

Here I Stand: Paul Robeson's Legacy of Leadership

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In September, I stumbled upon an article entitled “12 Things You Didn’t Know About Actors’ Equity Association.” One fact was that Actors’ Equity formed the Hotel Accommodations Committee after Paul Robeson experienced extreme discrimination on a tour of *Othello*. I knew that I recognized Robeson’s name, but I could not remember what he did. A quick Google search revealed that he did just about everything. Not only was he a prolific singer, Broadway actor, Columbia-educated lawyer, professional athlete, and civil rights activist, but he accomplished all of this in an era of oppression for African Americans. What I found most fascinating about Paul Robeson was his obscure status. He was once the most famous black man in the world and yet he does not appear once in my history textbook. It seemed as if his legacy had been erased... I was hooked.

I began my research by reading Lindsey Swindall’s biography *Paul Robeson: A Life of Activism and Art*. Next, I read Paul Robeson’s political statement *Here I Stand*, which taught me about Robeson’s life in his own words. I then explored a number of sources ranging from “Paul Robeson: Beleaguered Leader,” an article praising Robeson’s leadership, to “Paul Robeson— the Lost Shepard,” an article that condemned his leadership. W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Philadelphia Negro* helped me contextualize Robeson’s life, while the documentary *Paul Robeson: Here I Stand* provided a “big picture” of his career. I used *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, and Interviews, 1918-1974* as a reference source throughout my research process to learn more about particular subjects in Robeson’s words.

I created a website in order to facilitate viewer interaction. I designed my website around the theme of grit, so I selected a stark color palette, bold text, and striking header images. I featured Robeson’s own music on the website not only because he had a beautiful voice, but also because he sang about issues that were relevant to his life and that complemented his experiences.

In 1944, Mary McLeod Bethune lauded Paul Robeson as “the tallest tree in our forest.” The nickname was a testament to Robeson’s leadership. Robeson was fearless, standing by his controversial beliefs when it would have been easier to compromise. He was dedicated, placing his cause above himself at the expense of his reputation and a lucrative career. Finally, Robeson was creative, masterfully using the arts to dispel the myth of black inferiority. Another popular nickname for Robeson, coined by *Freedomways* in 1971, was “the Great Forerunner.” Robeson’s career paved the way for future black athletes, intellectuals, and artists. As an activist, he made an enduring impact in the fight against fascism, racism, and colonialism. Most significantly, Paul Robeson left a legacy of leadership. Leaders in the 1960s and beyond utilized his model of fearless, dedicated, and creative leadership. Robeson’s powerful enemies may have stopped him from singing, but his voice will echo for generations to come. If you listen closely, you can hear it in the struggles of today.