

Harry Belafonte

Harry Belafonte has been called “the consummate entertainer” – an artist in every field in which he has participated – a concert singer, a recording artist, a movie, Broadway, and television star and producer.

Belafonte was born in Harlem in New York City. Overwhelmed and intimidated by its ghetto streets and thinking the islands to be a safer place, his immigrant mother sent him back to the island of her birth, Jamaica. The island and all its variety became a cultural reservoir that he drew upon for his artistic expression. At the outbreak of World War II, his mother retrieved him from the island and brought him back to Harlem. He tried to adapt to his new environment, but found it difficult. Before finishing high school, he enlisted in the United States Navy and served for almost two years as a munitions loader. After his tour of duty ended, he was honorably discharged. He then returned to New York where he worked both in the garment center and as a janitor’s assistant.

For doing repairs in an apartment, Belafonte was given, as his gratuity, a ticket to a production of “Home is the Hunter” at the American Negro Theatre (A.N.T.), a Harlem community theater. For the first time, he came face to face with what would be his destiny – a life in the performing arts. He joined the Dramatic Workshop of the New School of Social Research. Under the tutelage of the famed German director Erwin Piscator, he studied alongside classmates that included Marlon Brando, Walter Matthau, Bea Arthur, Rod Steiger and Tony Curtis. For his first Broadway appearance in John Murray Anderson’s *Almanac*, he received the coveted Tony award. Since that launching, Belafonte has sustained an inordinately successful career:

In pursuit of study at the New School, Belafonte was subsidized by the U.S. government (The G.I. Bill of Rights). As many ex-servicemen were to experience, the subsidy ran out all too soon. In his quest to continue his student work in theater, his friend, Monte Kaye, the revered and highly respected promoter for the Royal Roost, came to his rescue. Having heard Belafonte sing at the Workshop in a student production, Kaye suggested that if Belafonte could learn three or four songs, he would hire him as the intermission singer at famed jazz club. To help him learn the songs, Kaye made available a young jazz pianist named Al Haig. On opening night, although the audience may have had some curiosity as to who Belafonte was, they were most familiar with his “back-up band” made up of Belafonte’s friends – Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Max Roach, Tommy Potter and Al Haig. The warmth and camaraderie emanating from the “back-up band” helped a frightened and unsure Belafonte launch what was to be the first step to a career that has since been globally embraced.

- His RCA album “Calypso” made him the first artist in industry history to sell over 1 million LP’s.
- As the first black producer in television, he won his first Emmy for his CBS production of “An Evening With Belafonte” directed by Norman Jewison
- At the dawning of his cinematic film career “Carmen Jones” took top critical honors and attracted Oscar nominations

In the early 50s, Belafonte met a young Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on his historic visit to New York. From that day until the leader's assassination, Belafonte and King developed a deep and abiding friendship that for Belafonte still stands as one of the most precious of his experiences. Dr. King said of his friend, "Belafonte's global popularity and his commitment to our cause is a key ingredient to the global struggle for freedom and a powerful tactical weapon in the Civil Rights movement here in America. We are blessed by his courage and moral integrity."

Belafonte was prominent in his contribution to the ending of the oppressive Apartheid Government of South Africa and the release of his friend, Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for twenty seven and a half years. Belafonte was appointed by President John F. Kennedy Cultural Advisor for the Peace Corps, and served for five years. He has been honored many times by such diverse groups as the American Jewish Congress, the NAACP, the City of Hope, Fight for Sight, The Urban League, The National Conference of Black Mayors, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the ACLU, the State Department, the Boy Scouts of America, Hadassah International and the Peace Corps. He has received awards from the Bronx Community College for his work with children, the Albert Einstein Award from Yeshiva University, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Peace Prize and the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors for excellence in the performing arts. He was the first recipient of the Nelson Mandela Courage Award and was honored at the White House with the 1994 National Medal of Arts from President Clinton for his contributions to our nation's cultural life. He has received honorary degrees from City University of New York, Spellman College in Atlanta, Tufts University, Brandeis University, Long Island University, Bard College and most recently Doctor of Humane Letters from Columbia University.

Disturbed by cruel events unfolding in Africa as a result of war, famine and drought, Belafonte set in motion the wheels that led to "We Are the World" in 1985. He contacted Ken Kragen, who along with others, undertook to guide and direct the project known as USA for Africa. In 1987, Belafonte accepted the appointment as UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, thus making him the second American to hold this title – the first was Danny Kaye. Belafonte has continued to devote himself globally to civil and human rights issues, focusing in particular on the United States and Africa. "My social and political interests are part of my career. I can't separate them," said Belafonte. "My songs reflect the human condition. The role of art isn't just to show life as it is, but to show life as it should be."

Belafonte has four children; Adrienne, Shari, David and Gina and boasts of five grandchildren – Rachel, Brian, Maria, Sarafina and Amadeus. He says of them, "They represent my final contribution to a world in need of love."