

Images are throughout the lecture

Music plays

- ♪ Water boy ♪ ♪ Where are you hiding ♪ ♪ If you don't a-come ♪ ♪ I'm going to tell-a your Mammy ♪ ♪ There ain't no hammer that's on this mountain ♪ ♪ That a-rings like mine, boy ♪ ♪ That a-rings like mine ♪ ♪ Done bust this rock, boys ♪ ♪ From here to Macon ♪ ♪ All the way to the jail, boys ♪ ♪ Yes, back to the jail ♪ ♪ You jack o' diamonds ♪ ♪ You jack o' diamonds ♪ ♪ Now I know you are bold, boys ♪ ♪ Yes, I know you are bold ♪ ♪ You rob my pocket ♪ ♪ Yes, you rob a-my pocket ♪ ♪ You done rob a-my pocket ♪ ♪ Of silver and gold ♪

- I've never really fully understood the words of that song. It's basically the song of a prisoner on a chain gang, but I find it incredibly moving. I think for me, it expresses the deep sorrow of an oppressed people. And it's also of course, the way that Paul Robeson sings it, it's the combination of strength and tenderness. It's obviously, it's a very big voice, a very dark voice. But particularly the soft singing is so exquisite, it's so tender. Now we, throughout the rest of world, we like to think of America as being the bastion of freedom. And indeed, there have been many occasions in the 20th century when America has been the bastion of freedom. I think the whole world needs to be very grateful for America's part in the defeat of Hitler in the Second World War, and we probably need to be very grateful too, to America for its current support of Ukraine against Russian aggression. We just have to hope and pray that that support lasts, and that no political disaster in the forthcoming election will change that.

The Statue of Liberty was of course a gift to United States by the French Republic, commemorating the centenary of the American War of Independence. And once again, you could say that her record is a little uneven. I mean, there have been times, of course, when she did what she promises to do with the inscription on her base, that she has welcomed and protected "the huddled masses", in the poem of Emma Lazarus. She was of course, particularly referring to the number of Russian Jewish refugees from Czarist oppression, who were taken into America at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. But I think we also have to recognise for all its greatness, United States was created on two crimes, two huge, huge crimes, the one of genocide and one of slavery. Genocide because America was not an empty country when all these people came over from Europe. There were Native indigenous population, for instance in California. There isn't now, there were none left. The very last died in the early 20th century. And the other great crime of course, was that of slavery. You see this horrific image of the conditions in which slaves were brought to America in the 18th and the early 19th century. And these crimes have left a very bitter and very divisive legacy that still plays a big role, I would say, in American society today.

So we have three heroic pioneers of the struggle for racial equality and for social justice. I'm sure everybody amongst my American listeners is going to be very, very familiar with Martin Luther King. He is a household name. The other two, perhaps in America, do not get the credit that they deserve, Paul Robeson on the left, Josephine Baker on the right. They're both, I think, very much more famous in Europe than they are in their native country. Robeson here is really a kind of, I would say, a folk hero, not just of ethnic minorities, and his name appears in many places, on names of streets and buildings and so on. And Josephine Baker, again a very remarkable woman. I mean, I would at one point very much like to have an opportunity to talk to you about her as well. And you probably caught in the news last year that she was inducted into the Pantheon in Paris, amongst the greatest political and cultural

heroes of the French. So Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, like Mara Hess, who I was talking about last week, they're all wonderful artists.

But there's much more to Paul Robeson than just the wonderful singer you heard. He was an acclaimed actor, he was a brilliant athlete, and he was a very courageous political activist, as we shall see later. His father had actually been born into slavery, William Drew Robeson. He was the Reverend William Drew Robeson. He was a minister, but lived on a very meagre wage. His mother was of mixed ancestry, white Quaker ancestry on one side, and Black on the other. But he did not get to see much of her. She died in a terrible accident when he was just six years old. So it was quite a tough upbringing with several siblings, but I think it was very clear right from the start that he was somebody really outstanding, somebody who was going to get to places. In the early part of career it was often his athletic prowess that helped him along. Here you can see him and his football team when still a schoolboy in 1913. And it was undoubtedly his athletic prowess that helped him get a scholarship to Rutgers in 1915. He was very determined to be in the football team, but there was a huge amount of racial prejudice. He was put through terrible initiation, brutal initiations, which left him with a broken nose and a dislocated shoulder, but he was not going to let anything put him off. He was determined to make the team, and he did.

