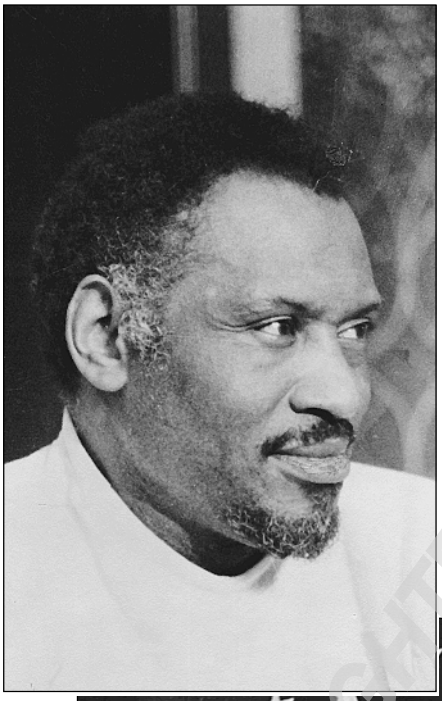
I
"AMERICA'S NUMBER ONE NEGRO"

(1939–1945)



Paul with his Othello beard at the Enfield house in Connecticut, 1945. *Photo by Eslanda Robeson. From the personal collection of Paul Robeson Jr.*

Paul speaking at a meeting in New York, 1939. *Photo by Eslanda Robeson. From the personal collection of Paul Robeson Jr.*

I

THE CALLING

(1939–1940)

On October 23, 1939, my father, Paul Robeson, the American singer, actor, and movie star, strode off the gangplank of the USS *Washington* in New York Harbor. He had come home from England with my mother, Eslanda (Essie), myself, and his longtime accompanist Lawrence "Larry" Brown one month after the start of World War II in Europe. In the wake of Hitler's invasion of Poland and the subsequent declaration of war against Germany by Britain and France, Paul, after twelve glorious years in London, had decided he must return to his native Harlem to be with his people during a time of international crisis.

Essie, gracefully regal in her manner, remained beautiful at forty-four. Although a wide streak of gray ran through her hair, her light olive complexion remained as smooth as ever, and her vivacious personality had the same irresistible charm. Her five-foot-two-inch frame was beginning to thicken, but she countered with a fashionable wardrobe, an ever-expanding intellect, and undiminished energy. Larry, forty-eight, handsome, elegantly dressed, moved with an athletic grace that reflected his young days as one of Florida's top amateur boxers. Paul, even in the swirl of passengers debarking at the Port of New York, was the center of attention. He had sailed out of that same harbor twelve years earlier as the "King of Harlem," and now he returned as an international celebrity.

He cut a striking figure. At forty-one years of age, with no trace of gray hair, standing six feet three inches tall with broad shoulders,

a barrel chest, and a still narrow waist, he towered over most of the crowd. The engaging smile flashing in his dark brown face, the large, wide-set, expressive eyes, and his huge, athletic body gliding forward made him instantly recognizable. Admirers called to him from all sides. Gripping his music briefcase in his left hand, he saluted them with his right, tipping his fashionable Stetson hat. Two customs officials, one white and one black, who had hurried out to meet our party as if we were visiting royalty, led the way.

Grandma Goode, Essie's mother, and a small group of friends greeted us as we emerged from the customs area. Ramrod straight, with her iron gray hair, high-top shoes protruding from under a long black dress, a cane, and a piercing gaze, Grandma was a disciplinarian. She had been my primary caregiver until my father liberated me a few years earlier to live with him and my mother, and I hoped that this arrangement would continue. The exchange of greetings was soon interrupted by the approach of a large group of reporters who bombarded Paul with questions, most of them controversial. Why had he returned from "exile in London"? What was his "current attitude on the race issue"?

In step with the rising black resistance to segregation, Paul was determined to make U.S. racism the main issue. He replied, "My roots are here, and I always expected to come back. In England I considered problems from the point of view of Africa; in this country I look at everything from the point of view of the Negro worker in Mississippi. I wanted success not for money, but so that I could say what I wanted."

"Are you a communist, Mr. Robeson?" a reporter from the Hearst press yelled in response.

"I am not a communist, and I am not a fellow traveler; I'm an antifascist," Paul shot back.

"What about the Stalin-Hitler nonaggression pact?" another reporter challenged.

"No matter what other countries do, including Russia," Paul answered, "I think America should play a key role in building a worldwide antifascist coalition. You don't negotiate with fascists—you fight them."

"But why won't you criticize Stalin?" the reporter persisted.

