the second concert, even though he knew that there were definite plans to kill him. When he arrived at the second concert, the concert organizers asked for a new group of volunteers. And they got about a dozen men eager to protect Robeson — two or three of them veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which incidentally was another group that Robeson had sung to during the Spanish Civil War.

These men took a position in front of Robeson, in front of him against his objections, holding that his life was no more valuable than theirs. They took a position in front of him so that if there were any more riflemen posted up in the hills they would kill these men; they would not hit Robeson.

And Robeson stood up, facing thou-

sands and thousands of people in that hollow, and he sang. He sang every song in his repertoire. It was a wonderful, wonderful afternoon. Marvelous afternoon! Nothing interrupted it until we began to leave the concert.

What had been prepared for us while we were in there, surrounded by a mile and a half of trade unionists with their arms linked, was a new trial by fire — under the guidance, and with the support, of the local and state police. And remember this when you talk of police tactics today, a trap was set to destroy us. The police willingly lent themselves to this effort. They piled rocks on every overpass, and there were many overpasses in upper Westchester. In those days the Hudson River towns were in a state of virtual decay. The police found plenty of drunks and hoodlums, and together they collected piles of stones on these overpasses. As we drove out of the concert grounds, the cars were pelted with rocks, many of them the size of watermelons. Pelted with rocks from the sides of roads, too. Every car going out of that picnic ground had to run through this gauntlet of shattered glass and smashed metal. It was like nothing I had ever seen. Some of the World War II vets who were there said they had never encountered anything as threatening, as horrifying, as those two concerts.

Paul, happily, got away unhurt. There was no official apology for this assault. Governor Dewey said not one word in protest, although we had dozens of photographs of his state troopers as part of the crowd in the assault, and photographs of local police joining the crowd in rock throwing. Well, anyway, this is the story of Peekskill. It's a story that should be investigated, researched, and written about. It's an important event in American history.

I will tell just one other story. I went to see *Othello* before I met Paul. I looked at this man. I watched this play. I said I must do something about this. So I wrote a book called *Freedom Road*. And I wrote it with only one purpose in mind. The moment the manuscript was finished I gave it to Paul. I said: "This is for you. I wrote it for you. And you must play the part." For twenty years we tried and no one in Hollywood would touch it with a ten-foot pole. And finally, because Muhammad Ali, a good, generous, sweet man, was willing to play the part of Gideon Jackson — and only because he was willing, NBC agreed to make the film. But, unfortunately, while Muhammad Ali had the stature, the brains — everything else — he had no voice. And so we never had a chance to hear that grand voice that was like no other in the world.