

Ep 25 - A Struggle Too Long: Paul Robeson Sings at Peace Arch Park

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:09] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, the podcast that revisits significant events from BC's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. In this episode marking Black History Month, we take a look at an extraordinary event that took place along the Canada-US border more than 70 years ago. It features two larger than life figures: Harvey Murphy, the balding, Polish born, heavysset and no-holds-barred regional director of the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelters Workers Union. And Paul Robeson, the imposing Black American artist known around the world for his powerful singing voice and fearless crusade for peace, universal justice and an end to racial discrimination in the United States. He was also an all-American football star and an actor in movies and on the stage, particularly his mesmerizing performance in Shakespeare's tragedy Othello. In other words, he was a superstar. Both men were victims of the Cold War and anti-Communist hysteria that had been sweeping the United States and Canada since the late 1940s. Murphy's union, Mine Mill, was the dominant mining union in BC, but it had been thrown out of the AFL-CIO and the Canadian Congress of Labour for its Communist leadership. As for Paul Robeson, he had had his passport lifted by the US State Department, for no other reason than his outspoken views. As a result, he was unable to travel to England and Europe, where he was a huge star. And in his own country, his concerts were boycotted and often disrupted by anti-communist thugs. These twin circumstances brought Harvey Murphy and Paul Robeson together for what became an historic concert on an area of parkland known as Peach Arch Park, 50km south of Vancouver, right on the border. Historian Ron Verzuh has researched and written about the concert. In a recent interview with On the Line, he explains why Paul Robeson was singled out by American authorities.

Ron Verzuh [00:02:40] He wanted to see the world changed for the better for everybody, and that got you in trouble in those days. And also the first thing they went to was they accused him of being a Communist. Once you do that to somebody in the Cold War '50s, you're toast. They go after you endlessly, as they did Robeson and Murphy. So it was those reasons led the authorities to remove his passport.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:03:05] And how much of the feeling and sentiment against Robeson by the authorities do you think was because he was a Black man?

Ron Verzuh [00:03:13] We have to say it was a lot of that. I mean, this was a racist time as well. I mean, the Cold War wasn't the first of the racism that American Black people faced, but it was certainly highlighted by a lot of people. This was a period where the Civil Rights Act had not been passed yet. The, you know, the Freedom Riders and the fights in the South had become very prominent in the media. So, you know, you're looking at a forerunner of that in Paul Robeson and, of course, someone who would have been revered by the likes of Martin Luther King Jr, for example, and many other leaders of the of the Black movement in the States, to try and clean up the horror that was going on in the Confederacy as they still see themselves. So, yeah, I think it had a lot to do with it. Hey, he was a Black guy. Let's get him.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:04:02] Here's what happened. In early 1952, Robeson had accepted an invitation from Harvey Murphy to sing at Mine Mill's annual convention in Vancouver. In those days, no one from Canada or the United States needed a passport to cross the border. Any piece of ID would do. But when Robeson approached the border, he

was turned back by US border guards, and there was no protest from Canada. They didn't want him in the country, either. In spite of that, Robeson still managed to sing an abbreviated concert over a long-distance phone line from Seattle for the 2000 disappointed union delegates back in Vancouver. But that wasn't enough for Harvey Murphy. He wanted something big to celebrate Paul Robeson and defy the Cold Warriors, who were blacklisting unions and individuals for their opinions. What if they brought the audience to Paul Robeson instead of the other way around? And so on May 18th, 1952, the Union parked a flatbed truck in Peace Arch Park so that it straddled the US Canada border, and Robeson sang from the back of the truck. More than 25,000 people came to hear him. Most were from Canada. In fact, so many came that authorities had to close the border for a time as cars lined the highway as far as the eye could see. Robeson was introduced to the crowd by Harvey Murphy.

Harvey Murphy [00:05:41] Ladies and gentlemen, trade unionists, brothers and sisters from the United States and from our own Canada. I welcome you here today on behalf of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. [cheering] We meet here today to welcome the outstanding American and world citizen. [cheering] I know that you came here to hear a singer. But you also came here to demonstrate the brotherhood and fraternity of the peoples of the United States and Canada. That we have a common mission in this world to march forward with the other peoples of this world for peace and security for all of us, and [cheering] for our children. And we're so happy that we were the means of bringing you together. But I know that Paul Robeson, that name, what that stands for is what every decent man and woman in the world stands for. [cheering].

