

Song of Freedom

UK | 1936 | 80 minutes

Credits

Director	J. Elder Wills
Screenplay	Ingram D'Abbes/Fenn Sherie
Photography	Eric Cross/Thomas Glover/ Harry Rose
Music	Eric Ansell
Cast	
Johnny Zinga	Paul Robeson
Ruth Zinga	Elisabeth Welch
Gabriel Donozetti	Esme Percy
Monty	Robert Adams

In Brief

Although no-one could call this a great movie, it is of compelling historical interest. At a time when Black people in the movies were servants or scoundrels, Paul Robeson portrayed a London dock-worker who is discovered by an impresario and launches a great singing career; after that, he goes to Africa to bring education and enlightenment to the tribespeople.

It's easy to be harsh on this movie; it shows the people of Africa as benighted savages in need of guidance (only this time they get it from Robeson, playing an Afro-cockney). The whole second half also plays in tropical-adventure mode, with all the clichés of the 1930s.

But you have to realize that the film's sympathies are with the London dock-workers, black and white; it goes to great lengths to show them treating each other with friendship and respect, and this is the most notable part of the story. Everyone else is

a caricature - the impresario, the aristocratic explorer, the witch-doctor, and so on.

Anyone who has a tolerance for 1930s films will quickly realize that this is much better than most of them, and is worth a look for many reasons, not the least is the opportunity to hear Robeson's great singing voice. One curious fact is that this is from Hammer Studios, which later became identified with horror films.

Song of Freedom

A substantial acknowledgement of the history of black Britons and their position in contemporary (1930s) Britain can be found in *Song of Freedom* (d. J Elder Wills, 1936), an exceptional star vehicle for Paul Robeson.

After the embarrassment of *Sanders of the River* (d. Zoltan Korda, 1935), Robeson insisted on a clause in his contract allowing him to approve the final editing. Consequently, he tried, almost successfully, to appear in a film that included a hero who departed from the traditional racist stereotypes. However, in spite of its shortcomings (the sequence set in Africa is embarrassing), Robeson valued the film as "[the first] to give a true picture of many aspects of the life of the coloured man in the west."

Robeson's performance beautifully expresses John Zinga's feeling of social displacement, his desire to visit his ancestral home in Africa and the need to find his people. Zinga is shown to have integrated into London's dockland community together with his wife, Ruth (Elisabeth Welch), although some critics have found the couple's portrayal bourgeois and unrealistic.

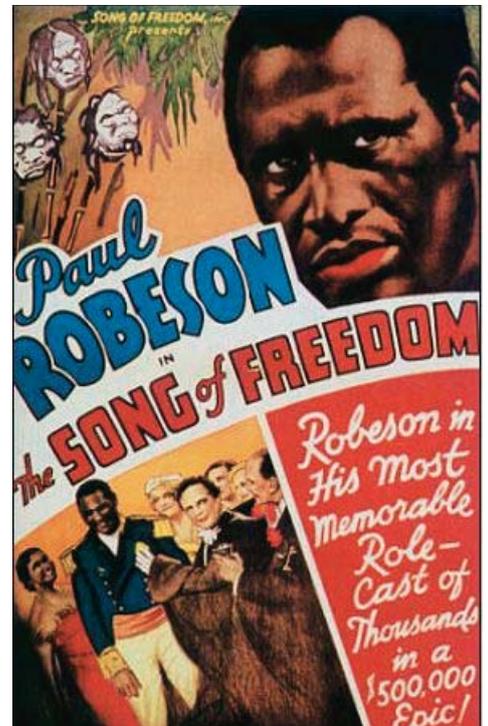
Ruth departs from the stereotypical depiction of black women in films upto that time. For example, in American cinema they were caricatured as clownish, desexualised mammies or maids. Ruth is neither: she is an intelligent, articulate and caring wife.

One of the most striking features of *Song of Freedom*, and one that has been completely ignored, is the loving relationship between John and Ruth. At the end of an emotional musical interlude in which John sings 'Sleepy River' to his wife, the couple kiss, probably the first time a black couple were permitted to do so in a film.

For a British film of the 1930s, all this is revolutionary - especially when we remember that *Song of Freedom* was released within a year of *Sanders of the River*. In spite of its highly improbable plot, and stereotypical depiction of Africans, *Song of Freedom* is a landmark film within the history of British cinema for two reasons: it acknowledges the black presence in 1930s England, and it shows that it was possible for a black man to be born in Britain.

It is the only film in which Robeson played a British-born character rather than Africans or African-Americans. It is a radical departure from previous representations of black people in British films, but sadly one that has never been fully appreciated.

- Stephen Bourne



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GUILD

Paul Robeson