As you can see, he was a very handsome man, very beautiful man. Got this nude statue of him on the left hand side. And here he is, a pose. In fact, he wasn't really a boxer. This is, he's posing for a play that he appeared in, called "Black Boy" in 1926. So after Rutgers, he gained entry into Columbia Law School. And he was very hardworking, very clever, very brilliant. He did extremely well in all his exams, and he graduated and he began a career as a lawyer. But it became very clear to him that he wasn't going to get anywhere. There was just too much racial prejudice for a Black lawyer to succeed in the 1920s. So with the encouragement and support of his wife Essie, who was employed and earning quite well, he applied himself to the theatre instead. His first huge success on Broadway was in Eugene O'Neill's play "Emperor Jones". He wasn't actually the first person to play the part, but when he took it over, it became completely his, and he got rave reviews for a very, very testing part. He has these huge monologues. He was very quickly taken up in London, and throughout the 1920s he appeared in a number of stage productions in London, culminating in 1930 with an acclaimed performance of Othello with Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona. This led to a passionate affair between them that lasted some time, and eventually really wrecked his marriage. Now he was, in fact I think from the start, never a very faithful husband.

And one thing you have to say is, heroes are not necessarily saints. They're not necessarily say, made of the same material. I mean, I feel he was a very good man despite his marital infidelities. And I had an email just this afternoon from Louise Sweet, whose father was a friend of Paul Robeson's and who remembered him from her childhood, and what a giant of a man he was, physically, but also you know, a giant heart within a giant body. So, and this is just to, Othello of course, was a role that he could identify with very, very strongly. And he appeared in this again later in his career on Broadway during the Second World War. Here he is with his wife Essie, 1932. This is the time when the marriage is really breaking down, and later in the 1930s she divorces him. And here again Paul, and Essie Robeson on the left, and Paul Jr. on the right-hand side.

He appeared in his first silent movie as early as 1925. Of course, this tremendously imposing physical presence. But it was when sound came along in the 1930s that he really came into his own. And he made a whole series of films in the 1930s, largely on this side of the Atlantic. He was a big, big star of the British cinema, one of the most popular stars in the British cinema. In 1935, he made the film

"Sanders of the River". You can see it was made by Alexander Korda, who was a Hungarian Jew who found refuge in Britain in the 1930s, and really galvanised the British film industry, you could say. And the music for the film was written by another refugee, Mischa Spoliansky who I talked about last year, who was a big figure in Berlin cabaret. He's one of the first people to understand the real threat of Nazism, so the very moment that the Nazis took over, he left. And like so many Berlin Jews, he went first to Paris, but it was Alexander Korda who invited him to Britain, and then he became a very important figure really in the British film industry for the rest of his career. Now I've talked quite a bit to Spoliansky's daughter, Spoli Spoliansky, she was a great friend of mine, and she remembered Paul Robeson from her childhood, and how well Robeson and Spoliansky got on together. In fact, they weren't very happy with this particular film. In fact, with a couple of films they made for Korda, which glorified the British Empire, and put a rather flattering gloss on colonialism. Neither of them were politically in sympathy with the film. But nevertheless, Spoliansky wrote some very beautiful songs for Robeson to sing in the film, such as this lullaby.

Music plays

♪ My little black dove ♪ ♪ Curled up in your nest of love ♪ ♪ The moon is a charm to keep you from harm ♪ ♪ Asleep at my breast ♪ ♪ The stars are alight ♪ ♪ To watch over you all night ♪ ♪ The river of sleep flows gentle and deep ♪ ♪ To rock you to rest ♪ ♪ So sleep little one, til darkness is by ♪ ♪ Sleep til the sun rises up in the sky ♪ ♪ My little black dove ♪ ♪ Curled up in your nest of love ♪ ♪ And go to your rest asleep at my breast ♪ ♪ My little black dove ♪ ♪ Oh, oh ♪ ♪ Ooh, ooh ♪ ♪ Oh ♪