Paul Robeson [00:07:19] I want to thank you for being here today. I want to thank Harvey Murphy and the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. I can't tell you how moved I am at this moment. It seems that nothing can keep me from my beloved friends in Canada. [cheering] I stand here today under great stress because I dare, as do you, all of you, to fight for peace and a decent life for all men, women and children, wherever they may be. And especially today, I stand fighting for the rights of my people in this America in which I was born. [cheering] You have known me through many years. I am the same Paul, fighting a little harder because the times call for harder struggles. This historic occasion today probably means that I shall be able to sing again, as I want to, to sing freely without being stopped here and there. What is being done at this Peace Arch today will ring out -- is already ringing out -- around the world. I thank you deeply. [cheering] I have with me at the piano, my friend of many years, who you know, Lawrence Brown. Mr. Brown joins me in one of his own arrangements, 'Every Time I Feel the Spirit'. [cheering]

Music: 'Every Time I Feel the Spirit' traditional spiritual sung by Paul Robeson

[00:08:55] Every time I feel the spirit, moving in my heart, I will pray. Every time I feel the spirit moving in my heart I will pray. Upon the mountain my Lord spoke. Out of his mouth came fire and smoke. In the valley, on my knees, ask my Lord have mercy please. Every time I feel the spirit moving in my heart, I will pray. Yes, every time I feel the spirit moving in my heart, I will pray. Jordan River, chilly and cold, it chills the body, but not the soul. All around me, the sunshine, ask my Lord if all was fine. Every time I feel...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:10:02] Ron Verzuh:

Ron Verzuh [00:10:03] Again, the publicity around it was pretty good, but you couldn't really count on the mainstream media. The Vancouver papers and radio stations and TV were not really interested in a Communist union setting up a concert at the Peace Arch. The Communist press itself was pretty bold about sending out messages, so they were

drawing, you know, drawing the cadre together and bringing them to the Peace Arch concerts. But, I was a little bit amazed because most of it must have happened by word of mouth. Of course, it helped that Murphy had announced it at the convention in that January. But, I was pretty amazed myself. And when you come right down to it, it became an amazing concert, there were little kids there, there were families, there was picnicking. Generally Robeson was very, very friendly with everybody, from what I can tell, lots of handshaking and the occasional autographing and they just generally, were in euphoria. You know, you get that sense of it, right? You get the sense of an adoration going on, a kind of a feeling like, wow, we're really at a moment in history. We're part of it.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:11:13] Robeson stuck mostly to his familiar repertoire of spirituals and old ballads, plus 'Old Man River', his showstopper from the Broadway musical Showboat, that first made him famous. He also sang about slavery, and perhaps as a nod to the concert's union sponsor, he sang about Joe Hill, the legendary Wobbly organizer shot by a firing squad in Utah. The song was likely familiar to everyone in the audience, and Harvey Murphy came to the mic again to introduce it.

Harvey Murphy [00:11:50] I think this song is so much connected with the life of a hard rock miners union. You all know it. You've heard it. It's a song of the struggles of the hard rock miners and dear to the hearts of all the mine, mill and smelter workers, Joe Hill. [cheering]

Music: 'Joe Hill' sung by Paul Robeson [00:12:34] I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night, alive as you and me. Say says I but Joe, your're ten years dead. I never died, says he. I never died says he. In Salt Lake City, Joe, says I, I'm standing by my bed. They framed you on a murder charge, says Joe but I am dead. Says Joe but I am dead. 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 their as big as life, and smiling with his eyes, says Joe, what they can never kill, went on to organize. Went on to organize. Joe Hill ain't dead, he says to me, Joe Hill ain't never died. Where working men defend their rights, Joe Hill is at their side. Joe Hill is at their side. From San Diego up to Maine, in every mine and mill, where workers strike and organize, it's there you'll find Joe Hill. It's there you'll find Joe Hill. I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night, alive as you and me. Says I, but Joe, you're ten years dead. I never died, says he, I never died, says he. I never died, says he. [cheering]

Rod Mickleburgh [00:15:21] No matter how you looked at it, the concert was a huge success. Robeson called it one of the most joyous experiences of his career. The large turnout stands as a tribute to the courage of Paul Robeson in not backing down an inch from all attempts to silence him. And as an added benefit, people got to hear him sing. Ron Verzuh:

Ron Verzuh [00:15:44] I mean, people knew the man and they knew his story. And he was a celebrated figure until the State Department went after him. And, of course, the House un-American activities people. But I think they came because they thought -- they loved his voice. In his bass baritone voice, which is very compelling. And he sang songs that they liked to hear. He sang songs about miners. He sang songs about, of course, slavery and a number of other social issues that spoke to people. And I think it's funny because he didn't, in my view, he didn't really bring his left wing views to the stage so much. Although he did make talks and speak about his beliefs. I think mostly he was just singing his views. And that was what compelled people to pay attention to him, but also love him.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:16:35] Verzuh said Paul Robeson had a real fondness for Canada.