"Because in Russia I didn't find any race prejudice," Paul answered curtly.[1]

For the third time, Essie, who didn't think Paul should deliberately antagonize the press, tried to terminate the impromptu press conference. The first time, Paul had ignored her. The second time, he had waved her off peremptorily. Now he shrugged good-naturedly, waved, turned abruptly on his heels, and glided off with huge, rapid strides. Essie quickly organized us to fall in behind him, effectively blocking off the press. Over the next several days, Paul arranged multiple interviews with the black press to make certain that his message was disseminated accurately to a nationwide black audience. His subtext conveyed the view that white racists were the main enemies of blacks and that Hitler's Nazis were just like the racists. The Soviet people, who were strongly antiracist and anticolonialist, were the allies of blacks.

For the next few weeks, we lived with Hattie and Buddy Bolling in their comfortable Harlem home, a huge apartment occupying most of the top floor at 188 West 135th Street in Harlem. To my great relief, I stayed there with my parents instead of being shunted off to live with Grandma in her Greenwich Village apartment. Hattie, a heavyset "earth mother" figure in her late forties with a smooth brown complexion and an outgoing disposition, had played the role of older sister to Essie for many years. Buddy, a thin, smallish man ten years older than she, worked at a service job in a major downtown office building. He smoked cigars, told wonderful stories, and had a dry sense of humor. The foursome shared a love for bid whist and spent long evenings at the card table.

Paul rehearsed regularly with Larry, who lived on the floor below. Partners since 1925, the two men had become one of the world's best-known musical teams. Larry was a brilliant arranger and sensitive accompanist. He had helped Paul construct a vast repertoire of the world's folk songs and provided a tenor counterpoint to Paul's bass baritone. Essie prodded Paul to accept any appropriate offer and make a quick reentry onto the American cultural scene. After his long absence abroad, procrastinating even a short while might jeopardize the impending lucrative fall-winter concert season. Paul rebuffed her good-naturedly, believing that an ideal offer would come his way. It soon did.

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The *Pursuit of Happiness Hour* was one of the most popular prime-time entertainments, radio being the principal mass medium of the day. The show's producer, Norman Corwin, was a progressive activist with a keen ear for patriotic songs, and the left-wing composer Earl Robinson had written an eleven-minute-long populist cantata titled "Ballad of Uncle Sam." Corwin had a hunch that Robinson's tribute to democracy would appeal to a sorely divided nation, where conservatives were fiercely attacking liberals over Roosevelt's New Deal and the new labor unions battled management to organize industrial plants. After hearing Robinson perform the cantata, Corwin renamed it "Ballad for Americans" and, with Robinson's enthusiastic agreement, called Bob Rockmore, Paul's combined attorney, agent, financial manager, and friend, with an offer for Paul to sing it on his radio program.

Bob and his Russian-born musician wife, Clara, were both dear to Paul. Short, chain-smoking, balding, and about Paul's age, with piercing eyes and a businesslike manner, Bob had earned Paul's abiding trust. From a working-class Lower East Side Jewish background, he was a partner in the distinguished law firm Barron, Rice and Rockmore, and as one of the East Coast's most accomplished entertainment lawyers, he stayed keenly aware of Paul's professional and financial needs. Bob promptly forwarded Corwin's offer to Paul, along with the music for "Ballad for Americans" and an attached personal note from Corwin.

With Larry at the piano, Paul bit into the cantata like a ripe peach, savoring its everyday language and folk-inspired structure. From the outset of his singing career, Paul had rejected the classical operatic style. Instead, he had adapted his singing technique to his physical attributes. His vocal cords were not particularly strong, but his enormous fifty-one-inch chest expansion, wide throat, large palate, and broad nasal cavity were a sublime match for folk music.

Paul also realized that John LaTouche's simple lyrics were ideally suited to the delivery of a progressive message in song. Throughout the piece, soloist and chorus relate America's struggle for democracy. They tell about George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and "Old Abe Lincoln, thin and long":

> His heart was high and his faith was strong;
> But he hated oppression, he hated wrong.

And he went down to his grave to free the slaves.
Man in white skin can never be free
While his black brother is in slavery.

However, the CBS three-minute time limit required pieces of the seamless eleven-minute cantata to be cut. Paul, with Essie's encouragement, decided he should preserve the artistic integrity of the piece and made Corwin a counteroffer. He proposed that the entire eleven minutes be broadcast and requested a fee of a thousand dollars. That sum was unheard of, especially for a black performer, and the three-minute maximum for a song was one of radio's most rigid standards. Corwin's boss at CBS refused to pay Paul's fee or program the full eleven minutes, but Corwin, not to be discouraged, asked Robinson to perform "Ballad" for a group of top CBS executives.

