

# Larger Than Life

NASHVILLE SCULPTOR ALAN LEQUIRE'S OVERSIZED CULTURAL HEROES HONOR "GRANDPARENTS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT" BY **JEFF GOLDMAN**



Folk singer Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly, was one of sculptor Alan LeQuire's five original "Cultural Heroes."

**I**n a city known for its many contributions to the music world, Alan LeQuire has quite literally carved out his own niche in Nashville, Tennessee.

Best known for his full-scale re-creation of Athena, the largest free-standing interior statue in the Western world, and for *Musica*: nine, 16-foot tall dancing figures that salute Nashville's diverse music industry, LeQuire's latest project is somewhat smaller in scope but might be his most significant.

LeQuire unveiled the first five in an ongoing series of enormous portrait heads called "Cultural Heroes" in the fall of 2000. The first five, all performing artists from the first half of the 20th century, are vaudeville artist Bessie Smith (1894-1937); jazz vocalist Billie Holiday (1915-1959); folk singer Woody Guthrie (1912-1967); songwriter and performer Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly, 1888-1949); and singer, actor, athlete and social activist Paul Robeson (1898-1976). LeQuire refers to the quintet as being "the grandparents of the civil rights movement."

He became interested in the idea of sculpting portrait heads after a visit to the Cluncy Museum in Paris. There, LeQuire became enamored with the striking, larger-than-life heads of the Kings of France, which had been

displayed on the façade of Notre Dame before being broken during the French Revolution. LeQuire, however, wanted to translate that to his interest in "real people who succeeded despite obstacles."

Ironically, the vision for "Cultural Heroes" came to LeQuire during one of his darkest hours. After completing the *Musica* sculpture, LeQuire endured quite a bit of flak from the conservative sect in Nashville because the dancers happened to be nude.

One evening while watching television, he came across a PBS *American Masters* documentary on Robeson and realized that he really didn't know the meaning of hardship.

"I didn't know what suffering was until I saw what Paul Robeson went through," says LeQuire at his Nashville gallery in the fall. "He and the other artists in the series don't get enough credit for what they accomplished."

And so it began. The more LeQuire thought about it, the more he liked the idea of honoring Robeson, who became LeQuire's first "hero."

"I began thinking about him and his life and wanting to do something to memorialize Robeson," LeQuire told an audience at the unveiling of the sixth hero, contralto singer Marian Anderson, in the Nashville Public Library. "I had this idea I should (create) a colossal head—a real

person, not some emperor. The idea was not to create a realistic likeness. For me the idea was to try to re-create a living presence."

LeQuire grew up around art as his mother, Louise, was an art teacher, writer and painter. He learned bronze casting while working as an assistant to Milton Hebard in Rome. The first major commission he received was the Athena replica in 1982. Standing nearly 42 feet tall, it took eight years to complete and made its debut at the Nashville Parthenon (a full scale replica of the Athens original) in April 1990. The statue of Nike in Athena's right hand stands 6-foot-4 inches tall.

The gold leaf portion was added in 2002 for \$190,000.

LeQuire spends much of his time at LeQuire Gallery, which is a little different from a typical art gallery in that it contains a working studio. Visitors who stop in are welcome to enter the studio and catch a glimpse of LeQuire working on his next hero, Louis Armstrong, which will be unveiled in late 2010 or early 2011. "We feel that sets us apart," says Elizabeth Cave, who manages the gallery.

Of the five inaugural members of LeQuire's original exhibit, Robeson has the closest ties to the New York City area. The son of an escaped slave who went on to become a Presbyterian minister, Robeson was born in Princeton, New





It took LeQuire eight years to complete Athena, which stands nearly 42 feet tall and is the largest free-standing interior statue in the Western world



LEFT: LeQuire considers each of the "Cultural Heroes" artists to be role models who succeeded despite obstacles. RIGHT: LeQuire's admiration for New Jersey native Paul Robeson was the inspiration for the "Cultural Heroes" series



Jersey, grew up in Somerville, went on to be a football star and class valedictorian (and only African-American student) at Rutgers in New Brunswick, which was then a small, private all-male college. He then moved to Harlem where he got his start in the theater and attended Columbia Law School.

Robeson went on to be a star as a singer, (LeQuire finds Robeson's rendition of "Old Man River" particularly powerful) in the theater and on the big screen and eventually became involved in the civil rights movement. He became known as a symbol in the war against fascism abroad and racism in the United States after spending a few years living in Europe and the Soviet Union. Although he was befriended by the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman for being an outspoken advocate of civil rights and social justice, Robeson found himself in the crosshairs of Sen. Joseph McCarthy and targeted as a threat by those who favored the status quo.

In the words of writer Lloyd Brown, "Paul

Robeson was the most persecuted, the most ostracized, the most condemned black man in America, then or ever."

Robeson, who died in Philadelphia in 1976, has left quite a legacy in the New York-New Jersey area.

The home where Robeson lived from 1939-41 at 555 Edgecombe Ave. in Manhattan was named for him after his death in 1976 and was added to the National Register of Historic Places the same year. The building sits on what was once the corner of Edgecombe and 160th Street. In late September it was renamed Paul Robeson Boulevard and Count Basie Place (for jazz pianist and composer William "Count" Basie, like Robeson a New Jersey native). Paul Robeson High School, which specializes in business and technology, is on Albany Avenue in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. There are also schools named for Robeson in Philadelphia, Chicago and Washington D.C.

Across the Hudson, Robeson's name lives

on. In addition to having cultural centers named after him at Rutgers University's flagship campus in New Brunswick/Piscataway and a satellite campus in Newark, a library at another satellite campus in Camden is named for him. The former football star was posthumously inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1985. In 2004, the Paul Robeson commemorative postage stamp became the 27th in the Black Heritage Series. The stamp unveiling ceremony, attended by Paul Robeson Jr., took place in his native Princeton.

The now six-member exhibit will be on display at the LeQuire Gallery in February. Sculpting Armstrong will also be a labor of love for LeQuire. "If I'm lucky I'll get lost in it and I'll wake up and say, 'Where did that come from?'" LeQuire says of his previous works. "It's an act of pure love. You lose yourself in the act of creating something and then you have the result." □

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