

Paul Robeson

April 1982, September 1991, and January 1992 Calendars

While his achievements in athletics, academics and activism are all remarkable, it was his ability to break through racial barriers and establish new opportunities for African Americans in the theater that made Paul Robeson one of the most influential performing artists of his generation.

The son of a former slave, Robeson and his four siblings were raised by their father after their mother died in a house fire. He grew up bright and ambitious; and his talents led to a four year scholarship to Rutgers University, where he excelled at his lessons and on the football field. He graduated in 1919 with highest honors, delivering the valedictory address.

Robeson went on to graduate from Columbia Law School: and while looking for law work, he supported himself and his wife by singing at the Plantation Club in Harlem. This began his prolific stage and concert career, during which he helped establish African American spiritual and multilingual folk songs as recognized art forms.

In 1924, Robeson opened in Eugene O'Neil's "All God's Chillun Got Wings" to rave reviews, but it was not until 1928 when he sang "Ol' Man River" in the London production of "Show Boat" that he became



an overnight sensation.

Robeson's signature role came in 1930, when he performed as Othello in London. Repeating the role on Broadway 13 years later, Robeson played Othello for a record breaking 296 performances, then traveled the country with the play for another two seasons.

In 1959, he became the first African American man to perform as Othello in the 100-year history of the Shakespeare Memorial Theater in Stratford-on-Avon.

In 1963, Robeson returned to the U.S. after a five year absence and continued the civil rights work that was his passion during his long stage, film, and concert career. He

retired from public life two years later. In 1972, he was one of 33 individuals, and the only African American, selected as a charter member of the National Theater Hall of Fame.

Although Robeson died in 1976 at age 77, his powerful legacy continues. In 1983, he was given a star on Hollywood's Sidewalk of Stars, and he was awarded a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1998.