They were bowled over. "Wouldn't Robeson knock the hell out of this!" Vice President Bill Lewis exclaimed. CBS was ready to bet that the combination of the message and the messenger would be irresistible, and Lewis accepted Paul's terms. The agreement was signed and Paul plunged into intensive rehearsals with Robinson.[2]

At four-thirty on Sunday afternoon, November 5, 1939, six hundred people assembled in the main CBS studio, along with the CBS orchestra and chorus. For the next forty-five minutes, millions across the nation sat by their radios tuned to the *Pursuit of Happiness Hour* until finally the host, actor Burgess Meredith, announced, "What we have to say can be simply said. Democracy is a good thing. It works. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—of these we sing. 'Ballad for Americans'—and the singer, Paul Robeson."

Backed by orchestra and chorus, Paul's majestic voice rolled out over the airwaves, singing in praise of all the ordinary people who made the country great and kept it strong. The compelling, unifying message was that America could overcome any crisis because it put its hope in its people in all their diversity. The ending held out great hope for the future:

Out of the cheating, out of the shouting,
Out of the murders and lynching,
Out of the windbags, the patriotic spouting,
Out of uncertainty and doubting,
It will come again—our marching song will come again,

Simple as a hit tune, deep as our valleys,
High as our mountains, strong as the people who made it.
For I have always believed it,
And I believe it now,
And you know who I am—
AMERICAAAAA!

The ovation from the studio audience lasted for two minutes while the show was still on the air and continued for fifteen minutes thereafter. Hundreds of phone calls jammed CBS's Manhattan and Hollywood switchboards. Thousands of letters poured in requesting words, music, and recordings. "Ballad for Americans" became an instant hit. By popular demand, the radio broadcast was repeated with equal success on New Year's Day. Performances spread across the country among school choruses and choirs. The universally popular recording was issued a few months later. Paul Robeson was now the voice of America.[3]

Fresh from the success of "Ballad," Paul and Essie settled into living quarters of their own. It was a relief. For all of his sociability and energetic engagement with public affairs, Paul was an intensely private person. He thrived on study and solitude. The release of his creative powers required a quiet, comfortable, hospitable retreat from which he could venture forth at will from isolation to engagement. And, notwithstanding his nomadic spirit, he also craved a stable home base with a warm family hearth. Essie had provided this anchorage throughout the nineteen years of their marriage despite the emotional conflicts between them.

Since Paul wanted to live in Harlem, the center of black America's cultural and political influence, Essie found an ideal spot on Sugar Hill, the fabled enclave of the Harlem elite. Located at 555 Edgecombe Avenue, it was a spacious five-room apartment on the fourteenth floor with extensive views south and west. The apartment lent itself to studious work habits as well as to gracious entertaining. Above, on the penthouse floor, was a three-room apartment with a terrace where Grandma Goode and I would live.[4]

I was glad to be in Harlem despite being parked, once again, under Grandma Goode's authority. I accepted my exile to the penthouse with as much grace as a twelve-year-old could muster, but I spent as much time as I could with my parents downstairs. Seeking

the closeness I had experienced with my father in London, I carefully observed his usual daily schedule. A late riser, he ordinarily ate a leisurely brunch while reading the morning papers. A spurt of work or study would follow. Currently, he was studying Chinese using his collection of books and records on the Chinese language. By late afternoon, he was ready to relax for a couple of hours before dinner.

After school one day, I found Grandma gone from the penthouse—an unusual occurrence. Spared of her organizing efforts, I dumped my books and headed downstairs in the hope that I might catch my father in a good mood for a chess game. My arrival interrupted a highly contentious family discussion taking place in the guest room. Grandma Goode was sitting on the bed, her jaw tight. My father, clearly in command, stood in the middle of the room wearing a calm but determined expression. My mother had taken up a position near the foot of the bed. She looked distraught and subdued.

I stopped just inside the room, taking everything in. After a brief silence, Paul looked at Essie and said, in a quiet but commanding voice, "Are you going to tell him?" Essie snapped back, "Well, since you've decided this, *you* should tell him." My father turned to me without hesitation. "I've decided you'll move in with Mama and me down here. We're going to be a regular family. This room is yours. You can bring your things down anytime you like."

I was both surprised and elated, but I took my cue from his matter-of-fact demeanor. "Okay," I said. "I'll go get them now."

It did not take long for Paul to feel at home again in Harlem. Strolling in its heartland around 135th Street and Seventh Avenue, he recalled his days as a local football hero. The Harlem YMCA down the street from Larry's apartment was a familiar landmark. His older brother Ben's church, Mother A.M.E. Zion (the second largest church in Harlem), on 137th Street between Seventh and Lenox avenues, was another.

Uncle Ben, a gentle dark-skinned father figure graying at the temples, was not as tall or broad as Paul but radiated a commanding presence. He welcomed Paul's visits, as did the parishioners when Paul occasionally came to Sunday services and sang with the senior choir. Essie, who had relinquished neither her long-standing remoteness from Ben nor her quasi-atheism, gave the church a wide berth.

