

Harry Belafonte: problems faced by people of color are ‘as dire and entrenched as they were half a century ago’

written by Gloria Verdieu
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Harry Belafonte and Cuban
President Fidel Castro.

Harry Belafonte's album "Calypso," which included Day-O (The Banana Boat Song) and Jamaica Farewell, reached the top of the Billboard album chart shortly after its release in 1956 and stayed there for 31 weeks. It was said to be the first album by a single artist to sell more than a million copies.

His voice stirred hearts, many wakened for the first time to the melodies and rhythms of Caribbean music. The charismatic artist soon became the first Black actor to achieve major success in Hollywood as a leading man.

Belafonte starred in the iconic 1954 movie "Carmen Jones" with Dorothy Dandridge.

His 1957 movie, "Island in the Sun," was a romantic drama that dealt with social inequality and racism on a British-ruled Caribbean Island. That movie challenged the racist policies followed by the film industry. A bill was introduced in the South Carolina legislature that would fine any theater showing the movie.

Almost as soon as Belafonte's meteoric career blossomed, it ran into the wall of racism - a barrier designed to stifle the voices and words of Black and Brown people, to erase images that evoke a dream of equality, justice, and love between people.

Belafonte refused to perform in the South from 1954 until 1961.

When he arrived in Atlanta to appear in a benefit concert for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1962, a popular restaurant refused to serve him.

During the 1960s, Belafonte felt that Hollywood was not interested in the socially conscious films he wanted to make, and in turn, he was not interested in the roles

that cast racist stereotypes. He turned to television and his 1960 TV special “Tonight With Belafonte.”

“The show begins with images of hard labor while Belafonte belts a viscous version of ‘Bald Headed Woman.’ The whole hour is just this sort of chilling: percussive work songs, big-bottomed gospel, moaning blues, dramatically spare sets that imply segregation and incarceration, the weather system that called herself Odetta. Belafonte never makes a direct speech about injustice. He trusts the songs and stagecraft to speak for themselves. Folks — Black folks, especially — will get it. It’s their music,” [writes Peter Keepnews](#) in the New York Times obituary.

The show won an Emmy, the first for a Black performer. However, after the first show, the contract was broken. According to Belafonte, the sponsor, Revlon, asked him not to feature Black and white performers together.

The taping of a 1968 special with director Petula Clark was interrupted when Clark touched Belafonte’s arm. The sponsor, Chrysler-Plymouth, demanded a retake. Later they apologized. Belafonte reportedly said: “The apology came one hundred years too late.”

Harold George Bellanfanti Jr. was born on March 1, 1927, in Harlem, N.Y. His father, a chef on merchant ships, was born in Martinique. He changed the family’s name. His mother, Melvine (Love) Bellanfanti, born in Jamaica, took jobs as a housekeeper. She took her son to Jamaica, where he spent some of his childhood living with relatives.

Belafonte dropped out of high school in Manhattan in 1944 to enlist in the Navy. Black shipmates introduced him to the works of W.E.B. Du Bois and other African American authors and urged him to study Black history.

Returning to New York after his discharge, Belafonte became interested in acting

and enrolled at the Dramatic Workshop, where his classmates included Marlon Brando and Tony Curtis.

His lifelong friendship with Sidney Poitier began when both worked at the American Negro Theater in Manhattan. His first job was working as a stagehand.

From early in their careers, Belafonte and Poitier witnessed the unrelenting persecution by the U.S. government of Paul Robeson, the legendary Black freedom fighter who sought to use his enormous artistic talent to fight against racism in the U.S. and Western colonialism in Africa.

In “My Song: A Memoir,” Belafonte wrote: My whole life was an homage to Robeson. He recalled, “Paul Robeson had been my first great formative influence; you might say he gave me my backbone. Martin King was the second; he nourished my soul.”

Like Robeson, Belafonte fought for freedom at home and overseas. Like Robeson, he was blacklisted during the McCarthy era.

