

PAUL ROBESON

AT CARNEGIE HALL

PURE PLEASURE

"The struggle of the negro people cannot be by itself. There is a human struggle. My politics embrace the common struggle of all oppressed people, specifically the labouring people of all the world. There is a unity between our struggle, especially the white working people of the South as well. A few people should not control the wealth of any land. It should be a collective ownership. It's a Democratic socialism."

These words, spoken in 1958, strike a chord even now and will trigger nodding heads from many who read them. For this sort of talk, though, for his out-spoken political views, for his genuine search for equality and the freedom from poverty and repression, Robeson was a marked man and suffered restrictions in his movements in the USA – as well as other government-sanctioned interference. As a political activist, as an active opponent of racism, he was respected and admired. Some might say that his visits to the Soviet Union were naive and damaging to his cause, yet you feel that he only sought answers for his cause and would not rest until he examined every possibility.

"I was a little boy in Princeton, New Jersey," said Robeson. "A college town where the students mainly came from the deep South. So, I grew up in Jersey, in a rather 'southern' atmosphere. My father was a minister – he was also a slave – and I was shaped against that background."

As a singer, Robeson was peerless. His powerful, bass-driven voice was comfortable singing operatic or show-derived tunes. He commanded an audience but he could only really relax, in an artistic sense, when he felt a freedom to perform, "I felt the pressure of living in the area of my home. The pressure was so great that I travelled to New York but didn't stop and ended up in London. I went to play the musical, 'Showboat' in 1928. We had a great success. Then we did concerts. I then became domiciled there, paid my taxes there, until 1940, after the war began. I never felt the same pressures there."

But he never forgot his "people" and the struggle that they were facing, "I, and any negro

would have to say, that in our democracy at present, he is never, at any one second, unconscious of the fact that he is a black man."

Which was why, "After 1940, I decided that I must come back to my own country and struggle and make the sacrifices that I have."

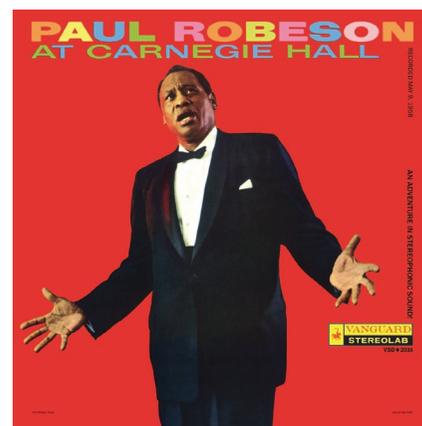
For many, his most well know song will be 'Old Man River'. For me, I'm used to hearing Frank Sinatra belt this song out and a remarkable job Sinatra does too. Especially using his remarkable breathing technique. But when Robeson stands up to the mic and sings this song you hear his pain. This is a powerful man, in form and in voice and you cannot imagine him submitting to anyone or anything. That said, the river, a symbol of abuse and subjugation, generates a picture in my mind of Robeson vs The Mississippi in some Super Hero-type battle. This song tells it all and Robeson struggles with everything that the Mississippi means to him and represents on a larger, slave-infused canvas, in every line and every word. He sometimes growls his lines, sometimes spits them out in bitterness. Sinatra never had that in his version. He couldn't. What Robeson offered in this song was experience. Most of them bad.

I was also delighted to hear Dvorak's 'Going Home' on this LP, which I immediately associated with the Welsh miners, a working group who received much support from Robeson and who extended their love and respect in return.

"I was one of the few outsiders who has sung at their National Eisteddfod, their musical festival. I went down the mines with the workers and they explained to me, they said, 'Paul, you may have had success here in England but your people suffer like ours, we are poor people. You belong to us, not to the bigwigs in this country.' I feel as much at home in the Welsh valleys as I do in my own negro sections in the United States".

This is a classic album, offering a measured, sometimes repressed emotional performance that is all the more powerful because of that. It is well mastered too while providing the only time that Robeson appears in stereo and recorded with more modern equipment.

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