Top celebrities now, Paul and Essie appeared together at important Harlem events and cultivated an influential social crowd. More often, Essie organized intimate parties or quiet evenings with friends. This group included educator Ira Reid and his wife, Gladys, Harlem lawyer Hubert Delany, and Dr. Louis Wright, the first black fire department surgeon, and his wife, Corinne. The couple I remember best, Walter White and his wife, Gladys, lived just a few blocks down Edgecombe Avenue and were important acquaintances. They had known my parents since the early 1920s. Walter, the longtime general secretary of the NAACP, was treated as the most important black leader by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Because Essie and Paul's white friends and acquaintances rarely came to Harlem in the evening, they would travel downtown to see them. Paul renewed his long-standing affair with designer Freda Diamond, whose husband, Alfred "Barry" Baruch, maintained a cordial relationship with Paul. Essie, despite her resentment, established a friendship with Freda. Both Paul and Essie revived their contacts with friends from the 1920s and added new ones from left-wing and liberal cultural circles.

Paul decided to keep a strict separation between his artistic performances and his political activity. Rockmore ably took care of his professional career but had neither the time nor the inclination to become involved in his political life. Consequently, Paul turned to Max Yergan to serve as his political aide and speechwriter. Max, the stocky, light-brown-skinned, erudite executive secretary of the Council on African Affairs, of which Paul was the chairman, had met the Robesons in the 1930s and found common ground with them. With the aid of scholar-researcher Alphaeus Hunton, he had made the council the leading U.S. organization concerned with African affairs. Its mission was to promote the independence of all African colonies and to support the full freedom of colored peoples throughout the world. Aside from his post as executive director of the council, Max was president of the National Negro Congress, which had strong roots in the black South. In his dual capacities, he maintained close ties with both the black elite and the communist-led left.

The council, funded through private contributions and public benefits, sponsored conferences and forums on current events and lobbied government officials. A permanent headquarters with a

research library was maintained at 23 West 26th Street in Manhattan, and the membership of twenty to twenty-five, which included Essie, had ultimate decision-making power. Paul's political statements were often issued as press releases.

Paul established a link with the Communist Party USA through his close personal friend Benjamin J. Davis Jr. A top black communist leader, Davis was a well-known and popular Harlem figure. Almost as big as Paul, jovial Ben was a Harvard-trained lawyer who played the violin and had a passion for tennis.

Paul's connection with the Soviet Union was continued through his friendship with the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Konstantin Umansky. In his early forties, urbane, brilliant, witty, and gregarious, Umansky spoke perfect unaccented English and was highly knowledgeable about American politics and culture. He was also a canny judge of Soviet politics and shared some of his insights with Paul.

As the popularity of "Ballad for Americans" grew, Bob Rockmore sought a network radio slot for Paul. All attempts resulted in quick failures—American radio had no room for a regular black presence, no matter how great the talent. The networks were not ready to override the deep-seated racial bias of their affiliates throughout the South. Denied consistent radio work, Paul readily accepted an offer to narrate and sing in an independent documentary film on U.S. civil rights and labor struggles. *Native Land*, codirected by Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand, with a score written by Marc Blitzstein, achieved the status of a classic in its genre. The film was not released until 1942 due to financial difficulties that Paul helped to resolve by personally raising funds. But substantive projects of this kind were unusual. Both Paul's color and his controversial political views kept the radio, film, and theater worlds at a distance. Undiscouraged, Paul sought a suitable Broadway play he could star in. One possibility was already on the table: the lead role producer Sam Byrd had offered him in the musical *John Henry*. The dramatic adaptation of the novel by white author Roark Bradford told an epic folktale about a legendary black railroad worker. It was consistent with Paul's beliefs, revealed some stirring truths about his people, and showcased his strengths as a performer. He thought it merited a gamble.

Essie, however, had her doubts. She had rejected an earlier version of the script on the grounds that it was poorly written and lacked a strong central character. As she put it:

> John Henry is always physically magnificent, but is in the end a dumb beast. I don't think you could do him. I think you could do a dumb, humorous, mischievous ne'er do well, but I don't think you could do a serious no-count character. You are now too aware, too definite-minded, too militant yourself, and you haven't the technical equipment to go against your set personality and quality.[5]

Two rewrites failed to change Essie's mind. Paul, however, calculated that even if the play failed, he would still be viewed as a marketable theatrical star. He felt it was worth the risk. Essie, highly skeptical, reluctantly agreed the project was worth a try.

