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# Rebel With A CAUSE

SINGER, ACTOR, ACTIVIST AND LEGEND HARRY BELAFONTE NEVER SHIES FROM CONTROVERSY OR A CAUSE THAT NEEDS HIM. THIS MONTH, AS HE JOINS FORCES WITH THE STEPHEN LEWIS FOUNDATION FOR A STAR-STUDED BENEFIT, HE SPEAKS WITH ELISA BIRNBAUM ABOUT WHAT KEEPS HIM FIGHTING ON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BRYAN ADAMS

Some memories are etched in your brain forever. The year was 1978. My brothers and I were transfixed in the glare of our 17-inch Zenith, watching one of the most auspicious episodes of the always affable *The Muppet Show*. My mother rushed in, flopped herself down by our side and gushed "That's him!" with a visibly restrained gasp. "Him" was King of Calypso, Harry Belafonte, a man whose music often lit up our home, set our record player in constant motion and stirred my parents' desire to sing, to dance – to soar. How many Sunday mornings were accompanied by an outburst of "Day-O" I cannot recall, but here "he" was, singing the "Banana Boat Song" live for the first time on television. And for a moment, for one glorious moment, all was right with the world.

The episode also included Belafonte's original piece "Turn the World Around." Requested by Jim Henson who wanted music that delved into African culture, the song was performed in prototypical Henson-style, replete with harmonizing Muppets dressed as African tribal masks. It was a seminal moment for the Muppets and the televised medium as educational portals for cultural diversity. It was also one of the show's most popular episodes and, reportedly, Henson's favourite. So strong was Henson's affinity for the song, in fact, that Belafonte would honour the man at his 1990 funeral with another moving rendition.

When you think about it, "Turn the World Around" is an apt summation of Harold George Belafonte, singer, actor, social activist. The lyrics are simple yet profound: "Do you know who I am; Do I know who you are; See we one another clearly; Do we know who we are." Yet they underlie his life-long philosophy: without understanding and accepting each other, peaceful coexistence is a long shot. He infused the song with added depth at Henson's memorial, crediting the creative genius with forging a more just world.

That overarching world view (in pursuit of tolerance, inclusivity and social justice) would inspire every single, deliberate step in Belafonte's life – from the songs he sang to the movie roles he chose and the social causes he engaged in. The calypso music, for example, a genre for

which he was most celebrated, was "not only something that could entertain you but also something that could inform you about social experiences, social conditions, struggle," he explains.

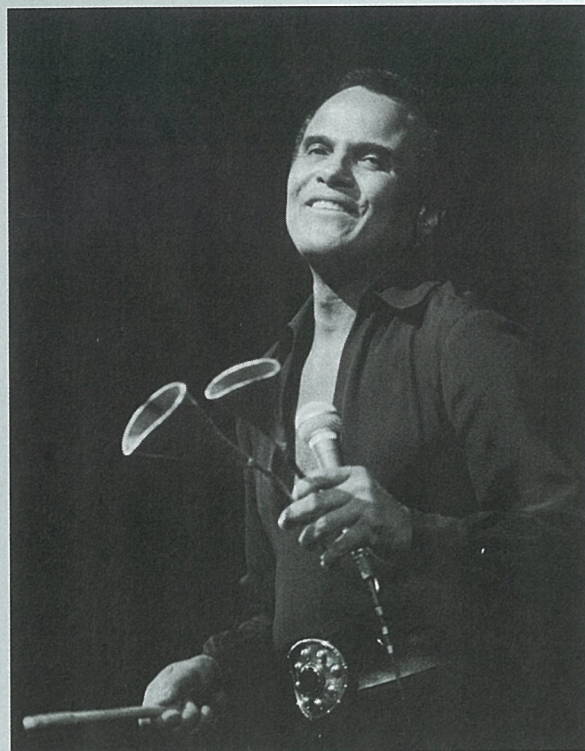
You think the "Banana Boat Song" represented a simple ditty about fruit? Think again. "As much as people delighted in it, if you listen to it carefully, it's a song that talks about the pain of plantation living, how gruelling the work is, how difficult it is, what you're subjected to in that working environment," Belafonte says. "Island in the Sun," meanwhile, spoke about people struggling against a system of colonialism. "So much of what the lyrics are about is buried in metaphor," he says. "If you don't understand the metaphor, you miss the deeper meaning of the lyrics."

