

Harry Belafonte

A Committed Life

Charles Cobb Jr.

For Harry Belafonte, artistic achievement does not and should not mean political disengagement. “My social and cultural interests are part of my career. I can’t separate them,” says Belafonte. Paul Robeson was a major influence on Belafonte and other African American artists in the late 1940s and 1950s. Many of these artists, like Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Sidney Poitier, were involved with the American Negro Theater in New York. So was Belafonte. “When I first met [Robeson], I was quite young. And he embraced those of us in our little group of cultural activists in New York. And he came to see a play that we were in, and at the end of the play, he stayed behind to talk to these young people, of which I was one. And he said to us, ‘You know, the purpose of art is not just to show life as it is, but to show life as it should be’” (2004a).

Belafonte’s political commitment started even earlier, during his years growing up in Harlem and Jamaica. His Jamaican-born mother, says Belafonte, “embraced Marcus Garvey and the struggles against oppression of Africans” (2002). Belafonte was also a veteran of World War II, a war that shaped many young African Americans who would emerge as civil rights leaders in the 1940s and 1950s. “In the victories that came out of that war, those of us who participated came back to our homes with the expectation that there would be generosity, that we would be rewarded for our commitment not only to our nation, but to its principles of democracy. However, we found that such generosity was not available” (2000).

Belafonte’s first record album, *Calypso*, sold more than a million copies in 1956, the first album ever to do so. It stayed at the top of the charts for an unprecedented 31 weeks. That was the year of the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott against racial segregation. Belafonte quickly lent his growing prestige to the boycott and to the young leader it had thrust forward—Martin Luther King Jr.

His interest in Africa, meanwhile, was growing, inspired partly by culture and partly by the emergence of the newly independent African nations. When the Peace Corps was founded in 1961, the Kennedy administration sought credibility for the fledgling organization. Belafonte became one of its advisers, but with a clear-eyed view of the corps’ real value. “Most people thought the Peace Corps was a chance for America to show how beautiful we were as a people, our great generosity. I viewed the Peace Corps another way: Get enough Americans to go to these countries and live for two years with indigenous peoples in environments where [these volunteers] learned something else altogether and bring them back to America to educate their own communities. To point out that their own humanity was inextricably bound to the humanity of the peoples of the developing world” (2004b).

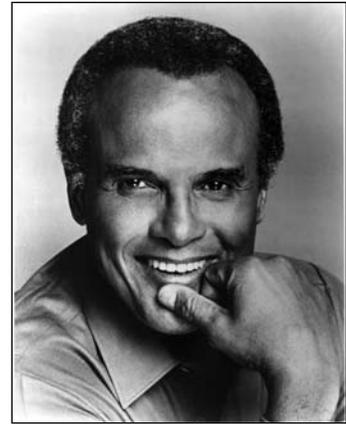
For many in the African American community, support for African liberation has been closely linked to the civil rights struggle in the United States. One of the clearest examples of this connection is the life of singer-activist Harry Belafonte, whose advocacy for Africa spans decades. This profile draws on published and broadcast interviews with Belafonte in 2002 and 2004 and on speeches he delivered in 2000 and 2004.

Involvement with the Peace Corps helped deepen his Africa experience. “And then I began to go to Kenya. [I learned] what Jomo Kenyatta went through in the Mau Mau uprising and I became very friendly with Tom Mboya.” Throughout his career, Belafonte maintained contacts with African leaders, intellectuals, and artists, both those in independent Africa and those from countries still under white minority rule.

During the intense years of civil rights struggle in the South, Belafonte not only lent time and resources to the movement but encouraged movement interest in Africa. In 1964, Belafonte sponsored a visit to West Africa by SNCC leaders Fannie Lou Hamer, John Lewis, Julian Bond and others.

Belafonte became increasingly visible as an opponent of apartheid. He introduced South African musicians Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela to U.S. audiences and supported their on-stage denunciations of the racist regime. In 1983 he was co-chair with tennis great Arthur Ashe of Artists and Athletes Against Apartheid. His 1988 film and record album, *Paradise in Gazankulu*, focused on children victimized by apartheid and had a significant impact. After Nelson Mandela was released from prison, Belafonte played a key role in organizing his visit to the United States and was his official host.

At age 78, he continues to speak out. “Whether it is Kosovo, whether it is Somalia, whether it is Rwanda, whether it is Kampuchea, wherever we have been in the world, we still see man’s inhumanity and our work is far from over” (2000).



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