In late November 1939, Paul began rehearsals for the pre-Broadway run of *John Henry.* The music by innovative New Orleans composer Jacques Wolfe proved true to the southern black folk idiom and comfortable to sing. The diffuse dramatic structure was tightened through painstaking trial and error. On December 11, 1939, a capacity audience at Philadelphia's Erlanger Theater gave Paul and the entire cast a rousing ovation. The most important critics divided three to two against the play but were unanimous in applauding its star. The drama editor in the December 12 issue of the *Philadelphia Daily News* summed up the prevailing view: "*John Henry* was a case of presenting one iridescent bubble as though it were an entire soap factory. Paul Robeson's bass-baritone voice lent an air of importance to the proceedings, despite their general unimportance. For his performance there is even higher praise." The play also fared badly with the Philadelphia public, and its reception in Boston was similar—a short run with fine performances, weak drama, mixed reviews, sparse audiences, but a personal triumph for Paul.

Two weeks later, *John Henry* opened at New York's Forty-fourth Street Theater to a fanfare of positive publicity. Byrd had hired a new director; there was less music and more of a story. The premiere performance drew an enthusiastic packed house that was about evenly divided between blacks and whites. The hundreds of Harlemites who had marched down to the theater created this highly unusual mix. Soon after the ovation from the first-nighters faded away, however,

the play suffered the same fate that had befallen it in Philadelphia and Boston. All six of the major reviews hailed Paul's singing and acting, but five dismissed the play.[6]

With the show deeply in the red, Paul and Essie agreed with Bob's recommendation to close it down after only a week's run. The commercial failure was more precipitous than Paul expected, but he had managed to deliver a performance that achieved at least the minimum results he needed: excellent publicity and much acclaim. Brooks Atkinson's *New York Times* review said it all: "It serves chiefly to renew acquaintance with a man of magnificence who ought to be on the stage frequently in plays that suit him. For there is something heroic about this huge man with a deep voice and great personal dignity. Count as one of the theater's extravagances the fact that Paul Robeson is not an active figure in it."

Equally important, the play about a working-class hero had enhanced Paul's image as a man of his people. At the reception following the New York opening of the play, the artist Frank Herring approached him with the remark, "I'm painting your entire race from the lower crust up, until now I want to paint you." Paul replied, "Sir, you must excuse me, but I recognize no such distinction."[7]

When the exclusive Dutch Treat Club, a lily-white luncheon club whose membership comprised many of New York's outstanding writers and journalists, invited him to sing, Paul failed to honor the invitation and notified no one. The January 20, 1940, issue of the *New York World-Telegram* noted that the club had never suffered "such a complete and embarrassing stand-up," adding that one of the members subsequently recalled an incident in 1925 when the club had invited Paul to be the guest star and left him to eat by himself in another room.

After his back-to-back successes with "Ballad for Americans" and *John Henry*, lucrative professional offers came to him from all directions. However, few, if any, were even remotely consistent with the artistic and personal standards he required as a symbol of black male dignity. Among the offers he declined was a $5,000-a-week contract from Herman Stark, owner of the legendary Cotton Club, to head the club's lavish revue. Cordial as Paul was to the entertainment world at large, he had long since turned his back on entertaining in nightclubs.

While waiting for a suitable offer, Paul joined efforts to create opportunities for black actors uptown by supporting the organizers of the Negro Playwrights' Theater. His ongoing sponsorship of the theater culminated later that year in a prominent appearance with bandleader Cab Calloway, writer Richard Wright, and other Harlem celebrities at the opening of the play *Native Son* based on Wright's novel.[8] Paul also joined Essie and Bob Rockmore in lobbying theatrical producers to take on a Broadway production of Shakespeare's *Othello.* British actress Peggy Ashcroft, who had been Paul's Desdemona in the 1930 London production, agreed to undertake the role again, and Margaret Webster, one of England's leading Shakespearean directors, consented to direct, play the role of Emilia, and fulfill the role of coproducer.[9]

Although the press gave these efforts positive coverage, the leaders of the Broadway theater establishment, along with all of the major white producers and actors, gave the project a wide berth, fearing racial controversy. They assumed America was not yet ready for a black Othello who married a white Desdemona and strangled her onstage. Even Bob and Essie were not convinced that a Broadway production of *Othello* could be mounted at this time. They urged Paul to forget about it and take another crack at the movie industry. Paul would have none of this; he was determined to perform Othello on Broadway in a production over which he exerted control.

Little had changed on the international front between Paul's arrival in the United States in October 1939 and the closing of *John Henry* in January 1940. In the aftermath of the August 1939 Treaty of Nonaggression between Germany and the Soviet Union, the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany from the west on September 1, and the immediately following annexation of the eastern half of Poland by the Soviet Union, World War II remained in its shadowboxing stage. There were no significant military clashes as the world waited to see whether Hitler's army would march east or west.