- Just that Paul Robeson tops the bill on this poster for this film, he is clearly the star, and Leslie Banks, a very well-known actor at the time is placed underneath him. But then we look at this poster for the MGM film made in Hollywood, "Showboat" in 1936, and well, you see Paul Robeson's name very small, but his image is not included on the poster. Presumably in America it would've been too off-putting, particularly in the South, to have a Black face on the poster. "Showboat", Jerome Kern, a very courageous show at the time, very, very bold. Though since then it's sometimes been criticised, the texts have been censored. Some of the language in later years came to seem racist. But nevertheless it was, as I said, a courageous venture to discuss racism. I mean it's a central part of the plot, of course, to "Showboat". It may surprise some of you that Paul Robeson wasn't in the original cast. He was in the original London cast in 1928. But really from that moment, he made the role of Joe completely his own. And it's very difficult for me to listen to anybody else singing this music. So I'm going to play you now an extract from the soundtrack of the 1936 movie. I'll play you the same piece later in a different version with Paul Robeson.

Audio from a film plays

- Joe.

- Hello, Miss Nola. I didn't know you was up there.

- [Miss Nola] Did you see that young man in the sheriff's buggy?

- Yep, I seen him. I see lots like him along the river.

- [Miss Nola] Oh but Joe, he was such a gentleman. Have you seen Miss Julie? I got to tell her. I got to ask her what she thinks, Julie, Julie.

- [Joe] Ask Miss Julie what she thinks. Ask Old River what he thinks, he knows all about them boys. He knows all about everything.

Music plays

♪ There's an old man called Mississippi ♪ ♪ That's the old man that I'd like to be ♪ ♪ What does he care if the world's got troubles ♪ ♪ What does he care if the land ain't free ♪ ♪ Old man river, that old man river ♪ ♪ He must know something, but don't say nothing ♪ ♪ He just keeps flowing ♪ ♪ He keeps on rolling along ♪ ♪ He don't plant taters, he don't plant cotton ♪ ♪ And them that plants them is soon forgotten ♪ ♪ But old man river, he just keeps rolling along ♪ ♪ You and me, we sweat and strain ♪ ♪ Body all aching and wracked with pain ♪ ♪ Tote that barge, lift that bale ♪ ♪ You gets a little drunk and you'll land in jail ♪ ♪ I get weary and sick of trying ♪ ♪ I'm tired of living and scared of dying ♪ ♪ But old man river, he just keeps rolling along ♪

- There are of course other wonderful songs in that, it's full of gorgeous tunes, and it's certainly the first great American musical, and some people would say it's still the greatest American musical. So I'm going to play you another, what's it, a duet in the movie. Of course he performs this with Hattie McDaniels. She doesn't actually sing. She talks her answers back to him. But this is a recording made in in London with his co-star in several films, Elizabeth Welsh, wonderful, wonderful star, who continued to appear well into her 80s. I saw her many times, went backstage for her autograph, and she was absolutely charming. She was quite open about the fact that she already had dementia. And she said, "I'm going to hug you, because I haven't got a clue whether I know you or not. So I just prefer to hug everybody." And she spoke very warmly about her memories of working with Robeson, she liked working with him, but she said in one way he was very, very selfish. And it's appropriate for the words of this song, because he had his tessitura, of course he had a very deep voice, and he wanted to sing in a tessitura that was comfortable to him. But that left her really high and dry. She said either she couldn't get down to the levels that he sang at, which meant she had to sing it an octave higher, which leaves her sounding like Minnie Mouse.

