

# Singer Luci Murphy receives Robeson Award

Author: **Tim Wheeler**

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*Photo by Jeff Elkner*

WASHINGTON — A standing-room crowd packed Wesley United Methodist Church Sept. 8 to pay tribute to singer Luci Murphy. It was an evening that resounded with songs, poetry, dance and a few pithy speeches honoring this people's artist.

The banquet, sponsored by the Friends of the People's Weekly World, bestowed the first annual Paul Robeson Award for Peace and Justice on Murphy, a vocalist famed for singing over the past 30 years at thousands of peace and justice rallies, usually in her uniquely stylized a cappella.

The people kept pouring in. The food ran out and there were no more chairs. A crowd stood at the rear and along the sides of the big room. Rita Jackson, director of the North East Performing Arts Group, told the audience her dancers had been performing at a festival all day. Addressing the honoree, she said, "When we heard they were honoring you, Luci, we had to come." Three young dancers then took the stage and danced in Murphy's honor.

The Grupo Folklorico de Panama en Washington, dressed in Panama's national costumes, also danced.

Poet Caroline Joyner read in English a poem by Manuel Ortiz. Carlo Gentile, a leader of the Young Communist League here, brought the house down with his fiery rap, "Revolutionary Speech." It ended with a salute to the Russian Revolution, "Remember 1917 ... Well, this is a sequel."

Elise Bryant, director of the D.C. Labor Chorus, of which Murphy is a member, said, "I have angels in my life. One of them is Luci." The chorus sang, "Bread and Roses" and "I Feel Like Going On."

Gail Dixon, a producer at Pacifica's local WBFW radio station, said she was first introduced to Murphy by Josephine Butler, a founder of the D.C. Statehood Party and leader of the Paul Robeson Society. Dixon has worked closely with Murphy ever since. She sang "Isn't She Wonderful."

James Early, director of cultural studies and communication at the Smithsonian Folklife Center, told the crowd he had befriended Murphy more than 30 years ago.

"I think it is very important to remember Paul Robeson at this moment in history," Early said. "So many people are afraid to take a stand." Like Robeson, Luci Murphy has taken her stand with the people, he continued. "No community-based artist in the District of Columbia is as organically connected to the community as Luci. That is the spirit of Luci Murphy. That is what we celebrate tonight, not the 'tallest tree in the forest' of the past, but the flower that blooms in our community today, Luci."

Alberto Prieto, first secretary of the Cuban Interest Section, hailed the People's Weekly World as a newspaper "always on the side of truth, on the side of the people," adding, "Luci has always been there, a friend of Cuba, a fighter for justice for the Cuban Five." He was referring to five Cuban men unjustly imprisoned for their role in combating terrorism in Miami.

Consuela Gomez, leader of a Salvadoran group that supports the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador, thanked Murphy for her solidarity. Gomez assailed the Bush administration: "They say they want to keep families together but it doesn't look like they want to keep immigrant families together. Please vote against any candidate who does not support immigrant rights."

Luci's son Robert and daughter Topaz thanked her for including them in her "mission" of creating a world where people "live in peace together."

Carlos Arrien, singer-guitarist with the Washington-based song group Rumisonko, came to the stage with his son and handed a microphone to Luci. Together they sang a haunting "Commandante, Che Guevara," and "Gracias a la Vida."

Arturo Griffiths, a longtime friend of Murphy, and union organizer Carl Gentile, together with members of the banquet committee, presented Murphy with a trophy featuring the image of Paul Robeson.

"It's so wonderful to be in a room full of friends," Murphy said. "People who have bailed me out of jail. I'm speaking of Arturo Griffiths," she said as the crowd erupted in laughter. "We have some difficult days ahead. We've got to get a little bit closer, work together, return each other's phone calls. I've just begun!"

*greenerpastures21212@yahoo.com*