Against this backdrop, the Soviet Union's 1939–1940 "Winter War" against Finland greatly increased the American public's hostility toward Stalin's Russia. But Paul refused to criticize the Russians, maintaining steadfastly that their foreign policy was essentially defensive

rather than aggressive. At the same time, he openly contradicted the Soviet Union's line, which was also the line of the U.S. Communist Party, that British and French imperialism on the one hand, and Nazi imperialism on the other hand, were *equally* the enemies of progressive humankind. In staking out his own independent position, Paul emphasized his consistent theme that the main enemy was Nazi Germany.

In a series of interviews, he said the goal of the current pro-fascist British and French governments—the "Munich men" who had appeased Hitler with the Munich accord in 1938—was to "save" Nazi Germany from Hitler. If they were successful in this, he said, they hoped to join a de-Hitlerized Germany in a war against communist Russia. Therefore the United States should stay out of the present war.

He added that the absence of significant military clashes between the British-French alliance and the Germans was a sure sign of a "phony war" designed to conceal negotiations between the "Munich men" and the anti-Hitler faction within the Nazi Party. The purpose of the negotiations was to establish "a Western civilization that would not include the Negro, just as it would also exclude Russia, Asia, Africa, China, Japan and India." Based on this analysis, Paul called for an all-out war against fascism led by a coalition of Britain, France, Russia, and the United States.[10]

Bob Rockmore warned Paul that radio network executives were complaining bitterly about his provocative pro-Russian statements, and his apparent immunity from punishment by the entertainment industry was vanishing. But to Bob's chagrin, Paul not only refused to participate in the widely popular theatrical benefits to raise money for "brave little Finland" but also publicly continued to support the Soviet Union's "defensive war" against "reactionary Finland." He shrugged off the resulting wave of criticism, replying that the anti-Soviet crusaders would soon "find themselves in the pro-fascist, pro-Hitler, pro-Mussolini camp."[11]

Despite these interviews, Paul's general popularity continued. At Hamilton College in upstate New York, where he received an honorary degree of doctor of humane letters on January 21, 1940, he gave his audience a glimpse of the broad cultural context that was the source of his political stands. He sang several songs, and then reflected briefly on the universality of diverse cultures. "In the future reorganization of the world," he said, "it is necessary to think of

hundreds of millions of colored peoples belonging to other cultures. [At the same time], one can think of a synthesis of all cultures into one human culture."[12]

In April and May, the German army carried out its "lightning war" against Western Europe, occupying Norway and Denmark and sweeping across Holland and Belgium to outflank the French fortified zone from the north. France fell quickly, and the Germans soon reached the shores of the English Channel, where they began to prepare for an invasion of Great Britain. Winston Churchill came to power as prime minister on May 10, 1940, as the Nazis began their air war against Britain as the first stage of a full-scale invasion. Churchill's first official pronouncement pledged that his nation would never surrender to the Nazis and would fight them to the finish. He inspired his people to close ranks and crush Hitler's air assault.

As a result, Paul reversed his opposition to U.S. aid to Britain. However, this did not placate his critics, who demanded that he denounce the Soviet Union's foreign policy. Faced with lack of opportunity in radio, film, and theater, Paul concentrated on preparing for his first major U.S. concert tour in over five years. In view of his political vulnerability, he decided to stop making political statements until he completed the tour. In the interim, Rockmore scheduled him to appear at major special events during the spring and summer.

On May 13, 1940, Paul opened the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera Festival at the Philharmonic Auditorium with a week's run of the musical *Show Boat.* An all-star cast had been assembled, including several actors from the original 1927 production. Hattie McDaniel, who had played opposite Paul in the popular 1935 film and was a star in her own right, wrote to him regretting that she would miss the opening and hoping that she might be able to play her *Show Boat* role again. She added "an extra wish that 'Joe' will bring down the house with 'Old Man River' (as usual)." The press reported after opening night that Paul had "become an institution as 'Joe,' and when he entered the stage with a bale on his back the audience acted like a football cheering crowd, and almost forgot . . . the operetta."[13]

As he prepared for the concert season, Paul refined his interpretation of "Ballad for Americans," working out a solo version with

Earl Robinson and Larry. Robinson recalled Paul as being extremely cooperative: "He continually checked with me how I wanted a phrase sung, a line read." On June 25, in New York's Lewisohn Stadium, the capacity audience of fourteen thousand applauded for twenty minutes at the close of the concert, and the management was forced to douse the lights. On July 23, Paul was scheduled to sing a concert featuring "Ballad for Americans" in the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. But his agent couldn't find him a hotel after two hours of trying. Paul told him to try again. Finally, a deluxe suite was found at the Beverly Wilshire for $100 a night (about $1,000 in today's currency), which Paul could have if he registered under a different name and agreed to take meals in his room. He took it.