Music plays

♪ Keep on a-nagging, and bullyragging ♪ ♪ And criticising, and call me pizin' ♪ ♪ I ain't apologising, no siree ♪ ♪ No matter what you say, I still suits me ♪ ♪ The rag you're chewing must be a ruin ♪ ♪ Keep right on knocking, keep right on mocking ♪ ♪ My rocking chair ain't rocking, no siree ♪ ♪ No matter what you say, I still suits me ♪ ♪ Does you ever wash the dishes ♪ ♪ Does you do the things I wishes ♪ ♪ Does you do them, no you don't ♪ ♪ Will you do them, no you won't ♪ ♪ When there's any working to it ♪ ♪ I'm the one that's got to do it ♪ ♪ When it's raining who's the fella ♪ ♪ Uses up the whole umbrella ♪ ♪ Selfish as a man can be ♪ ♪ No matter what you say, I still suits me ♪ ♪ You don't make money ♪

- One of his last films, if not the last I think, was one that he was actually really proud of, and that is "The Proud Valley", and that's made in 1940. So it is actually made in England during the Second World War at the time of the Blitz. And instead of just glorifying the British Empire like the "Sanders of the River", and other movies he'd made in the 1930s, this is a movie, quite a gritty movie about somebody, a refugee who arrives in a boat, familiar theme to us at the moment, who joins a community of Welsh miners. And the mine is closed down, and they walk to London to plead with the government to reopen

the mine. And in the course of the movie, he joins of course, a Welsh choir. I'm sure many of you know that Wales is very famous for its men's choirs. And there is this wonderful scene, the scene where he sings "The Lord God of Abraham" by Mendelssohn from his cantata "Elijah". And again I think, you know, the choice of this piece of music by a composer who at the time was banned in Nazi Germany is not insignificant.

Audio from a film plays

- [Choir Leader] Now listen everybody, we'll go straight through. As Ben isn't here, I'll beat the time for the solo part myself. Come on now lads, give me everything you've got.

Music plays

♪ Hear and answer, hear and answer ♪ ♪ Hear and answer, Baal ♪ ♪ Mark how the scorner derideth us ♪
♪ Derideth us, derideth us ♪ ♪ Hear and answer, hear and answer ♪ ♪ Hear and answer, hear and
answer, Baal ♪ ♪ Hear and answer, hear and answer ♪ ♪ Hear and answer, hear and answer ♪ ♪ Hear
and answer, Baal, Baal ♪ ♪ Hear and answer ♪ ♪ Hear and answer ♪ ♪ Hear and answer ♪

- [Choir Leader] One, two, three, four. ♪ Hear and answer ♪

- [Choir Leader] One, two, three, four, one. ♪ Lord God of Abraham ♪ ♪ Isaac and Israel ♪ ♪ This day let
it be known that thou art God ♪ ♪ And that I am thy servant ♪ ♪ Lord God of Abraham ♪ ♪ Hear, oh hear
me Lord and answer me ♪ ♪ Oh hear me Lord and answer me ♪ ♪ Lord God of Abraham ♪ ♪ Isaac and
Israel ♪ ♪ Oh hear me, oh hear me, and answer me ♪ ♪ And show this people ♪ ♪ That thou art Lord
God ♪ ♪ And let their hearts again be turned ♪ ♪ And let their hearts again be turned ♪ ♪ Lord God of
Abraham ♪

- Well as you can hear, he had both the voice and the technique for a career in classical music if he'd wanted it, but he said he preferred to sing songs and music that came from simple people.

- [Choir Leader] Now listen, everybody.

- And early in his career, in the early 1920s, he palled up with this man, Larry Brown, and they performed together really for the rest of their careers, giving concerts that largely consisted of spirituals, and so I'm going to play one of these. And often Larry Brown would join in with a rather high-pitched, chirping voice that contrasts with the dark splendour of Paul Robeson.

Music plays

♪ Oh my soul is a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ My soul is a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Oh, my soul is a witness
for my Lord ♪ ♪ My soul is a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Now you read in the Bible and you'll understand ♪
♪ Methuselah was the oldest man ♪ ♪ He lived 969 ♪ ♪ He died and went to heaven Lord, in due time ♪
♪ Now Methuselah was a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Yes, Methuselah was a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Oh,
Methuselah was a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Methuselah was a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Now, you read
about Samson from his birth ♪ ♪ He was the strongest man on Earth ♪ ♪ Samson, he went out one time
♪ ♪ Slew 10,000 of the Philistines ♪ ♪ Delilah fooled Samson, that we know ♪ ♪ The Holy Bible tells us so

