Singer, actor, civil rights activist Harry Belafonte is dead at 96

Fred Mazelis
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We repost below a May 2012 WSWS article ("Harry Belafonte provides an historical insight into the civil rights movement's decay"), which discusses the political role of the famous actor and singer Harry Belafonte in the civil rights movement and as a close confidant of Martin Luther King Jr.

Belafonte, who died this week at the age of 96, achieved enormous fame almost 70 years ago, when he was only in his mid-20s. He popularized calypso music in the US, with a hugely successful concert and recording career in several different musical genres. His album *Calypso* (1956) became the first long-playing record to sell 1 million copies in a single year.

The singer also went on to appear as a screen actor, including in a well-known role opposite Dorothy Dandridge in Otto Preminger's ground-breaking, all-black *Carmen Jones* (1959), as well as major roles in *Island in the Sun* (Robert Rossen, 1957) and *Odds Against Tomorrow* (Robert Wise, 1959). In the 1960s, however, Belafonte largely stepped away from a career in Hollywood, complaining that the film studios were not interested in the socially conscious films he was searching for. He appeared in some later films, notably co-starring with Zero Mostel in *The Angel Levine* (1970) and appearing in several Robert Altman films in the 1990s: *The Player* (1992) and *Kansas City* (1996).

For the rest of his long life, Belafonte called himself first and foremost a social and political activist, not a singer or actor.

Belafonte was born into a West Indian family in Harlem, although he spent part of his boyhood in Jamaica. After the Second World War, he met Sidney Poitier at the American Negro Theater and took acting classes at The New School under left-wing German theatre director Erwin Piscator. Belafonte traveled in left-wing circles around the Communist Party. He met actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee and singer Paul Robeson, whom he called a mentor.

Belafonte's collaboration with and steadfast support for Martin Luther King Jr. is the political connection for which he is most well-known. The singer financially supported King and his family, including after King was assassinated in 1968. He bailed out King and others when they were jailed. He turned his spacious home on Manhattan's Upper West Side into a virtual second home and unofficial office for the civil rights leader when he was in New York. It was in this apartment that the historically significant meeting dominated by a sharp exchange between King and Andrew Young, and referenced by Belafonte in his memoir, took place.

There is little to add to what was written 11 years ago on this important episode, including what it revealed about Belafonte's own outlook and class role. He was undoubtedly outspoken and unafraid to make certain enemies. He went so far as to criticize Obama, the first black president of the US. But he still supported Obama for reelection in 2012, and he supported the Democratic Party for his entire political life.

Belafonte's first political influences, in Stalinist circles, played a big role in turning him toward Popular Front reformism, including the claim that the Democratic Party could be pushed to the left and could deliver improvements for the working class. It was in this spirit that Belafonte supported the presidential campaigns of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders.

In Belafonte's case, this was also bound up with an emphasis on race, and on support for nationalist opponents of US imperialism, such as Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. While he did not embrace the rhetoric of the black nationalists or identity politics fanatics, he separated the struggle against racism from the challenges facing the working class as a whole. This flowed from his whole reformist outlook, reinforced by the experience of the postwar boom. He dismissed the role of the working class in the fight for socialism.

New York Times columnist Charles Blow, in his column this week paying tribute to Belafonte, quotes the entertainer at a speech he gave before an audience at the Ford Foundation 10 years ago. "We surrendered to greed," said Belafonte. "We surrendered to our hedonist joys. We destroyed the civil rights movement. Looking at the great harvest of achievements we had, all the young men and women of our communities ran off to the feast of Wall Street and big business and opportunity."

As we have pointed out, Belafonte is speaking of himself when he makes criticisms like these, as one of the most famous among the layer of American radicals, and not only African Americans, of course. It was this layer that made its peace with capitalism. Belafonte was torn by this history. He could not keep completely silent, he could not bring himself to celebrate Wall Street and the betrayal of the mass struggles of the 1950s and '60s. At the same time, he had no alternative to offer, and he joined in supporting capitalist politicians, from John F. Kennedy to Obama and Bernie Sanders.

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Harry Belafonte provides an historical insight into the civil rights movement's decay

By Fred Mazelis
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Tom Eley's May 1 article, "Behind the right-wing racial politics of Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton," makes clear the class gulf between these two defenders of big business and the working class.

As the article explains, Jackson and Sharpton are "two individuals who personify the decay of the civil rights movement and the cultivation of a wealthy black elite that is fundamentally hostile to the social aspirations of workers, both black and white." Jackson "has sought to portray himself as the heir to Martin Luther King Jr., the leading figure in the struggle for black equality from the 1950s to his death in 1968. However, both King and the civil rights movement of the earlier period were of a very different character."

Additional confirmation of this different character is provided in a recent memoir by an important eyewitness to civil rights history, singer and political activist Harry Belafonte. Belafonte, who marked his 85th birthday about three months ago, published a memoir last year, entitled *My Song*.

While he became famous as a calypso performer and later in other

genres and also as an actor, Belafonte is also well known for his social and political activism. He was one of the sharpest opponents of the Iraq War, which he correctly characterized as a war crime.

Belafonte first met Martin Luther King Jr. in 1956, in the midst of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Both men, not yet 30 years old, had already become famous in their respective fields. The singer and civil rights leader immediately forged a bond, and Belafonte went on to help raise funds for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and to develop a strong collaborative friendship with King. When King was in New York, he and his closest advisers—Belafonte among them—often met at the singer's apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Belafonte's memoir describes in some detail his last meeting with King. It took place on March 27, 1968, exactly a week before the civil rights leader was assassinated. King was in the midst of planning for the Poor People's Campaign, including the erection of a shantytown near the White House, to protest "until Congress passed an economic rights bill to alleviate poverty in America," Belafonte writes.

