

Two Heroes Worth their Salt

by Janet Jagan – March 2009

During this month of March, when we celebrate the birth and life of Cheddi Jagan, I am reminded of the close association he had with the great Black American actor/singer, Paul Robeson. It all began like this. Cheddi had established a writing connection with Paul Robeson, more political than cultural. Besides being the greatest male singer of his time, he had very strong political convictions. He was one of the early American Black advocates of equality and full freedom and the end of racial discriminations in the USA. He was a strong man, unafraid when his radical actions started hurting his singing and acting careers.

Already, Paul was blacklisted and not allowed to hold concerts anywhere in the USA, banned from theatres and Hollywood and refused exit from the USA. He would have been received with open hearts, on all concert stages, have no money problems and loved anywhere outside the USA.

I was visiting the USA, New York City sometime in the late 40's, or early 50's, I think. Cheddi gave me Robeson's telephone number in New York and asked me to convey our solidarity. When I got to New York I telephoned and heard the deep, exceptional voice say "Janet, you come over here right now. Hire a taxi and I'll take care of it." Which I did. I was greeted at the door of a modest but very artistically furnished bungalow by Paul and his wife Eslanda at 16 Jumel Terrace. We talked, we had lunch and arrangements were made for myself and Eslanda to meet. I later knew that everyone called her "Essie." We became very good friends over the years, corresponded regularly and met later in Trinidad and London.

I found out that their living conditions were difficult, his once very large income as a singer and actor was down to about zero and he was restricted to singing only in churches that were fearless enough to invite him. Eslanda earned an income of sorts as a journalist at the United Nations, although she had a high level education in the sciences.

I was reminded of all of this whilst looking through some of my books and came across "Here I Stand" by Paul Robeson and inscribed to me in 1958 by Paul and Eslanda. This quote of Robeson explains all – "The artist must take sides."

For the generations of the 20th century in which, he lived and died, (1898-1976) he was a controversial world figure and a reminder of the repression the US government used on those who didn't toe the US line. In those days the progressive movement was not so strong in the US and many Americans were even unaware of how the US government was destroying one of America's best artists.

Paul Robeson was a highly educated man. He had a law degree and, as well, was a great footballer. However, his voice was so great that he would not be allowed to follow a profession other than drama and music. For those who have listened to his records, they can hardly be forgotten. I can still hear his magnificent deep voice, going down, down, as if forever, in the Black Slave Song "Ole Man River." I doubt if anyone still lives who saw him in Shakespeare's "Othello", said to be a superb production, played both in London and New York.

The greatest offence the US government did to Paul Robeson was to incarcerate him for long years in the USA, without access to the concert stage or theatre until he passed the years when his voice lost its very special quality, range, and richness. By the time he was permitted to travel out of the USA, he went on a tour of Australia, where he was welcomed by enraptured audiences.

While the critics were not too harsh, Robeson knew himself well enough to know that his voice was no longer what it had been before. It pushed him into depression and he was sent to a London clinic. I know of this, because Eslanda wrote to me and asked if I was passing through London to be sure to look her up. From her tiny London apartment; she told me the sad story and asked if I would visit him and give him encouragement that he was still highly esteemed as a singer and was well beloved. I was to remind him of the royal welcome he was given by London workers when he left his land of incarceration and crossed the ocean. He was greatly beloved by the British workers who recognized him as their hero, not only a great singer, and joined the world demands for his freedom to travel.

These two men, Jagan and Robeson, both heroes and most beloved by the peoples of their own countries, lived through roughly the same time periods. Jagan was battered with all the punches the US could deliver, yet survived to become Guyana's most beloved Leader. Paul Robeson was probably hit even harder by the USA. Both, together, were strong, honest, talented men of the highest principles, which under maximum pressure, never gave up or gave in.

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