♪ ♪ She shaved off his head just as clean as your hand ♪ ♪ Samson became just like any other man ♪ ♪
Now that's another witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Yes, that's another witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Oh, that's
another witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Yes, that's another witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ What's that rumbling under
the ground ♪ ♪ Must be the devil turning around ♪ ♪ What's that rumbling in the sky ♪ ♪ Must be
Jehovah passing by ♪ ♪ Down came the chariot with the wheels of fire ♪ ♪ Took old Elijah higher and
higher ♪ ♪ Now Elijah was a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Yes, Elijah was a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Oh, Elijah
was a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Elijah was a witness for my Lord ♪ ♪ Now Daniel was a Hebrew child ♪ ♪
Went to pray with God for a while ♪ ♪ The king at once for Daniel did send ♪ ♪ Cast him into the lion's
den ♪

- Now as the '30s progressed, of course the world became more and more bitterly politicised. The Western democracies seemed to be in a desperately weak state, and these were for many people the two alternatives, you might say, the devil and the deep. And so Robeson, a highly intelligent man and an idealistic man, you know, a man who really wants to make the world a better place, so he becomes increasingly engaged in the politics of the period. And he, I suppose, makes his decision that certainly up till the great show trials of '36, '37, I think there were great many people who put their faith in Stalin, as being any person who is likely to stand up to Hitler. Of course in any event, it was the opposite. But here, this is Robeson arriving in Russia in 1934. I suppose you could say if he probed a little deeper, he would've known that there were already some pretty terrible things happening in the Soviet Union. But for him, the great thing about Russia, he felt, was the absence of the racism that completely poisoned the United States. So for him, it was a country of hope. The Spanish Civil War galvanised political sympathies on both sides of course. It became a war by proxy between Hitler and Stalin. And of course, liberals and people on the left were on the side of the elected government. They weren't on the side of the fascist insurgents.

And here you see Robeson actually going to Spain in 1938 to sing to the loyalist troops. And so he was a very vocal supporter of the left wing government of Spain against the fascist insurgents of Franco. And also a tremendous supporter of the victims of Hitler. And here he's singing, this looks a really intriguing occasion. This is in London and you can see Larry Brown at the piano. And behind him you can see a huge painting by Max Beckmann. I can see a Kandinsky. Beckmann, Kandinsky, both refugees from Nazi Germany, Beckmann in Holland, and Kandinsky in France. And also very intriguing to me is a song recital of Elizabeth Schumann. You can see the poster on the right-hand side. And during Second World War, after United States had entered the war in 1942, he issued an album of records. These would've been on 78 RPM records, on the label of Columbia, called "Songs of Free Men". This was meant to be his contributions to the war effort. I mean, there were in Yiddish, there are songs in Hebrew, there are songs in Russian. So he's putting forward his internationalist credentials, and also I suppose, his left wing credentials. And the song I've chosen to play you is "Joe Hill", a very moving, very beautiful song about a martyred trade unionist. So what Paul Robeson is saying with these songs is that this war is worth fighting only if we fight to make the world a better place. Not just to defeat Hitler, but to make America a better place, to make Europe a better place as well, for everybody.

Music plays

♪ I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night ♪ ♪ Alive as you and me ♪ ♪ Says I, but Joe, you're 10 years dead ♪ ♪
I never died, says he ♪ ♪ I never died, says he ♪ ♪ The copper bosses killed you, Joe ♪ ♪ They shot you
Joe, says I ♪ ♪ Takes more than guns to kill a man ♪ ♪ Says Joe, I didn't die ♪ ♪ Says Joe, I didn't die ♪ ♪

And standing there as big as life ♪ ♪ And smiling with his eyes ♪ ♪ Says Joe, what they forgot to kill ♪ ♪
Went on to organise ♪ ♪ Went on to organise ♪

- Then of course after the summer of 1941, Hitler attacks Russia. And then as you know, in December, 1941, Germany declares war on the United States. It wasn't the other way around. And you think this man really was insane if he thought that he could defeat the might of both Russia and America. So we have a cozying up for a fairly short time of course, during the Second World War, United States, Russia, slightly mistrustful allies. And these two guys you see here, they're Itzik Feffer on the left hand side and Solomon Mikhoels on the right hand side. They were Soviet delegates who came to New York, and they met up with Robeson and they befriended him. Now after of the war of course, the Cold War breaks out in the late 1940s, and the former allies now become deadly enemies. And so many people held it against Robeson, that he chose to go back to the Soviet Union after the war. And people have accused him of being, what's the term for it? A willing fool of Stalin. There's no doubt it was a tremendous propaganda coup for the Soviets to get this very famous, the most famous Black American at the time, to go to Russia.

