

# **In Rotation**

## **Seth Kim-Cohen**

*The Chicago Reader, 2017*

*The “In Rotation” column asks people to respond to the question:  
“What are you listening to right now?”*

At a press conference in the mid-1940s, Paul Robeson – singer, actor, All-American football player, Columbia Law School graduate – announced that he would only sing for the rights of his people, “No pretty songs, gentlemen,” he told the press. “Time for some full citizenship.”

At a Robeson concert in 1949, Ku Klux Klan and anti-Communist protestors, chanting “wake up, America!” attacked attendees with baseball bats and rocks. A cross was burned. Robeson was lynched in effigy. Police chose not to intervene. Afterwards, the local Klan received 748 membership applications. Eight days later, Robeson returned and performed, surrounded by a human shield comprised of labor union and Communist Party members.

Robeson was targeted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (a committee Newt Gingrich wants to revive), his passport was revoked, and his U.S. concerts were cancelled at the behest of the F.B.I. (remember them?). When Robeson visited Chicago in October, 1949, the Sun-Times and the Tribune sent reporters. But, worried about offending their subscribers, they chose not to publish stories.

We’re all spinning these days, like records off their spindles. The needle’s lost contact with the groove. So, I’m not *listening to* anything. I’m *listening for* something; something lost to the vacuous caterwaul of history. I’m listening for the songs that history prevented Paul Robeson from singing. I’m listening for Robeson’s call-to-arms. I’m listening for

songs of radical solidarity, songs of unequivocal repudiation, songs of ferocious  
resistance, songs of and for the oppressed. No pretty songs, gentlemen. No pretty songs.