

Harry Belafonte,
c. 1956



HARRY BELAFONTE

AS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST REVERED ARTISTS, HE HELPED ENACT CHANGE THROUGH HIS MULTIFACETED CAREER AND ACTIVISM.

BY SHAWN AMOS

Harry Belafonte is not a rock & roll singer. He never was a rock star. This son of Caribbean parents, born in 1927 into a working-class Harlem melting pot, never lived a rock star life. In fact, as he told writer Henry Louis Gates Jr., when he walked into certain rooms, the reaction was, “Here comes Mr. Conscience,’ and all the cocaine left the room – you know?”

But Harry Belafonte is unmistakably rock & roll. Every popular musician who has succeeded (or failed) in marrying politics and fame has Harry Belafonte to thank. Bob Marley, Bob Dylan, Bono, the Clash, Marvin Gaye, John Lennon, Rage Against the Machine, Public Enemy . . . add your own names. They all stand on Belafonte’s broad shoulders. Across a career that’s covered stage, screen, television, calypso, folk, pop, thirteen presidents, the end of segregation, the triumph of civil rights, and the slaying of its leaders, Belafonte has delivered the anger and agitation that – at its best – are what rock & roll promises.

Make no mistake, Harry Belafonte has always been an angry man who refused to play the Angry Black Man card. His light skin helped him infiltrate a star-making machine previously labeled “Whites Only.” His thousand-watt smile and chiseled good looks aided in his subversiveness. He was easy on the eyes and his music was easy listening. Among his string of albums recorded for RCA from 1954 to 1957, *Calypso* made him the first million-selling artist in history. His 1956 version of the

Jamaican folk song “Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)” transformed him into the “King of Calypso” (a moniker to which many calypso purists took offense) and opened doors across color lines. The thinly veiled politics of the song set the stage for Belafonte’s quiet revolution. Here was the future organizer of the mammoth 1985 “We Are the World” fundraising recording, imploring, “Daylight come and me wan’ go home.”

Most listeners were likely unaware of the song’s origins. As Amanda Petrusich explained in her 2017 overview of Belafonte’s recordings, “The song was written sometime around the turn of the twentieth century, though to suggest that ‘Day-O’ was formally composed in any sort of premeditated way might be overstating things. It’s a call-and-response work song, likely concocted spontaneously by overnight dockworkers cramming bunches of bananas onto ships, hot-footing it away from loose spiders, and fantasizing about rum. By 1890, the sugar trade in Jamaica had been toppled by an assortment of wars, acts of God, and political upheavals, and bananas had become the country’s primary export.”

Belafonte knew full well that he was leveraging his own skin tone and nonthreatening demeanor to win allies in his struggle for full Black freedom. In his 2011 memoir, *My Song*, he wrote, “If you liked Harry Belafonte, you were making a political statement, and that felt good, the way it felt good to listen to Paul Robeson, and listen to what he had to say. If you were a white Belafonte fan, you felt even better. You were connecting with your



With Dr. Martin
Luther King Jr., 1966

better angels, reaching across the racial divide.” By the end of 1956, Belafonte was propelled into the outer reaches of pop culture stardom previously reserved for white pin-ups. *Look Magazine* said it plainly in 1957, calling him the “first Negro matinée idol in our entertainment history.”

Belafonte’s quiet revolution had begun – and music was the means to create the revolutionary change he sought. He was a believer in the proposition that music serves as a “catalytic agent,” saying in a 1962 televised interview, “I found that [music] was quite capable of fulfilling all of my needs: dramatically, emotionally, my need to protest, my need to rebel . . .”

There is one frame – of one videotaped performance, of one song – that says everything about Harry Belafonte’s singular potency as a seductive pop culture saboteur. It reveals the Unapologetically Black Agitator hiding in plain sight in front of millions of adoring fans.

The song is “Muleskinner,” originally titled “Mule Skinner Blues.” Written and first recorded by the “Blue Yodeler,” Jimmie Rodgers, in 1930, the song is about a “shine” looking for work as a driver of mules – a notoriously obstinate animal. It was covered by country and folk prophets Roy Acuff, Bill Monroe, and Woody Guthrie before Belafonte’s own 1962 recording (which featured another future folk prophet, Bob Dylan, making his recording debut on harmonica). Belafonte was undoubtedly inspired by his sister-in-arms Odetta. She was the first Black singer to claim the song during the 1960s folk revolution, when musical color lines were mercifully erased, and Black artists reclaimed early



In the studio, 1963

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twentieth-century folk songs infused with racist imagery. As Belafonte’s best friend, Sidney Poitier, told Henry Louis Gates in 1996, “The whole history of Black people was in the texture of folk singing.”

The performance is on April 22, 1962, during a live televised appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, six years after “Day-O (The Banana Boat Song).” Belafonte is unapologetically articulate, exuding a cool command and simmering sexuality that makes Elvis’ earlier hip swinging on the same stage seem comical by comparison. He checks all of the matinee idol boxes: tight-fitting shirt unbuttoned to nearly his waistline, a deep lover’s gaze into the camera, and the seductive smile. It’s perhaps enough to make you forget about the three Black backup singers

onstage behind him, making the sound of a whip cracking on flesh at the end of each verse. Never mind that “shine” had been changed to “son.” This is a Black man on national television amid a civil rights reckoning giving live testimony to Black Americans’ struggle, dignity, and grace in front of an estimated twelve million people.

Then, the moment: At two minutes, five seconds into the song, Belafonte dips his head down and looks up at the camera. It’s as close to menacing as Harry Belafonte will ever allow himself to appear. Yet it reveals the simple truth about his ninety-five magnificent years on earth. He did not come to entertain us. He came to change us. And he did – with a beautiful smile, an easy voice, and an angry, rebellious heart.



FROM LEFT: With Lionel Richie at Live Aid, Philadelphia, 1985; speaking strong in New York City, 2014.