That would be a shame because, in Harry Belafonte's world, art is an indisputable force for change. "If that's not the motivation of the art, then what's the art about?" he asks rhetorically. In line with his deliberateness, Belafonte turned down the role of Porgy in Otto Preminger's *Porgy and Bess*, deeming the film racially stereotypical. "How do you permit yourself to be used? What voice do you choose to be heard?" Those are the questions artists need to ask themselves to ensure they're "vibrant, powerful human beings who shape society in profound ways."

Keeping eyes focused on life's indignities inspired Belafonte to organize the making of the award-winning song "We are

the World", a multi-artist effort that raised more than \$60 million for African famine relief. He fought apartheid in South Africa, hosting Nelson Mandela upon his visit to New York in 1990. John F. Kennedy named Belafonte cultural adviser to the Peace Corps and, in 1987, he received an appointment that would impact his life and others in innumerable ways for years to come. As UNICEF's goodwill ambassador – a post he still holds today – he's been on the frontline supporting civil and human rights campaigns against issues like poverty, famine, children's lack of education and HIV-AIDS.

It was through UNICEF that he became acquainted with Stephen Lewis. The former Ontario NDP leader and Canada's United Nations Ambassador who went on to be-



come deputy executive director of UNICEF and the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV-AIDS. Lewis is currently chair of the Stephen Lewis Foundation and co-director of U.S.-based AIDS-Free World, and has devoted much of his life to the cause of HIV-AIDS. And Belafonte is a most devoted fan. "To me, he's one of the great intellects and articulators," he says. "I just loved being around him, listening to him talk, help shape ideas and bring solutions to grave questions."

The admiration is mutual. "I knew of him then as I do now – as someone of enormous principle, radical and progressive views, articulate and extraordinary influence," says Lewis. It came as no surprise that when Lewis invited Belafonte to join him in Toronto on May 3 for the Globe and Mail Roundtable: Philanthropy for Hope and Impact, a discussion on the role of philanthropy in the fight against AIDS, he was quick to accept. "When anybody mentions Lewis's name, you don't have to worry about me; the answer is yes," Belafonte laughs.

The discussion will precede Hope Rising!, a concert for the Stephen Lewis Foundation in support of organizations working with HIV-AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, featuring Alicia Keys, Angélique Kidjo, as well as Canadians Rufus Wainwright and Holly Cole. For executive director Ilana Landsberg-Lewis, the choice of Belafonte couldn't be more fitting. "Part of what the event is about is bringing a real visibility, respect and admiration for the extraordinary courage and determination of those living at the frontlines of AIDS," she explains. "To bring people in who have embodied that and who are themselves engaged in that makes sense."

**B**elafonte's commitment to activism is steeped in history, his own and that of the civil rights movement. Born on March 1, 1927, in Harlem, New York, Belafonte was sent at the age of two by his mother, Melvine Love, to live in her hometown of Aboukir in Saint Ann, Jamaica. He remained there for close to 10 years under the watchful eye of his grandmother. "She instilled in me so many things that would later turn out to be part

of my value system and shape the way I thought and felt about things," he says. For one thing, she imparted an incredible sense of survival, having faced the adversity of poverty head on while raising her children and grandchildren with dignity intact. These early years would also form the basis of Belafonte's affinity with Caribbean culture and an appreciation for cultural diversity – both of which he would later cultivate with great affection and success.

Returning to New York wasn't easy for Belafonte. His West Indian heritage made him stand out among his new-found neighbours, causing him to be the target of much teasing. But he stood strong. "Whatever difficulties were endured in the face of that fact, later on came to reward me," he explains, "because, in the well of that experience,

I was able to draw so much and shape my artistic interest."

Belafonte initially dreamed only of being an actor. Singing was simply a means of funding the acting classes led by German director Erwin Piscator at The Dramatic Workshop of the New School in New York with classmates Marlon Brando, Tony Curtis and Sydney Poitier. But you could say his musical destiny of greatness was written on the proverbial wall when Belafonte's first gig was accompanied by none other than the Charlie Parker band, featuring Parker himself, Max Roach and Miles Davis.

In 1952, Belafonte inked his first record contract with RCA Victor, and it didn't take long for Belafonte the singer, the consummate performer, to garner

fans the world over, with TV appearances, critical accolades and awards following suit. His breakthrough album, *Calypso*, released in 1956, was the first full-length LP to sell more than one million copies. Heart-stopping, object of affection for any woman over 16: you name it – superstar, celebrity, exotic, debonair – the title was his. Film roles followed, with his first, 1953's *Bright Road*, starring alongside Dorothy Dandridge. True to form, Belafonte would choose his roles carefully, often preferring ones with social relevance. In more recent years, he starred in Robert Altman's *Kansas City* and Emilio Estevez's *Bobby*, a drama based on the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy.