And so I think Robeson still, he was under no illusions. He really knew what was going on, he wasn't a fool. But I still think he thought the best hope for Black Americans was the friendship and the support of the Soviet Union. And so he was accused of course, of being a traitor. He was accused of being unpatriotic. And this is what he's replying, he said, "I will be loyal to the American true traditions. The true traditions that fought for my people's freedom, but not for those who tried to enslave them." And so he was certainly, I think he was a patriot. I think he loved America, he wanted America to be better. And I would agree with him that being a patriot doesn't mean, "My country right and wrong." No, you still must be very critical of your country. So he gave a famous concert in 1949 in Moscow that was recorded, but before the concert, he demanded to see his friend Itzik Feffer. Itzik Feffer was actually in prison at the time, but he was sort of scrubbed up and made presentable, and he was brought to Robeson's Hotel. And he indicated to Robeson that it was very likely their conversation was bugged. So in fact, they communicated with signs and with little scribbled messages. And he told Robeson that in fact Solomon Mikhoels had already been murdered, and he was shortly to be murdered himself.

So this was of course the period of the so-called doctor's plot, when Stalin himself became very antisemitic and started persecuting Jews. And so Robeson, heroically really, with tremendous courage actually, he made speeches in his concert on the behalf of the Jews, and he insisted, as we shall hear, in singing a song in Yiddish. He wanted to demonstrate his solidarity with Russian Jews. Now the concert, as I said, was recorded. His speeches were cut and censored. So we only really have a rather partial picture of the concert. But here is, he apparently spoke very good Russian. My Russian is non-existent, so I'll be quite interested. I'm sure we have many Russian speakers among the listeners, and they will be able to tell us really how convincing Robeson's Russian was. 'Cause here we have him addressing the audience in Russian.

Recorded audio plays

- [Host] "Mississippi".

- I think we might be able to translate that, we'll see. And this here, he does sing what the introducer calls "Mississippi", which is of course "Old Man River". But as you'll see, he's completely transformed the words, and turned them into something much more defiant.

Music plays

♪ There's an old man called the Mississippi ♪ ♪ That's the old man I don't like to be ♪ ♪ What does he care if the world's got troubles ♪ ♪ What does he care if a land ain't free ♪ ♪ Old man river, that old man river ♪ ♪ He must know something, but don't say nothing ♪ ♪ He just keeps rolling, he keeps on rolling along ♪ ♪ He don't plant taters, he don't plant cotton ♪ ♪ Them that plants them is soon forgotten ♪ ♪ But old man river, he just keeps rolling along ♪ ♪ You and me, we sweat and strain ♪ ♪ Body all aching and wracked with pain ♪ ♪ Tote that barge, life that bale ♪ ♪ You show a little grit and you lands in jail ♪ ♪ But I keeps laughing instead of crying ♪ ♪ I must keep fighting until I'm dying ♪ ♪ And old man river, he'll just keep rolling along ♪

- As I said, he was very keen to show his support and his solidarity with Russian Jews. And he included this song in Yiddish, it's the song of the Warsaw Ghetto, in his concert.

- Course he came back to a hornet's nest, but nothing was going to suppress him. Nothing was going to make him keep quiet, and he spoke out against what he thought was injustice. He was speaking here against a bill, which was restricting the rights of trades unions. And he had to appear before the notorious House of Un-American Activities, this period of McCarthyism, which is I would say, one of the most shameful in the history, of American history. Some you may have heard the excellent talks that Phil Rubenstein did about all of this, and how shabby and unjust and disgraceful the whole thing, many lives ruined many people who were simple idealists, who as I said, just wanted to make the world a better place, were persecuted, and their careers were ended. He was forced to appear before the House of Un-American Activities. And if you wished to, you can hear quite large chunks of the hearings on YouTube. If you Google "Paul Robeson House of UN-American Activities", these things will come up.