Ron Verzuh [00:16:39] He liked to be in Canada. Well, first of all, I think there was a certain moment there where he realized, this is not the southern states. This is not a group, this is not a population which is particularly racist, although there are racists everywhere. But I think he felt comfortable there. I think he felt that he was speaking to an audience that, were not going to be, you know, vicious about him and not be concerned about him being a man of colour. So I think that was was a comfort level there for him. And I think that, people rose to that occasion. I think Canadians decided that he was theirs and he was going to get their respect.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:17:24] Meanwhile, the concert's legacy lives on. In 2002, to celebrate its 50th anniversary, close to 2000 people gathered again in Peach Arch Park to hear songs and remembrances of the original event. Well known Black actor Danny Glover captivated the crowd by reading from some of Robeson's speeches. More recently, the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission put up an exhibit commemorating Paul Robeson and the Peace Arch Concert. It's been called the Woodstock of the McCarthy era, and the forerunner of the benefit concerts of the 1970s and 1980s by stars of the pop world. Ron Verzuh.

Ron Verzuh [00:18:10] In a sense, it was a precursor to what was to come, right? Because after that, all hell broke loose with concerts and fundraising events that came through the '60s and, you know, into the '70s and so on. So in a sense, maybe it put a marker on the wall that this could be done, that you could bring a lot of people to an outdoor concert and have a cultural event which was memorable and which people would enjoy and want to have more of.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:18:40] If Paul Robeson had been around, he would certainly have taken part in the famous 'We Are the World' gathering, where all the big stars were asked to check their egos at the door.

Ron Verzuh [00:18:52] He would have left his ego at the door, and he would have sang 'Old Man River'. And on that particular album, which went around the world and made millions and millions, tens of millions of dollars for aid to African countries. And so, in a way, he wasn't there, of course, but I know in a way, I suspect some of the people in that room, Lionel Richie was another one. There were a number of people. Bob Dylan was there, Bruce Springsteen, in a way, he was a legacy in the room. Nobody mentioned him. But I think in a way, all of those people, fairly progressive in many cases, would have remembered Paul Robeson as part of the inspiration for 'We Are the World'.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:19:34] There were three more Paul Robeson concerts at Peace Arch Park, although none was as successful as the first. You've heard from Paul Robeson, the singer in this podcast. But of course, he was much more than that. We leave you with part of his speech to the crowd at the end of the second concert at Peace Arch Park. His words remain inspirational even today, more than seven decades later.

Paul Robeson [00:20:01] But I speak as one whose roots are in the soil of my land. I speak as one as I say, whose fathers and whose mothers toiled in cotton, toiled in tobacco, toiled in indigo, toiled to create, help create the basic wealth upon which the great land of the United States was built. The great primary wealth came from the blood and from the suffering of my forefathers. And I say, as I have said many times, that I have a

right to speak out on their blood, on what they have contributed to that land, and on what I have contributed also as best I can. But I say right here, that because of their struggle, I will go around the world. But I'm telling you now that a good piece of that American earth belongs to me. [cheering] And it belongs to my children. So there's a lot of America that belongs to me and to my people. And we have struggled too long ever to give it up. My people are determined in America to be not second class citizens, to be full citizens, to be first class citizens. And that is the rock upon which I stand. From that rock, I reach out, as I say, across the world, to my forefathers in Africa, to Canada, all around the world, because I know that there is one humanity, that there is no basic difference of race or colour, no basic difference of culture, but that all human beings can live in friendship and in peace. I know it from experience. I have seen the people. I have learned their languages. I sing their songs and I go about America wherever I may go, seeking a simple thing. It seems so simple that all people should live in full human dignity and in friendship. But somewhere the enemy has always been around, who tries to push back the great mass of the people in every land. We know that. Well, I said long ago that I was going to give up my life to spend my day to day struggle in down among the masses of the people. Not even a very great artist at on top somewhere. But right here in this park, in many of the picket lines, wherever I could be to help the struggle of the people. And I will never apologize for that. I shall continue to fight as I see the truth. And I tell you here, I hope to see you next year, wherever I am in the world. I'll come back.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:22:57] We hope you've enjoyed this episode of On the Line, and our look back at one of the most charismatic and courageous Black Americans of the 20th century, and how he and the flamboyant Canadian union leader set in motion such an enduring cultural legacy. Thanks to the other members of the podcast collective Donna Sakuta, who provided the transcripts, Patricia Wejr and John Mabbott, who put it all together. The excerpts from the Peace Arch concerts come from a recording released by Folk Era Records. A special thanks to Ron Verzuh for research and the interview. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On The Line.