Having arrived at the hotel a couple of days before the concert for rehearsals and publicity, Paul made it a point to spend a few hours every afternoon sitting conspicuously in the lobby. His purpose was to open the way for Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and anyone else to have a place to rest their heads when they next came to Los Angeles. And he succeeded, partially. The hotels were open to selected black guests after that.

The ingrained habits of racism ran deep in the concert world, but they came as a shock to Earl Robinson. On the morning of Paul's performance, the composer of "Ballad for Americans" got a taste of Jim Crow, Southern California style:

> As composer of the piece, I attended a breakfast given by the Hollywood Bowl Association on the morning of the concert. Paul didn't show up, but I didn't think much of it, figuring he was busy or sleeping late. That afternoon I asked him, "Where were you this morning?"
>
> "Where was I what?" he answered. Turned out, he had not been invited—the star of the show, the only person aside from soprano Lily Pons who could guarantee to fill the Bowl.

That evening, a record crowd of twenty-five thousand filled the Hollywood Bowl and gave Paul a great ovation, calling him back to the stage eight times.[14]

On July 28, Paul attracted 165,000 people, as black and white Chicagoans filled Grant Park and overflowed onto the surrounding lawns. This was a highly unusual show of racial unity in a city known

for race riots. Chicago's black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, hailed Paul under the headline "Robeson 'Recaptures' Chicago":

> It is easy to understand why Paul Robeson is the most beloved and the greatest of [the] artists we have produced. Robeson is an artist-fighter for Negro America. Robeson is more than an ambassador for his people. He sings for freedom.
>
> Robeson the singer has learned the relation of art to politics and politics to art. He saw how some Negro artists are used to make a caricature of their own people, to play the Uncle Tom and buffoon. Robeson refused to be [either].
>
> The Negro artist must learn to be a spokesman for Negro freedom. This is what adds greatness to our art. It has made Robeson the greatest of our living artists, the spokesman in art for complete equality for us in all walks of life.

In August, Paul sang at Philadelphia's prestigious Robin Hood Dell before a capacity audience of six thousand, which accorded him "limitless cheers" for a program ranging from a group of spirituals and a Hebrew prayer, through English and Russian folk songs, to a solo arrangement of "Ballad for Americans." The inevitable encore, "Ol' Man River," capped the evening. The critics were no less appreciative than the audience.[15]

A few days later, Paul appeared in a summer theater production of *The Emperor Jones*. Written by Eugene O'Neill more than two decades earlier as a breakthrough in the portrayal of the black male with a measure of human dignity, the play was encumbered by stereotypes. Nevertheless, the erstwhile Pullman porter Brutus Jones had become a signature of Paul's to a degree almost matching the song "Ol' Man River."

Paul cut the word "nigger" from the script. He also asked director James Light and composer Colin McPhee to add new elements and construct innovative scenery. The weeklong August run of *Emperor* at the Country Playhouse in Westport, Connecticut, broke all records for that theater, and a second one-week run followed with equal success at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey.[16]

Paul accepted a major offer in October. John Hammond, of the Columbia Recording Corporation, talked him into doing a blues tribute to Joe Louis—"King Joe"—with Count Basie's jazz band.

Novelist Richard Wright had written the lyrics, and Basie himself had composed the song. With Paul singing, Hammond was convinced the recording would be a classic. Paul tried his best at the studio session, but it became obvious that the blues were not his forte. After the session, Basie and Paul joked about it, with Paul laughing good-naturedly at Basie's admonition: "You should stick to what you know." Ironically, the record, released on the Okey label, became an immediate best-seller—a tribute to the marketing power of four famous names.[17]

Bob Rockmore negotiated a pathbreaking concert tour contract for Paul. In addition to top fees, it included the highly unusual stipulation that he would not appear before segregated audiences. Paul shunned political appearances throughout the summer of 1940. Ironically, "Ballad for Americans" was featured at the nominating conventions of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and the Communist Party, but he refused to perform it at any of those venues.

Paul prepared for his tour systematically, remembering his past vocal difficulties under the stress of such grueling marathons lasting seven months or more. Working with Professor Harold Burris-Meyer of Stevens Institute of Technology, he participated in the development of an electronic sound system for the concert stage. The mechanism provided a sound envelope around Paul so he could easily hear himself while performing, allowing him to sing in a relaxed manner in large halls without forcing his voice. The equipment was simple and compact: a small microphone in front of the footlights fed the sound to an amplifier, and a small highly directional speaker at the side of the stage threw back significant harmonics to the performer without affecting the sound heard by the audience. He became so used to this device that whenever he sang without it on informal occasions he took to cupping his right hand to his ear to hear himself. They dubbed this pioneering system "Synthea."[18]

Paul invited Clara Rockmore, Bob's wife, to join him on the tour as the associate artist. Diminutive and charming, Clara was a brilliant musician and retired concert violinist. She cut a striking figure—large dark eyes, a flashing smile, and jet black hair framing a

beautiful face with an alabaster complexion. Having emigrated from Russia in the 1920s, she remained steeped in Russian culture, and her fluent English was tinged with a piquant accent. She and Paul delighted in their long talks in Russian about music and Russian poetry.