Success came easy, but Belafonte didn't simply delight in it; he took pleasure in helping others achieve their →



own. Thanks to his generosity, American audiences in the 1960s were introduced to artists like Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Nana Mouskouri and Bob Dylan, whose first-ever recording playing harmonica can be found on the title track of Belafonte's *The Midnight Special* album. "In my platform, I constantly show diversity of cultures," he offers. "This is the real power of art; this is what it can do."

The platform is well-suited for the man who calls himself a "citizen of the world." Considering how far his reach,

So powerful, in fact, Belafonte chose the phrase for the title of an upcoming documentary on his life, *Sing Your Song*. Directed by Susanne Rostock, produced by Canadian rock concert and Broadway impresario Michael Cohl, and Belafonte's daughter Gina, among others, it debuted at the Sundance Film Festival this year, and HBO recently acquired its U.S. television rights.

The title describes his life to a T, he explains, metaphorically and literally. "I sang my song both musically and socially; who I am is on the table and a lot of people came to

## LET'S PUT IT THIS WAY: I'M NOT AN ARTIST WHO BECAME AN ACTIVIST; I'M AN ACTIVIST WHO BECAME AN ARTIST

how great his impact, the moniker fits. Case in point: when Belafonte performed in Berlin in 1958, he was one of the first pop singers to entertain German audiences. "Here I was, an American, coming from immigrant parents, a man of colour, standing in Germany, singing the songs of the Jews, 'Hava Nagila,' and having all these Germans sing with me, a rich song of a people who just a decade before had been relegated to the gas chambers in Germany."

Of course, being a citizen of the world comes with heightened responsibility. And Belafonte has never been one to back down from that either. His is a life hell-bent on pushing boundaries, never settling for what's easy, what's expected or fashionable. Here's a man who stands up for what he believes and speaks his mind freely.

**T**o be sure, sometimes his words and actions can venture toward the controversial. The social activist threw caution and critics to the wind, for example, when he befriended Fidel Castro, opposed the U.S. Cuban embargo and the Grenada invasion and publicly criticized President George W. Bush and America's foreign policy. He led a delegation to meet Hugo Chavez to show his support of the Venezuelan president's rejected offer to provide Americans with cheaper heating oil. And that's just the tip of the divisive iceberg. No doubt about it, Belafonte can be a polarizing figure but he's okay with it. He's never shied from controversy before and he's not about to start now.

Belafonte credits three individuals with inspiring his political activism: Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr. and African-American performer and activist Paul Robeson, iconic figures that leave one's revolutionary spirit salivating. Often referring to Robeson as his mentor, Belafonte reminisces on how the singer-actor-athlete-activist gave him enduring advice: "You're on a great journey, just remember this," he began. "Get them to sing your song, and they'll want to know who you are." Powerful words.

it approvingly," he says. "And in that approval, I was given a solid platform on which to launch my mission [for] social development, activism and the things I did politically." To those who ask when he made the life-changing transition toward activism, Belafonte is quick to reply: "Let's put it this way: I'm not an artist who became an activist; I'm an activist who became an artist."

Here's the thing about Belafonte's relationship with celebrity: he didn't flaunt it or indulge in its excesses. He made a conscious decision to leverage his fame to promote causes close to his heart. To wit, the activist played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement and was part of Martin Luther King Jr.'s circle of confidants. He even provided King's family with financial support and bailed the leader out of Birmingham City Jail. He raised money to release other civil rights protestors, financed the Freedom Rides and assisted in organizing the March on Washington in 1963.

His daughter Shari fondly recalls meeting Martin Luther King Jr. at her father's apartment when she was six. "And I met presidents and heads of state of not just the U.S. but many foreign countries, long before I was a teenager," she says. "He was always, I mean *always*, at the forefront of bringing North Americans to focus on the indignities that existed for not only the African Diaspora but any Third World country in need."

Having recently celebrated his 84th birthday, Belafonte is effectively fulfilling the adage, growing older gracefully. From speaking engagements to making the rounds of the film circuit promoting his documentary and enjoying time with his wife of three years, Pamela, life is certainly full. He's like the Energizer Bunny, jokes daughter Shari, adding that despite his hectic schedule, "he still has time to give me a good recipe every now and then." Ever-committed to his varied causes – including ending child incarceration in the U.S. – Belafonte continues to heed his mentor's advice, singing his song to all who will listen. ■