So they said to him, "Well if you love Russia so much, why didn't you just stay in Russia? Why do you want to come back to this country?" And his answer was, "Because my father was a slave and my people died to build this country, and I'm going to stay here and be a part of it just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me from it, is that clear? I'm for peace, peace with the Soviet Union, peace with China, and I'm for peace and friendship. I'm not for peace and friendship with fascist Franco, nor with fascist Nazi Germany. I'm for peace with decent people," that's what he said. And so there was a huge horrible populist reaction against him. His concerts were picketed, there were riots, Black people were attacked. As you can see his effigy was hung, on the right-hand side. So very, very ugly phase of American history. Not something to be proud of. And he was somebody that the world listened to, outside of America. And of course that enraged the McCarthy people, and they took his passport away from him for several years. He was supposed to give a concert in the Albert Hall in London. Of course he couldn't leave, 'cause he didn't have a passport. So he actually phoned in the concert, he sang over a telephone line, and it was the whole of the Albert Hall. Can you imagine that? 8,000 people assembled in the Albert Hall in London to listen to Paul Robeson singing over a transatlantic telephone line.

There he is again, testifying before the House on Un-American Activities in 1956. Eventually his passport, oh here is, since he was world famous, far more famous really outside of America than in America. So you have Nehru coming to America. Who does he want to see? Paul Robeson, who can't leave. And then under huge international pressure, the American government restored his passport in 1958, and he was again able to travel the world. He was received by everybody on all political sides. Some of the people you may think, "Whoa." Walter Ulbricht, a rather unsavoury character really, head

of the communist East Germany. And here he is with Nikita Khrushchev in Yalta in 1958. In the '60s his health declined, he had a series of strokes. You see him here, on the left, a very diminished figure, looked after by his sister in Philadelphia, and on the right is his funeral. But I don't want to end on such a sad note. So I'm going to end with one of the most beautiful of his recordings of a spiritual, "Steal Away to Jesus".

Music plays

♪ Steal away, steal away ♪ ♪ Steal away to Jesus ♪ ♪ Steal away, steal away home ♪ ♪ I ain't got long to stay here ♪ ♪ My Lord, He calls me ♪ ♪ He calls me by the thunder ♪ ♪ A trumpet sounds within my soul ♪ ♪ I ain't got long to stay here ♪ ♪ Steal away, steal away ♪ ♪ Steal away to Jesus ♪ ♪ Steal away, steal away home ♪ ♪ I ain't got long to stay here ♪

Q&A and Comments

- Right

Jonathan who saw Robeson play Othello at Stratford in 1959. Yes, it is a truly heavenly voice, isn't it?

And this is Mona, who also saw him in Othello with Uta Hagen. Well it was a long time ago, wasn't it? That was the 1940s. So actually not that far off a century ago.

This is Heather whose aunt accompanied Paul Robeson. That's really remarkable. "Did he have any formal acting, singing training?" Not, he may have, I'm sure he had some singing lessons and some acting lessons. But no he never, he didn't attend a conservatoire or have any real formal training.

"A dark voice," a dark voice, a voice has a colour. I mean, you can talk about a bright voice, and Pavarotti has a very bright voice, doesn't he? And who would I say nowadays? Well, most basses have dark voices, don't they? And you can have a female dark voice, a mezzo can have a very dark quality to it. You spotted a tiny pic of Robeson towards the bottom on the right in the poster. Yes, but he should have been bigger than that.

This, your family friend Bruno Reichen, "Over three generations, a fine pianist, Lithuania, Hanover Leipzig. He accompanied Paul Robeson on his tour through Europe. When they got to Russia, Bruno," yes I read that actually. There is a really excellent biography behind me somewhere of Paul Robeson, "Paul Robeson", and he talks about that, yes.

This is Bev who says, "My father took me to see him as a very young child, to Camp Naivald, a left-wing summer college, summer cottages and camp." Your father thought he had the finest voice living then. I wouldn't quarrel with that, I don't think.