Clara had mastered the theremin, the world's first electronic instrument, which she played almost magically by moving her hands in the air through electromagnetic and electrostatic fields. She was arguably the only person able to achieve the artistry and muscle control required to produce classical music on this instrument. Paul admired its violinlike, ethereal sound and asked her to play as a regular part of his concert program. Clara's keen intellect, broad range of interests, and vast musical knowledge belied her almost childlike manner. But at the beginning of the tour, Paul had to educate her in the grim realities of American race relations. One day she gave him a playful hug in public and he instantly detached himself from her, remonstrating, "Do you want to get me killed?"[19]

On tour, both Paul and Clara were in rare form. The headline in the October 2, 1940, issue of the *Manchester Union* of New Hampshire read, "Robeson Thrills Throng of 1,700; Clara Rockmore on Mysterious Theremin Shares Acclaim." The article hailed Paul's "flawless singing," which inspired demands for "encore after encore." On October 4, the *Troy Record* of upstate New York reported on a "performance that was an unforgettable event for Troy music lovers." Paul sang "with the fierce energy of groundswell emotion, or smoothly and sweetly with the lightness of an errant breeze."

On university campuses, in small cities, and in large urban centers, Paul's performances had to appeal to a wide variety of audiences. His populist repertoire of Negro spirituals and folk songs of many lands enthralled them all. A typical program consisted of an opening set of spirituals, a group of classical Russian songs, the patriotic favorite "Ballad for Americans," and a closing mix of traditional folk songs. Songs with more social significance were saved for the encores.

A few music critics questioned this emphasis. For example, an October 24 review in the *Minneapolis Star Journal* complained that Paul's program should have offered "greater [musical] tasks and more significant songs." Paul brushed aside these criticisms,

noting with satisfaction the praise of the Mussorgsky songs he regularly included. He added several more classical songs with a folk base, including two main arias from Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*.

Despite the immense popularity of Paul's concerts, he was not universally welcomed. An ugly racial incident occurred at one of San Francisco's most famous restaurants, Vanessi's. When Paul's party went to eat there, they were refused service, and a scuffle nearly erupted between the owner and Paul. A lawsuit against the restaurant was brought by Paul along with eight black and white friends, but it never came to trial.[20]

By December 1940, Paul had established himself as arguably the most popular concert singer in the United States. His appeal lay not only in his singing but also in his stage persona. The lithe grace of his huge strides as he glided onto the stage, the relaxed and informal introductions of his songs, the stillness of his towering frame as he sang, and the range of emotions infusing his delivery combined to produce a compelling effect. As a Buffalo, New York, critic put it, "For Mr. Robeson the song he is singing—be it art-song, simple folk-tune or popular song of the day—is the most important thing. Unconventional, yes, and perhaps for the chance musical cultists or Brahmins who may have been present, uncomfortable; but for those who love beautiful and sincere singing, completely delightful."[21]

Clara toured for three seasons with Paul, growing to respect him as a musician. She never ceased to be amazed at the contrast between his calm dismissal of racial slights directed at him personally and his frightening anger at insults or violence directed at his people as a whole. In 1946, during a particularly vicious spate of violence against returning black war veterans in the South, she remembered him pacing the floor of her living room in such a rage that she felt compelled to calm him down.

Paul and Clara shared a unique relationship as intimate friends but not as lovers. I met Clara during those years, and we maintained a friendship until her death in 1999. Over several decades, we spent many hours talking about my father. She felt Paul made far too much of his inability to sight-read. While he could not spontaneously sing a musical composition at first sight, she knew him to read music, including orchestrations and choral arrangements, more than

adequately for his performance needs. As to the issue of whether Paul should have studied opera, Clara, contrary to some critics, thought that singing opera and other classics such as German lieder would not have made him a greater singer and might well have diminished the unique quality of his voice.

The triumph of Paul's return to the American concert stage after an extended absence freed him to ignore the minority of music critics who continued to carp about his lack of "classical" repertoire and style. By creating an endearing populist image of himself in the mind of the public, he had become the singer who belonged to the people.

Writing to Paul on December 29, Brooks Atkinson, the theater critic of the *New York Times*, reverently expressed this phenomenon: "A few days ago I bought a copy of your 'Ballad for Americans.' I feel thankful for your voice . . . and for the fortitude and honesty of your character. They fill this extraordinary ballad with the sort of humanity I respect and love."[22]