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'Borderlines: Paul Robeson and Film'

At MOMA, through July 3

Paul Robeson was far more than a movie star, and most of the movies in which the awesomely gifted singer-athlete-political activist appeared were unworthy of his talents. MOMA's retrospective, timed to coincide with the Museum of the City of New York's own Robeson show, not only includes the "race," Hollywood, and independent films in which Robeson appeared between 1925 and 1942 but, throughout its final week, a selection of newsreels and documentaries culled from East German archives. Here, Robeson emerges as the Voice of another America, performing his "progressive" version of "Ol' Man River" in Moscow or singing "Water Boy" for an audience of East German factory workers.

Attacking racial injustice at home while defending the Soviet Union abroad, Robeson was a prime target for American anti-communists. After his passport was confiscated, he made East German films from the U.S., narrating the 1954 Joris Ivens documentary *Song of the Rivers* (which also featured Brecht lyrics to Shostakovich music) and teaming with composer Earl Robinson for a filmed concert. To see this titanic comrade and hear his rumbling bass, at once inspirational and comforting, is to understand why although both Elvis and Malcolm have been honored with postage stamps, mighty Robeson is still being red-baited a decade after the Cold War's end. —J. HOBERMAN

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