"Oscar Hammerstein's part," yes. I mean it is very interesting that these, the greats of American Jewish life, Broadway, this kind of music, they were, with the exception of Cole Porter of course, all Jews of Eastern European or Russian origin. And they were all very much on the left, and they were also all very supporting of the civil rights movement. Richard Rodgers was another, who did his best to support Black talent, Black musicians, was always ready to, you know, to help in any way he could. You've got

the programme from Robeson's concert at the Eden Auditorium in 1942, how nice. You've got the autograph programme of Paul Robeson, and with a personal connection, that's very nice.

Thank you, Eleanor.

And Rita has given us the connection on YouTube, so that you can hear Paul Robeson defending himself in the 1940s. Yes, he was very acclaimed, and throughout the war and afterwards his records were very much played over the airways in Russia.

Thank you, Erica. I don't think he was a believing Christian. Christianity, actually this is a mystery to me. I don't really understand the huge attachment of Black Americans to Christianity. It would seem to me that Christianity had so often been an agent of their oppression. But also of course it gave them a comfort, and it helped to create a sense of identity for them. And the good thing of course about Christianity, it's much more emphasised in Christianity than Judaism is the afterlife. So even if you have a really shitty, horrible life, you can look forward to a better afterlife.

"Is there Cary Grant in the lower left of the photo?" I don't think so, I'd have to have another look at that.

"The Soviet Union regarded people like Robeson as useful idiots to be exploited," possibly. Yes, well I'm sure some people did. You know, there were cynical people. To me this does doesn't diminish him, it really doesn't. You know, I greatly admire his courage and his idealism.

Monica says his Russian's really good. Oh, but somebody else says it's a bit halting, but I think that's, yes. I mean that's the circumstances really, isn't it? Of making that kind of speech.

Thank you.

"He had the ability to control his pronunciation tools as an actor," that's a very interesting idea, yes.

Thank you very much, Carrie.

Yes, I think he was a great mensch. I would apply that term to him. "Not a question," oh of yeah, well you know, this house is really an archive of recordings, so you can find most things behind me somewhere. I've seen documentaries about him. I don't know if there's been a fictional film about his life, it would make a great movie. Especially his confrontation, I think, with the House of Un-American Activities, would make for some very dramatic scenes.

Thank you, thank you.

"Any relations with Marian Anderson?" He must have known her and she must have known him. But I don't, as far as I know, there wasn't a close friendship between them. I know, 'cause their repertoire was so different. Although of course they both sang spirituals, that's true.

"Did he ever meet Lamumba?" That I don't know. I mean in that photograph, of course he's holding up a photograph of him.

Thank you Ruth.

What a pity he didn't sing with Marian Anderson. I mean she had a voice of, that's a dark voice as well, isn't it? It's a mezzo, even a contralto voice, and they would've been marvellously matched if they had ever made recordings together.

"I guess the voice is very natural-sounding." Mind you, a well-trained voice should sound natural. You don't want it to sound artificial. Can I say, well it's very sad, isn't it? That he spent the end of his life in isolation, though presumably with the consolation of being looked after by his sister. And I do, now I think he's getting more recognition than he had, but I think it's very, very sad indeed that he was somehow portrayed as a traitor to American values. No he made it very clear, he believed in American values, but he didn't think that McCarthyism represented American values, or Jim Crow laws, or racism. You're saying here he performed with the Toronto Jewish folk choir at Massey Hall. He obviously felt a great affinity with Jews, and I think they did with him as well. Right, and are we getting to the end here?

"Final years of isolation," I think I've done that question, yeah.

"In communist Romania," this is Maria saying, "he was admired not only for his voice, but for his affiliation with the Soviet Union." Well yeah, maybe.

"Did he give up?" No, I don't think so. I think he gave up sports, 'cause he had more interesting things to get involved with, and he wanted to be an actor and a singer, and not a footballer.

"Does he have," he certainly had, I presume he does have contemporary descendants. I remember seeing his son interviewed in a documentary about him.

And thank you all very much for listening, and I'll speak to you next time from my more luminous Paris apartment. So look forward till then, thank you, bye bye.