Belafonte a voice for black history

BY DAVE HORKY

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 in exile Nelson Mandela, the deputy president of the African National Congress. Bob Dylan's first appearance on record was in 1962 as a harmonizing singer 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 the case..."

"The HistoryMakers" is an archival project dedicated to increasing awareness about contributions African Americans have made to U.S. history by combing oral history with technology. Founder Julianne 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 unknowns.

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 Melvina 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 seamstress. "They married when they were young," Belafonte said in soft, husky tones. "I suspect my mother gave birth to me around the age of 18. She told me she was at sea. Sometimes it wasn't that way..."

Moving 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 is born within you, and that's what I stand strong about, where not to stand idle in the process of defending those 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 with a smattering of books around the house, 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 ecletic group of service men," he said. "They came from colleges, high school. There were peasants all thrown together. It was a 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 the tools 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 which is part of a series called "The HistoryMakers."