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“Calypso”—Harry Belafonte (1956)

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Essay by Judith E. Smith (guest post)*



Album cover

Harry Belafonte, the Harlem-born son of poor undocumented Jamaican immigrants, an untrained singer whose heart was set on becoming an actor, made music history with “Harry Belafonte: Calypso.” This record was the very first by a solo performer to sell a million copies, holding the top spot on “Billboard’s” pop album charts for an unprecedented 31 weeks (in addition, 58 weeks in the top ten, 99 weeks among the top 100). The higher-ups at RCA had doubted the commercial potential of a thematically unified recording of “island and Calypso songs,” but the “Calypso” record, released at the end of May 1956, quickly soared in sales, knocking Elvis Presley’s first album out of the way to take over the top spot within a few weeks. The “Calypso” album also reached the top of music charts in most of Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, and was “covered” via native language recordings in many countries.

Belafonte often joked that it took him 30 years to become an “overnight success.” He had dropped out of high school after one semester and joined the World War II Navy at age 17. His experience in the military included political education from college-educated soldiers about how the Jim Crow racial status quo would have to be challenged as part of a national system. From this moment on, Belafonte committed himself to “help make things different.” Through the American Negro Theatre, acting classes at the New School’s Dramatic Workshop, and a friendship with Paul Robeson, he found the postwar black and interracial left dedicated to keep fighting to end Jim Crow. But he couldn’t find paid work in the theater. A jazz club he frequented invited him to sing jazz standards; although his voice was untrained, he projected something powerful and compelling on stage. His performing life had begun.

Participating at left-wing political events in 1950 and 1951, Belafonte experimented beyond the jazz standards he was paid to sing, trying out songs associated with Robeson, such as “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” and “John Henry”; Dizzy Gillespie’s “Cubano Be Cubano Bop” and the Calypsonian King Radio’s 1946 calypso song “Brown-Skinned Girl.” When he quit singing jazz in clubs in December 1950, and reintroduced himself as a folk singer at New York’s famed Village Vanguard in October 1951, he drew on this experimentation for his new repertoire of “folk songs, work songs, [and] calypsos.” Belafonte felt these songs signaled to an audience: “here’s Negro life with as much dignity as I can give it.” Singing with guitar accompaniment freed Belafonte to draw on his dramatic training to use his hands, his face, and his body to inhabit and convey the world invoked by a song. His musical style, appeal and charisma were inseparable from his uncompromising political stance, personal beauty, and emotional expressiveness. Reviewers described him as the “total package”: “his baritone, his

facial expressions, and bodily movements become part of the words and music, and the result is a rich dramatic portrayal.”

With this repertoire of “folk songs, work songs, and calypsos,” Belafonte was not seeking to embody one particular cultural tradition, but instead to present himself as a Black world citizen who drew from and respected multiple traditions. Rejecting the segregation of musical genres was one of the ways Belafonte chose to protest racialized boundaries and to resist white supremacy. He did not have the vocal resonance or concert presence of Robeson. He did not convey the experiential authority or musical ingenuity of southern born blues performers like Lead Belly, and he didn’t possess the facility with wordplay of the Trinidadian calypsonians. But his juxtaposition of folk songs, work songs, and calypsos renewed each form. His clearly articulated calypsos, absent the island costumes, enabled him to represent calypso as part of other forms of black and non-elite culture, repositioning the music away from colonial associations with “native” inferiority or tourist-driven exoticism.

Belafonte’s intensity, his dramatic authority, his phrasing and his vocal emphasis made his audiences feel they were hearing the music for the first time, engaging directly with a world that came alive through his performance.

The collection of songs that constituted the “Calypso” album resulted from several fortuitous events. By August 1955, Belafonte was a full-fledged celebrity as a result of nightclub and stadium appearances across the country, performance on Broadway, and his starring role in the hit film production of “Carmen Jones.” This gave him the clout to bargain successfully for an extended time slot on television, and more control over the musical selections, as his conditions for an appearance on the television show “Colgate Comedy Hour.” Belafonte’s good friend, the left-wing writer William Attaway, then working for NBC, was assigned to write the show. Attaway introduced Belafonte to *his* friend, left-wing singer, composer and folklorist Irving Burgie, who was then collecting and performing Caribbean folk music. Burgie explored black diasporic musical borrowings, including meringues from Santo Domingo and mentos from Jamaica.

With five of Burgie’s songs as thematic core, Attaway and Belafonte went to work on a Caribbean script, introducing ordinary working people and Caribbean culture on the island. In advance publicity for the TV show, Belafonte promised “authentic West Indian work songs and love ballads, something no one has ever done on TV before.” He argued that the well-known Calypsos “covered” by American singer Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Jordan’s well-known “Stone Cold Dead in the Market” and the Andrews Sisters’s “Rum and Cocoa Cola,” were no more representative of West Indian culture than Patti Page’s novelty pop song “How Much is That Doggie in the Window” was of American culture. Burgie’s songs included two that would become indelibly attached to Belafonte’s persona: the Jamaican work song “Day-O (Banana Boat Song),” dramatized with *a capella* opening and a call-and-response chorus, and the sweet love song “Jamaica Farewell.” The television show itself was limited by its “Caribbean as tourist haven” framework, but the integration of songs and theme, and the appeal of the music generated great excitement. Within two weeks of the broadcast, the recording process for the album began.

