

TF  
presents

The Coalition of Concerned Black Americans

**AN OPEN FORUM**

**"PAUL ROBESON"**

**THE PLAY, THE PROTEST, THE LEGACY, & THE LESSONS**

guest speakers

**JAMES BALDWIN**

**JULIAN BOND**

panelists

**PAUL  
ROBESON, JR.**

**CLAYTON  
RILEY**

**DR. JEWELL HANDY  
GRESHAM**

moderator **GIL NOBLE**

Host/Producer, WABC-TV's "LIKE IT IS"

**THE ISSUES AT STAKE**

**The Packaging of Robeson for Broadway:**

What is the *real* history of the play? Who were the packagers? The writers? The promoters?  
What were the *real* motives? Who are the *real* "censors"? What is the continuing threat?

**The commercialization of heroes and history:**

What is the *line between*: Artistic license and dishonesty? Substance and sentimentality?  
Interpretation and exploitation? Criticism and censorship? Fact, fiction and fraud?

**What do we owe our heroes—and how do we claim our legacy?**

**audience participation invited**

**FRIDAY, MAY 12, 7:30 pm.**

Hunter College Assembly Hall  
68th St. & Lexington Avenue  
General Admission only \$5.50

Due to the exceptional public interest in these two events, it is recommended that you purchase in advance and come early for best seating.

Tickets available at all **TICKETRON** outlets. (212) 977-9020

AND

**Maya  
an evening with Angelou**

The full range of one of America's great artists in a rare New York appearance

••**SATURDAY, MAY 20, 8pm.**•••••

McMillan Theater, Columbia University  
116th St. & B'way Orch: \$6.50; Mezz: \$5.50 ••

**MAIL ORDERS:** Please send stamped, self-addressed envelope with check or money order made payable to:  
The Coalition of Concerned Black Americans, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, N.Y. 10027 **Important:** No mail orders  
can be honored if received after Friday, May 5, for "Robeson" forum, or after Monday, May 15, for "Angelou" concert.

I am enclosing \$ \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_ tickets for "ROBESON" forum, and

(total amt. enclsd.) (no. of tickets)

\_\_\_\_\_ tickets at \_\_\_\_\_ for "ANGELOU" concert.

(no. of tickets)

(\$6.50 or \$5.50)

Tickets available at all **TICKETRON** outlets. (212) 977-9020

# Why CCBA is sponsoring these public events

(See other side for announcement.)

On Jan. 11, 1978, 56 prominent Black Americans published a paid, two-page ad entitled "A Statement of Conscience" in *Variety*, the organ of the entertainment industry. The focus of this statement was the play *Paul Robeson*—and the declaration represented the culmination of the protest that had followed the play through a 15-week tour of major cities en route to Broadway.

Recently, without warning, WNBC-TV reporter Carl Stokes, in an unprecedented three-part series totalling 28 minutes of prime news time, launched an all-out attack on the signers of the statement. Among the 56 (strangely never identified on the air!) were Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and Julian Bond; historian Lerone Bennett; novelists John Killens and Piri Thomas; playwrights Loftin Mitchell, Alice Childress and Lonne Elder III; Mrs. Coretta Scott King; New York Supreme Court Judge William Booth and Detroit Mayor Coleman Young; Harvard Profs. Alvin Poussaint, Derrick Bell, and Ewart Guinier; Department Chairmen and Profs. of Afro-American and African Studies at nine major universities; and the entire Board of Bishops of the A.M.E. Zion Church in America.

**The statement at issue was in fact an historic document—for never before had so distinguished a group addressed the entertainment industry in this fashion.** Reasoned and temperate in tone, the statement did not *attack* the industry. It did not urge a boycott or picketing of the play. It attempted rather, to *address* the industry on a matter of vital concern: the packaging of the Black image for mass consumption, the diminution and trivialization of Black heroes and history in commercial production, and, in the case at hand, what the committee regards as "a pernicious perversion, however unintended, of the essence of Paul Robeson." It was an effort to engage those responsible, and all concerned citizens, in a serious discussion of *ideas*.

That discussion of ideas **never took place.**

Instead, the language of denunciation used by critics of the committee, as exemplified by the Stokes-WNBC broadcasts, included such terms as: "radicals with bees in their bonnets," "Black un-American Activities Committee," "It [the statement] approaches criminality," "a damnable... self-appointed censor board [advocating] genocidal censoring of drama." *The New Republic* described the signers as "vigilantes" and "the threatening mob."

