

New Museum School Podcast Transcript– 2019/2020

PODCAST TITLE: *A Site for Solidarity*

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HOST INSTITUTION: *Southbank Centre*

SCRIPT

NMS INTRO STING

LINK 1

Hi, my name is Ufuoma Essi and I'm an archive trainee in the Heritage and Archive department at Southbank Centre. In this podcast, I'm going to look at the life of Paul Robeson and his connection with Southbank Centre as well as Southbank Centre being a site for solidarity.

The Royal Festival Hall is one of the most famous concert halls in the world and has been a host to some of the most influential and famous musicians, writers, activists and artists. In a lot of ways, the Royal Festival Hall is at the heart of Southbank Centre. It's a place I know well as the year before I started working at Southbank Centre my university graduation was held at the Royal Festival Hall.

Southbank Centre comprises the Royal Festival Hall, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Hayward Gallery. Built as part of the Festival of Britain, the South Bank Centre concert halls were originally funded and managed by the London County Council, and its successor, the Greater London Council. The Royal Festival Hall opened on the 3rd of May 1951. A ceremonial concert was held, attended by King George the Sixth and Queen Elizabeth to mark its opening. Since being founded in 1951, Southbank Centre

has grown to be the UK's largest arts centre, acclaimed for diverse and groundbreaking programming.

Since I've started working in the Heritage and Archive team at Southbank Centre, I've come across some fascinating artists that have performed in the Royal Festival Hall. One of the most interesting people I came across is the American actor, singer and activist Paul Robeson. I've been a big fan of Robeson's work and even took a film class while studying abroad about his contribution to the legacies of African Americans in TV and film – this is when I watched his show-stopping performance in *Showboat* for the first time.

Born in 1898 in New Jersey, Paul Robeson was an acclaimed stage and film actor. He was a talented bass-baritone and could sing in more than 20 different languages. Robeson appeared in Hollywood musicals and films such as *Showboat* and plays such as *Othello*, which he also starred in at the Savoy Theatre in London. He was widely acknowledged as the greatest American footballer of his generation, and he was also a prominent political activist who, in the 1930s and 1940s, exerted an influence comparable to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in a later era.

Robeson built his career in the 1930s despite the Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation, a racist and violent American apartheid system that controlled every aspect of African American life. He came to London with his wife Essie partly to escape the brutal racism of the United States. Yet later in life he always insisted that he became a radical as much because of his experience in Britain as in America. Racism in Britain was also inescapable. Robeson left his mark in the United Kingdom through his work as a performer, but he also developed a deep bond with the labour movement, particularly with the miners of Wales.

In 1960, Robeson performed at the Movement for Colonial Freedom Benefit Concert in the Royal Festival Hall. Founded in the United Kingdom in 1954, the Movement for Colonial Freedom was a political and civil rights organization. Its supporters included Labour MP and future Prime Minister Harold Wilson and composer Benjamin Britten as well as activists such as the Pakistani Welfare Association, Ratta Singh, President

of the Indian Workers Association, and Claudia Jones, Editor of the *West Indian Gazette*.

LINK 2

The Movement for Colonial Freedom Benefit Concert was an event programmed during African Freedom Day. It was an annual concert and event held at Southbank Centre from 1960 till 1969.

LINK 3

Southbank Centre became a site of protest and solidarity by hosting influential artists and activists. In 1960, the same year that Robeson performed at the Movement for Colonial Freedom's Benefit Concert, a number of prominent African American singers and musicians also played in the Royal Festival Hall such as Sarah Vaughan and Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

In recent years I myself have enjoyed attending important events at the WOW festival as well as attending talks by Angela Davis, Michelle Obama and Nikki Giovanni. The Royal Festival Hall for me is a place where important voices are allowed the space to flourish and has been a site of solidarity for many artists, singers, musicians and activists.

The Movement for Colonial Freedom was an influential organization, and its 1960 Benefit Concert was said to be Paul Robeson's last concert in the United Kingdom. In 1963, Robeson returned to the United States, to a political climate where African Americans were going through a transformative period and demanding their civil rights. He spent his final years in Philadelphia, the city that I was living in when I first discovered Robeson's films – I was taking a film class given by the distinguished film historian, Donald Bogle.

Robeson's connection with Southbank Centre is no accident. As it says on the website:

“Southbank Centre’s mission is its belief that art has the power to help change society for the better and that art must be accessible.”

Southbank Centre has celebrated Robeson throughout the years even in his absence from the Royal Festival Hall. In 1968, on the 8th of April, Southbank hosted Paul

Robeson’s 70th Birthday Party, and in 1999 Southbank celebrated his life and work. Southbank Centre has remained a site for change, protest and solidarity, and provided a space for activists and performers to lead their voices for change and protest.

I think it’s quite remarkable that Paul Robeson’s legacy can be traced back to Southbank Centre as he, to me, represents the true meaning of solidarity, resistance and progress. I’m happy to have found a little piece of history amongst the archives at Southbank Centre.

NMS OUTRO STING

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