For the recording sessions in October 1955, Belafonte gathered his close friend, the jazz clarinetist Tony Scott and members of Scott’s orchestra (Belafonte wanted to inject “a jazz feeling” where it seemed to fit) and other talented musicians, including Burgie’s colleague, Jamaican pianist and penny-whistle player Herb Levy, and Haitian guitarist Franz Casseus. The powerhouse chorus of singers was led by actor/singer Brock Peters. Burgie played guitar and sang harmony on the chorus of four of the songs, and Attaway wrote the liner notes. The album included eight songs written by Burgie, one written by Attaway and Belafonte, and two songs that were King Radio calypsos Belafonte had been singing for several years, “Brown Skinned

Girl,” and “Man Smart (Woman Smarter).” The album’s rich and varied orchestration, Belafonte’s articulation, and the versions of new and older songs made this album a departure from Belafonte’s previous recordings and from other calypso recordings. Attaway’s liner notes signaled this when he wrote that the collection was “not just another presentation of island songs.... Here are songs ranging in mood from brassy gaiety to wistful sadness, from tender love to heroic largeness. And through it all runs the irrepressible rhythms of a people who have not lost the ability to laugh at themselves.”

The “Calypso” album’s extraordinarily enthusiastic reception had many sources. It drew from the synergy and cross-promotion of Belafonte’s multiple sources of celebrity from the nightclub stage to radio, television, and film. Recording for national sales through RCA, his repertoire of folk songs, work songs and calypsos was well suited to the new long-playing album format, purchased primarily by record buyers with more discretionary income. Belafonte’s recordings became increasingly commercially successful in the cross-over pop market, offering diverse audiences of black and white steelworkers, grandmothers, symphony patrons, bobby soxers and school children a Black alternative to rock and roll. His first long-playing folk album “Mark Twain,” composed of songs he had sung on Broadway and on television, had been released in 1954, but rose to third place on the “Billboard” charts in January 1956; the folk album “Belafonte” released in 1955, rose to first place on the charts in February 1956, holding the top spot for six weeks. After release in May 1956, “Calypso’s” rise on the charts was immediate and long-lasting.

The unprecedented national and international success of the Caribbean folk songs, the occasional calypso, and songs composed in the folk song mode, written by Burgie and performed by Belafonte performed on “Calypso,” attached Belafonte’s celebrity to calypso-styled music, and generated a commercial “calypso craze.” Music fan magazines tagged Belafonte as “King of Calypso,” a title normally reserved for the winner of Trinidad’s annual carnival competition. The success of this recording accelerated an already well-established process of calypso reinvention, which West Indian literary critic Gordon Rohlehr described as traveling in the 1930s from Trinidad into the United States, the United Kingdom, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Surinam, Venezuela, Ghana and Sierra Leone, all places where singers began to refer to themselves as “calypsonians.” In the US, the success of the “Calypso” album encouraged Latin artists Candido, Tito Puente, and Perez Prado, jazz singers Sarah Vaughan and Dinah Washington, pop singers Rosemary Clooney and Pat Boone, and even actor Robert Mitchum to record calypso songs. Rohlehr noted that, after Belafonte, distinctly different folk singers from throughout the Caribbean would call themselves “calypsonians” or “calypso singers,” as long as it was profitable to do so.

In interviews, Belafonte tried to distance himself from the “calypsomania” spurred by the album’s success. In one interview published early in 1957, he described himself as a “singer of folk material...from every section of the world” and described the hit singles “Jamaica Farewell” as a West Indian folk ballad and “Day-O” as a “West Indian work song.” He praised the topicality of “True calypso” as a “kind of living newspaper,” and promised to keeping singing “true calypso as I see it [and]...every other kind of music that carries truth in it.”

The timing of Belafonte’s celebrity, and his chosen political commitments connected him with the new stage of civil rights protest, with growing conflicts between challengers and defenders of racial segregation and backlash following the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision. Belafonte’s rise coincided with new demands for racial equality, which he thoughtfully shaped his performance to embody. Buying and playing his records may have provided audiences with a tangible connection to the combination of Black and multi-racial and international cultures he and his music represented. A survey of New York area male and female high school and college students reported in “Billboard” in December 1956, found that although more students ranked white performers Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Teresa Brewer and

Doris Day as their favorite singers, Belafonte had “the highest percentage of record buyers.” Perhaps when students at Marquette, a Jesuit university in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, petitioned to replace Presley with Belafonte in the student union jukebox, they wanted to associate themselves with the civil rights promise Belafonte represented.

When in March 1956, the young minister from Montgomery, Martin Luther King, Jr., approached Belafonte to ask for his support for the bus boycott underway, Belafonte’s second record was at the top of the music charts, and the “Calypso” album had been recorded but not yet been released. Belafonte answered the call, and from then on, he drew on his star power to lead demonstrations and raise money for the civil rights movement. The Black press enthusiastically covered Belafonte’s stunning accomplishment and his commitments to the struggle for racial equality. White audiences may have wanted to embrace Belafonte as a token of racial progress. But Belafonte consciously used all his interviews and superstar media attention in white spaces to open doors for other performers, to challenge racial exclusions and discrimination, and to associate his name and his music with the freedom struggle.

The enormous popularity of the “Calypso” album gave Belafonte’s stunning performance of Burgie’s songs an outsized impact on defining “calypso” music for American audiences, and around the world. The long life of “Day-O” offers one trace of the music first introduced here. The Nashville sit-in students would sing “Day-O” when in jail in 1960; the Freedom Rider protesters wrote new words, singing “Freedom’s Coming and It Won’t Be Long” in their cells in Mississippi’s Parchman Penitentiary in 1961. In the 1980s, new generations encountered its memorable presence in Tim Burton’s 1988 film “Beetlejuice”; New York Yankee fans have heard the song reverberating throughout the stadium; it has been sampled in recent releases by rap artist Lil Wayne and popular singer Jason Derulo. The work song of the Caribbean labor gang still “carries truth in it.”

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.