This attitude toward Black protesters contrasts markedly with the attitude of the media towards members of white protesting groups. We believe such discrimination in response where Blacks are concerned to represent something fundamental in America's long and tortured racial history. Notwithstanding the calibre of the statement or its signers, **neither the full text nor significant excerpts were ever presented by any organ of the major media or press (including NBC, which quoted only nine words in its report to the public.)**

Nonetheless, the wildly unsubstantiated charges and deliberate misrepresentations of Stokes against a roster of America's most distinguished Black citizens were picked up by the TV critic of *The New York Times*, John O'Connor, amplified further, and repeated as fact elsewhere.

Despite repeated efforts by the Robeson committee to gain access to the media to rebut the attack, WNBC-TV permitted only ten minutes of rebuttal, followed by additional programs by Stokes designed to buttress the original attack. *The Times* simply refused to carry any rebuttal at all. (Earlier, it had declined to publish even the statement by James Baldwin reprinted below.)

In the face of such a massive assault on the First Amendment rights of Black Americans, the Coalition of Concerned Black Americans felt a public forum on the subject of the controversy and the associated issues of art and censorship to be urgently needed.

In this context, the CCBA feels that a corollary question must be posed: **Is the vast power of the New York City media being used to silence Black dissent?**

CCBA has therefore undertaken as an educational project **the first public forum designed to make possible full discussion of the issues involved in the controversy.** Questions from the audience will be invited.

CCBA is also proud to present Ms. Maya Angelou in an evening of rare and varied offerings reflecting the quality and range of her multi-faceted artistry.

These programs have been made possible through the wide support of church and community groups.

**COALITION OF CONCERNED BLACK AMERICANS**  
The Interchurch Center, 475 Riverside Drive,  
New York, N.Y. 10027

## "THIS DANGEROUS GROUND..."

### A Statement by James Baldwin

It is tempting to dismiss the Robeson Ad Hoc Committee as an "un-black activities committee," but this is inaccurate and unfair. The accusation is not supported either by the tone, or the language, of the committee's statement. This statement was, after all, drawn up by writers, and every writer loathes and distrusts this sort of controversy.

Yet, the danger of such a controversy is part of one's calling, or, the acceptance of this danger is part of one's responsibility. In my own case, my commitment to Robeson has had to outweigh other considerations, and, however uncomfortable my position may be, it is the only honest position I can take.

The committee is distressed, as I am, by the trivialization of Robeson. It is concerned about the debasement of his legacy. This is dangerous ground indeed, of course, for a legacy like Robeson's is subject to many interpretations. On the other hand, Robeson is not yet a historical figure, has not yet entered the limbo of the public domain. He lives, overwhelmingly, in the hearts and minds of the people whom he touched, the people for whom he was an example, the people who gained from him the power to perceive and the courage to resist. It is not a sentimental question. He lived in our times, we live in his. There was a human interaction between us: For example, I took my then 14-year-old baby sister to see him when he was, at last, allowed to sing in New York, because it was important that the little girl see him with her own eyes. Important for her to *know* that such a man was in the world.

Thus, it is not a matter of setting a historical record straight, or a matter of historical interpretation. It is a matter of bearing witness to that force which moved among us.

It has been obliquely suggested that, since I have not seen the play, I can have no judgments concerning it, or that my judgment is doomed to be unfair. This is nonsense. Plays are read and judged—seen, in the mind's eye—long before they are produced: Indeed, this is *how* they are produced.

If the play were not called *Paul Robeson*, it might well be hailed as an exceedingly able tour de force. It was written by a craftsman. And, if one reads the play knowing that James Earl Jones is going to play Paul Robeson, one can almost feel the electricity with which Jones will fill the theatre. The Jones incandescence would beautifully transform the script.

Ah. But the exceedingly inconvenient question of the script remains, and the responsibility that goes beyond the script has placed us on this dangerous ground. I hope I do not need to say that no one wishes to burn the script and no one is willing to stone the author: We have all been stoned too often. Nor is it true that some of us wanted a discussion of "scientific socialism" and have been confronted with a poem, nor that we wanted a photograph and have been bewildered by a painting.

The man the play presents is not Paul Robeson. That is all that we are saying. There is much, much more than this to say, for this controversy raises enormous questions, questions within questions: of life versus entertainment, life versus art, of awaking or sleeping, of warring responsibilities with which we will be struggling until we die. Yet, at the moment, it must be said: This man is not Paul Robeson. We *must* say this, since we are here, we are living, and we knew him. We *must* say this so that our children's children's children will know better than we did how to honor and protect him when they meet him in their own lives. ■

James Baldwin, *Village Voice*, March 27, 1978

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