Tribute to a Baaad Dude, a Living Hero

Photos by Peter Gould

Standing in silent appreciation for Paul Robeson are, left to right, Roscoe Lee Jones, Leon Bibb, Zero Mostel, James Earl Jones, Ruby Dee and Sidney Poitier.

Paul Robeson Jr. with Harry Belafonte.

"The artist must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative."

—Paul Robeson, 1937

By Dorothy Gilliam

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NEW YORK—He was one of the original baaaad dudes, and that, they agreed, was good.

Paul Robeson also was uncommonly sensitive and talented and one of the rare people meriting the label "great." Those sentiments drew 20 big-name stars and activists Sunday afternoon to Carnegie Hall for a three-hour 75th birthday tribute to Robeson, a tribute that left hard-nosed actors sniffling, and many among the audience of 2,000 with new understanding of a unique artist's role.

Harry Belafonte sang to him; Sidney Poitier acknowledged the debt all black actors owe him; Zero Mostel remembered him as "my friend, whom I love"; Pete Seeger recalled his great songs; Gary, Ind., Mayor Richard Hatcher said words of him that may have put his own career on the line.

Paul Robeson was not there to hear any of it.

As actor, recreating roles such as Othello and Emperor Jones, as an outspoken man who dared speak his mind, Paul Robeson was "black and beautiful" long before Stokely Carmichael sang out the words "Black Power" on a road outside Selma, Ala.

tive baritone voice rang out to audiences in London and New York, Berlin and Moscow. But in recent decades, the voice has become silent.

Paul Robeson Jr., the artist's son, said Sunday's tribute changed some of that. "This is a moment of great triumph . . . for this salute has torn to shreds the curtain of silence that has been before my father. Now the way is open for an entire generation of Americans to see Paul Robeson in the light of today."

A jubilant Lerone Bennett, black author and historian, said after the salute: "There was Angela Davis and Coretta Scott King on the same stage. This says to me that black men can never again be destroyed in America. Black people will never again let whites define their heroes."

Robeson entered white-dominated higher education in 1915 as a scholarship student at Rutgers University. He graduated as class valedictorian, and twice an All-American athlete and went on to earn a law degree at Columbia University.

He first appeared on the American stage in 1921, and emerged as a leading developer of Negro folk music in 1925, making his first major international appearance the same year in "The Emperor Jones." (The film was to have been part of the American Film Institute's theater inaugural, until Robeson's son—at his father's direction — ordered it withdrawn as part of a protest against the cancellation of another scheduled movie.)

He has played leading roles of black heroes in productions spanning four decades; in 1943 he played the lead in "Othello" in New York for 292 performances, a record for a Shakespeare play.

His career as a concert singer, stage and screen actor spanned 30 years. It was a career that began to be painted with the dull brush of political innuendo in the years just after the war.

In 1948, he was called before a Senate Judiciary Committee and asked if he was a Communist. In 1946, he testified at a legislative hearing in California that he was not a member of the Communist Party, but adds in his book, "Here I Stand," that "since then I have re-

fused to give testimony or to sign any affidavits as to that fact. There is no mystery involved in this refusal. (It is) an important issue of Constitutional rights involved . . ."

During a tour in 1949 he caused an uproar when he told a Paris peace conference that black Americans would never fight against Russia in view of their plight at home. In 1950 the State Department revoked his passport, partly on grounds that he had always supported liberation for colonized Africans. It took eight years of court battles before his right to travel was restored.

He went into self-imposed exile then in Europe, made concert tours and traveled privately in democratic and Communist countries. He retired in 1963 and returned to Philadelphia, where he sequestered himself in his sister's home, refusing to make public appearances. Friends blamed failing health for his seclusion.

Sunday's salute took the form of a theatrical biography, including excerpts from Robeson's films, plays, concerts and speeches. From "The Emperor Jones," which introduced him to the talking screen, Robeson is seen as Brutus, in Eugene O'Neill's play about a brash pullman porter's rise to become ruler of Haiti. "King Brutus!" he exclaims . . . "Somehow that don't make enough noise." In a flash, he knows what he must be called. "Smithers," he booms to a trader, "you have just had an audience with the EMPEROR Jones!" The entire show was videotaped for the Paul Robeson Archives, which will be set up in New York City.

"It was beautiful," Mrs. Zero Mostel told Sidney Poitier afterward. "I needed lots of handkerchiefs."

Many people said predictable things. Activist Angela Davis, wearing a huge Afro, called Robeson a "revolutionary with creative vision." At one point during Davis' sing-song tribute, a tape recorder sputtered, and one of her guards stepped from behind the curtain to protect her more closely.

Gary Mayor Hatcher, who had never met Robeson, called him "a black prince and prophet" for working class people the world over. Calling his controversial political philosphy of socialism the cornerstone of today's black politics, he praised Robeson's dictum of black unity, a world outlook and a cohesion of the working classes. Hatcher admitted later that some people in Gary wouldn't like what he said, but felt that like Robeson, he had to take a stand.

Robeson was too ill to attend, but he sent a taped message from Philadelphia, including a tribute to organizers Harry Belafonte and Ralph Aswang, an architect and lighting designer. Robeson's words crackled through the cavernous hall as the saluters stood with locked arms:

". . . Though I have not been able to be active for years, I want you to know that I am the same Paul, dedicated as ever to the worldwide cause of humanity for freedom, peace and brotherhood. . . ."