A party was held at Belafonte's large apartment. After the guests had left, King and some of his closest colleagues stayed and talked about the conditions in the country and the state of the civil rights movement. Among those present, in addition to King and Belafonte, were King's lawyer, Clarence Jones, his secretary and bodyguard, Bernard Lee, and Andrew Young, who would later become a congressman, the mayor of Atlanta and also the US ambassador to the United Nations under President Jimmy Carter.

This passage in Belafonte's book deserves careful examination. The political establishment had reacted with fury to King's denunciation of the Vietnam War. The ghetto rebellions had erupted in nearly every major northern US city over the previous four summers. King was intensely affected by these conditions. In the midst of the discussion, he exclaimed:

> Somehow, frustration over the war has brought forth this idea that the solution resides in violence. What I cannot get across to these young people is that I wholly embrace everything they feel! It's just the tactics we can't agree on. I have more in common with these young people than with anybody else in this movement. I feel their rage. I feel their pain. I feel their frustration. It's the system that's the problem, and it's choking the breath out of our lives.

Belafonte continues:

> In the pause that followed, Andy [Young] replied, "Well, I don't know, Martin. It's not the entire system. It's only part of it, and I think we can fix that."
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> Suddenly, Martin lost his temper. "I don't need to hear from you, Andy," he said. "I've heard enough from you. You're a capitalist, and I'm not. And so we don't see eye to eye—on this and a lot of other stuff."
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> It was an awkward moment. Martin was really angry. But I understood the subtext. Deep down, Andy was ambivalent about the Poor People's Campaign…
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> The tension peaked. "The trouble," Martin went on, "is that we live in a failed system. Capitalism does not permit an even flow of economic resources. With this system, a small privileged few are rich beyond conscience and almost all others are doomed to be poor at some level… That's the way the system works. And since we know that the system will not change the rules, we're going to have to change the system."
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> At heart, Martin was a socialist and a revolutionary thinker. He spoke not just in anger, but in anguish. His voice dropped to a more reflective tone as he continued. "We fought hard and long, and I have never doubted that we would prevail in this struggle. Already our rewards have begun to reveal themselves. Desegregation… the Voting Rights Act…" He paused. "But what deeply troubles me now is that for all the steps we've taken toward integration, I've come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house."
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> We had not heard Martin quite this way before. I felt as if our moorings were unhinging. "Damn, Martin! If that's what you think, what would you have us do?" I asked.
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> He gave me a look. "I guess we're just going to have to become firemen."

King was a pacifist and a reformist. If he had been a revolutionary thinker, it is likely that his tone would have been one of determination, not anguish, as Belafonte describes it. Nevertheless, his sincerity as a fighter for the interests of the exploited and the poor comes through quite clearly in this passage, and it is significant but not surprising that this side of his political views is rarely presented as he has been transformed into a public icon.

What is even more important is what this account shows about the bitter tensions within the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King felt himself almost alone, surrounded by right-wing figures like Young or preachers who did not share his broader outlook and political views. The isolation of King also has sinister implications, when one considers that his every move was being followed by the FBI, and that his assassination, about which numerous unanswered questions persist to this day, took place just one week later.

Belafonte has little to say about Jesse Jackson. He describes him as among those who "vied for places of influence" with the slain civil rights leader's widow, Coretta Scott King, adding that "[s]oon [Jackson] would go back to Chicago and brandish the 'bloody garment' that Martin was wearing when he died."

King's outburst directed against Young could just as well have been addressed to Jackson, who later came to personify the policy of "black capitalism" embraced by the Nixon administration. Jackson and Young came from different backgrounds and pursued slightly different paths, but their views were very similar. Young worked to some extent behind the scenes, while also pursuing a career in "public service" by running for office as a Democratic politician. Jackson—like Sharpton after him—played the demagogue and looked for big headlines. The tactics sometimes differed, but the aim was the same—in Jackson's words, to "keep hope alive" in the system and specifically in the Democratic Party.

Belafonte's eyewitness account of the March 1968 discussion is all the more revealing because he himself is part of this privileged layer, although his history is a different one. He came of age politically in New York in the late 1940s, and his hero was Paul Robeson. He was radicalized as a young man and, as he describes it in his book, moved in circles of "socialists and communists [who] embraced the working class as the bedrock of a new political order." Belafonte "never signed on as a member of the American Socialist or Communist party, or even viewed myself as a fellow traveler, as the jargon of the day had it." It is clear from his memoir that Belafonte was not driven to study, to examine the political programs and the differences among the various tendencies within the socialist movement. While he has remained a critic of specific policies, he has also made his peace with the system.

This is the significance of Belafonte's statement that he felt his "moorings were unhinging" when he heard King denounce the system. While King was searching for a way to fight back, Belafonte was

exhibiting the demoralization and conservatism that were encouraged in the circles in which he had earlier traveled, influenced above all by the Communist Party and its slavish subservience to the Democratic Party.

When King was killed, Belafonte drew no political conclusions from this final discussion in his apartment. In fact, ten pages further into the memoir, Belafonte boasts that he quickly decided, after King's death, to "help elect black candidates at every level of the political system… I helped persuade Andy Young to run for Congress in Georgia, gave him money, and staged a lot of free concerts." Belafonte made "four- and five-figure contributions" to help elect black mayors in Cleveland; Gary, Indiana, and other cities. Where King had called for "firemen" to deal with the "burning house" of capitalism, his epigones turned in the opposite direction.

Belafonte, like others, has criticized some of the policies of President Barack Obama, but has also said that he will vote for his reelection.