

SHOWCASE

Belafonte a voice for black history

BY DAVE HOEKSTRA
STAFF REPORTER

Harry Belafonte has seen many things in his lifetime.

He marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. into Montgomery, Ala. He served as an adviser to patriot Nelson Mandela, the deputy president of the African National Congress. Bob Dylan's first appearance on record was in 1962 as a harmonica player on Belafonte's "Midnight Special" LP.

But when Belafonte arrived at the Art Institute last week to tape the national launch of "The HistoryMakers" documentary series, he was amazed that most of the production staff was African American.

"This is a relatively new phenomenon for black citizens of America," Belafonte said in an interview before the taping. "Our newly found middle-class experiences are just that, relatively new. To have access to media and communications instruments is not a usual state of affairs. 'We're learning. But where we might have expected greater benevolence or response from government or from institutions—primarily white—we've found that isn't quite the case.'"

"The HistoryMakers" is an archival project dedicated to increasing awareness about contributions African Americans have made to U.S. history by combining oral history with technology. Founder Julianna Richardson plans to have accumulated 5,000 interviews by 2005. The series will include artists, entertainers, civic leaders, sports figures and non-celebrity history makers such as Pullman porters. "We're capturing well-knowns," Richardson said. "But also unsung."

Belafonte was interviewed by

actor Danny Glover in a taping at the Arthur Rubloff Auditorium of the Art Institute of Chicago. The hourlong interview airs in February on the A&E cable network during Black History Month. Later, it will air on PBS.

The child is the father to the man. And when Belafonte, 73, talked about his awakening to history, his thoughts drifted back to his immigrant mother Melvine Love.

"We have to become more responsible and far more self-sufficient."

—Harry Belafonte

Belafonte was born in Harlem. When he was 8 his mother returned him to Jamaica, the island of her birth, where Belafonte lived until he was 13. His mother was a domestic worker, his father, Harry George Belafonte, was a seaman chef. "They married when they were young," Belafonte said in soft, husky tones. "I suspect my mother gave birth to me around the age of 16. She became a single parent. My father was a drifter and went away for long stretches of time. We were always told he was at sea. Sometimes it wasn't that way."

Melvine Love thought the Caribbean was a safer place to rear her children than on the gritty streets of Harlem. "The experience of poverty and racism in America blended with the experience of poverty and racism in the Caribbean," Belafonte said. "Because in the Caribbean we lived under [colo-

nized] British rule. In America, we lived under white American rule, and the black citizens were also colonized, so to speak."

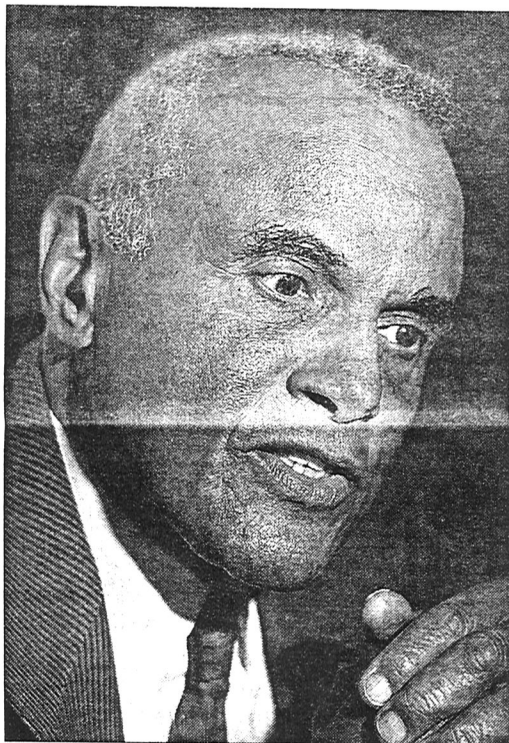
Belafonte saw the parallels and concluded there was a "oneness" among African Americans. That was a pivotal observation, contrasting the accepted W.E.B. Du Bois view of duality. In his 1903 classic, *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois wrote, "One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings." This was an ongoing dichotomy for Dr. King, as outlined in Taylor Branch's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Parting the Waters (America in the King Years 1954-63)*.

Belafonte said, "Early in life I saw my relationship to struggle in universal terms. I saw me in America, I saw me in the Caribbean. And I understood my mother's commitment to the [Marcus] Garveyite [black nationalist] concept of what Africans should seek and have."

"If I were to pick any one individual who is responsible for my social and political consciousness, it would be my mother. She impacted me not only on the kind of information I was exposed to as a child, but also how to act upon it—what things to stand strong about, where not to yield; that if I were to die in the process of defending issues that were moral, correct and just, then so be it. It was never the length of life that made life important. It was the quality of life that made life important."

Belafonte said there was a smattering of books around the homes he grew up in, but he didn't become an avid reader until World War II. He was stimulated by fellow members in his battalion.

"The Navy was segregated, and I was in a barracks filled with an eclectic group of service-



JEAN LACHAT/SUN-TIMES

Harry Belafonte was at the Art Institute of Chicago last week to tape the start of a black documentary series called "The HistoryMakers."

men," he said. "They came from college, high school. There were peasants all thrown together. It was my good fortune to be involved with those who had a good handle on what the war should be about and what they saw as African Americans as their destiny tied to America's destiny. It was fascinating. They gave me things to read like Du Bois' 'Crisis' (Du Bois was the editor of the NAACP periodical 'Crisis') and Langston Hughes."

The fire will never go out in Belafonte's eyes. He remains active with UNICEF, traveling to Rwanda and Sudan to work on programs. He is working on a

new album for RCA. Belafonte is producing Branch's "Parting the Waters," which will air next year on ABC-TV.

"We have to become more responsible and far more self-sufficient than we have been, and 'The HistoryMakers' is an attempt at that," Belafonte said. "My responsibility is to energize that thinking. So when I get a call from Chicago to archive the history of our nation through those who have experienced it, my answer is overwhelmingly on the positive side. That's what I would like to see happen: the capacity to hear each other's voices unfettered."