Belafonte emerged from the Civil rights movement as a mover and shaker. During the 1963 Birmingham campaign, he bailed King out of the Birmingham, Alabama, jail and raised funds to release other civil rights protesters. He contributed to the 1961 Freedom Rides, supported voter registration drives, and helped to organize the 1963 March on Washington.

His New York City apartment often served as a headquarters for the Civil Rights Movement. Belafonte wrote that Dr. Martin Luther King “wrote the outline to his 1967 antiwar speech denouncing the Vietnam War in my apartment.”

Belafonte described a trip with Sidney Poitier in Freedom Summer 1964 to deliver the desperately needed funds he had raised to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in Greenwood, Mississippi. The Ku Klux Klan threatened them from the

moment their small plane touched down.

Belafonte was a longtime critic of U.S. foreign policy. He made statements opposing the U.S. embargo on Cuba; praising Soviet peace initiatives; attacking the U.S. invasion of Grenada; praising the Abraham Lincoln Brigade; honoring Ethel and Julius Rosenberg; and praising Fidel Castro.

Belafonte was active in the anti-apartheid movement. He was a board member of the Trans Africa Forum and the Institute for Policy Studies. He helped organize a cultural boycott to end apartheid in South Africa.

In 2005, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez initiated a program to provide cheaper heating oil for poor people in the United States. Belafonte supported this initiative. He was quoted as saying during a meeting with Chávez, “No matter what the greatest tyrant in the world, the greatest terrorist in the world, George W. Bush says, we’re here to tell you: Not hundreds, not thousands, but millions of the American people support your revolution.”

The comment ignited a great deal of controversy. Hillary Clinton refused to acknowledge Belafonte’s presence at an awards ceremony. AARP (American Association for Retired Persons), after naming him one of its 10 Impact Award honorees in 2006, released the statement: “AARP does not condone the manner and tone which he has chosen and finds his comments completely unacceptable.”

Belafonte and Danny Glover met with Chávez in January 2006 when they led a delegation, including activist/professor Cornel West, to meet with the Venezuelan president.

When the people of St. Denis, France, named a street for U.S. political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal in May 2006, Harry Belafonte recorded a video message to be presented at the ceremony.



Speaking about Haiti in 2011 on Democracy Now, he noted that the U.S. has a pattern in looking at the devastation that takes place in regions where they have great interests. And they move in, first and foremost, to look at how to use the moment of distress to further those interests.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-qgfRsEnJY>

In 2013, Belafonte was named a grand marshal of the New York City Pride Parade alongside Edie Windsor and Earl Fowlkes. Windsor won a legal victory for the same-sex marriage rights. Earl Fowlke is the President/CEO of the Center for Black Equity (formerly the International Federation of Black Pride - IFBP).

Harry Belafonte wrote a New York Times opinion article in 2016 urging people not to vote for Donald J. Trump, whom he called feckless and immature, a film flam man. "What Langston Hughes so yearned for when he asked that America be America again was the realization of an age-old people's struggle, not the vaporous fantasies of a petty tyrant. Mr. Trump asks us what we have to lose, and we must answer, only the dream, only everything."

Harry Belafonte, born Harold George Bellanfanti Jr., joined the ancestors on April 25, 2023. He was 96 years old.

Lallan Schoenstein contributed to this article.

A black and white portrait of Harry Belafonte, smiling and wearing a light-colored shirt, with some foliage visible on the left side of the frame.

**IF YOU BELIEVE IN JUSTICE, IF YOU BELIEVE IN
DEMOCRACY, IF YOU “BELIEVE IN PEOPLE’S RIGHTS,
IF YOU BELIEVE IN THE HARMONY OF ALL
HUMANKIND - THEN YOU HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO
BACK FIDEL CASTRO AS LONG AS IT TAKES!”**

HARRY BELAFONTE



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