

DID JIMMY REID EVER MEET PAUL ROBESON?

I confess I knew nothing of [Jimmy Reid](#) until his death was announced last week. My excuse is that I first arrived in Great Britain in 1978 at the age of 16, straight into a boarding school in the South of England. Not the kind of place that working class heroes are celebrated.

In the last two decades or so however, I have been introduced to many such people, British and otherwise, and for me the most significant is Paul Robeson, the African American singer and actor, best known for singing Spirituals and songs like Ol' Man River, and for his definitive portrayals of Othello on Broadway and in Stratford-upon-Avon. He also sang Beethoven's "Ode To Joy", that musical affirmation of the brotherhood of man, and at Jimmy Reid's request, Robeson's version was played at his funeral yesterday.

Despite being a forty-something ex-public school boy, I find myself not sitting at the cabinet table in Downing Street preparing to slash the life and soul out of Britain, but on the fringes of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, performing my play about Robeson. People I have met here tell me he's well remembered in these parts, such as the occasion of the May Day Rally in Glasgow in 1960, at which his presence is said to have been the highlight. Apparently, several people broke the otherwise well organised ranks of about 20,000 to shake the great man by the hand. I would like to think that the 27-year-old Jimmy Reid was one of them. Robeson was back in Scotland for the first time in over ten years, because he had been prevented from leaving America for most of the 1950s thanks to his public stance for peace, for the rights of working people and for independence of colonial people all over the world. He, like Mr. Reid was a fine orator, and while his oratory also moved and inspired thousands, it showed him to be a man too far ahead of his time for his own good. In a 1947 speech for example, he declared, "*Mr. Bevan [The British Foreign Minister] must be totally blind if he cannot see that the absence of peace in the world is due precisely to the efforts of the British, American and other imperialist powers to maintain their control over the peoples of the Middle East, Europe and Africa.*" He was branded a traitor to his country and had his passport revoked.

Robeson's internationalism was not new then, either. Ten years earlier, he had participated in a concert in London in support of Spanish Republican refugees and made a speech which contained the words that would become his epitaph: "*The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.*" An African American using a London stage to fight on behalf of Spaniards. This was a perfect illustration of the spirit of Jimmy Reid's most famous speech to Glasgow University students in 1972: "*.... An affirmation of faith in humanity. All that is good in man's heritage involves recognition of our common humanity. An unashamed acknowledgement that man is good by nature.*" I hope this becomes Mr. Reid's epitaph, and not "*the rat race is for rats*"!

It was heartening to see such huge crowds paying tribute to Jimmy Reid at his funeral, but I ask myself which working class heroes can draw such numbers in life or death today. Here at the Edinburgh Fringe, the huge crowds are flocking mainly to the TV celebrity comedians and to West-End produced musicals. In my 65-seater "fringe of the fringe" venue, I happily reintroduce people to the words, music and activism of Paul Robeson, and am gladdened to know that Jimmy Reid has done the same across the way in Glasgow, reminding us of the eternal goodness and brotherhood of man.

Call Mr. Robeson. Zoo Southside, 117 Nicolson Street, EH8 9ER. Until 30th August.
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