

THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

(DLITT ET PHIL) (*HONORIS CAUSA*)

HAROLD GEORGE BELAFONTE

Harold George “Harry” Belafonte was born in Harlem in New York City in 1927. Overwhelmed and intimidated by its ghetto streets and believing the island to be a safer place, his immigrant mother sent him back to the island of her birth, Jamaica. As a result, the island and all its variety became Harry Belafonte’s cultural reservoir.

At the outbreak of World War II, his mother brought him back to Harlem. He tried to adapt to his new environment, but found doing so extremely difficult. Unable to finish high school, he enlisted in the United States Navy and served for almost two years as a munitions loader. After his tour of duty ended, he was honourably discharged and returned to New York City, where he worked both in the garment centre and as a caretaker’s assistant.

For doing repairs in an apartment (of Clarice Taylor and Maxwell Glanville), Belafonte was given, as his gratuity, a ticket to a production of *Home is the hunter* at a community theatre in Harlem – the American Negro Theatre (A.N.T.). The world that the theatre opened up to him put Belafonte, for the first time, face to face with what would be his destiny – a life in the performing arts. He joined the Dramatic Workshop of the New School of Social Research under the tutelage of the renowned German director, Erwin Piscator. With classmates like Marlon Brando, Walter Matthau, Bea Arthur, Rod Steiger and Tony Curtis – just to name a few – Belafonte became thoroughly immersed in the world of theatre. Paralleling this pursuit was his interest and love of jazz. He developed a relationship with the young architects of this form of music, the geniuses of modern jazz, and on the occasion of his first professional appearance, he had Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Tommy Potter and Al Haig as his “back-up band”. Ever since that first performance, Belafonte has pursued an extremely successful career in the performing arts:

- His RCA album *Calypso* made him the first artist in the history of the industry to sell over 1 million LP’s.
- His first Broadway appearance in *John Murray Anderson’s Almanac* earned him the coveted Tony Award.
- As the first black producer in television, he won an Emmy for his CBS production of *Tonight with Belafonte*.
- At the beginning of his film career, *Carmen Jones* won the admiration of top critics and attracted Oscar nominations.

His many “firsts” in breaking down the numerous racial barriers in the world of culture in America are legendary. Belafonte met a young Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. on his historic visit to New York in the early 1950s. From that day until the leader’s assassination, Belafonte and King developed a deep and abiding friendship that, for Belafonte, still stands as one of the most significant of his experiences. Dr. King said of his friend, “Belafonte’s global popularity and his commitment to our cause is a key ingredient to the global struggle for freedom and a powerful tactical weapon in the Civil Rights movement here in America. We are blessed by his courage and moral integrity.”

Disturbed by cruel events unfolding in Africa due to war, drought, and famine, Belafonte set in motion the wheels that led to “We Are the World” on January 28, 1985. He contacted manager, Ken Kragen, and they, along with others, guided and directed the project known as “USA for Africa”.

Belafonte was prominent in contributing to the ending of the oppressive apartheid government of South Africa and to helping obtain the release of his friend, Nelson Mandela, after twenty-seven and a half years of incarceration.

Belafonte was appointed by President John F. Kennedy to be the cultural advisor for the Peace Corps. He served in this capacity for five years.

In 1987, Belafonte accepted the appointment as UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, thus making him the second American to hold the title – the first being Danny Kaye, upon whose death Belafonte assumed the position. Belafonte has continued to devote himself globally to civil and human rights issues, focusing in particular on the United States and Africa.

Belafonte penned his much-anticipated memoir *My song*, which was published in October 2011. In conjunction with the release of the book, HBO debuted the critically acclaimed superior bio-documentary *Sing your song*, directed by Susanne Rostock, the same week. The film chronicles the life and times of one of America’s most ground-breaking entertainers and social activists through his own words, eye-witness accounts, FBI files and archival footage, and seeks to answer two profound questions about who we are, especially as artists and what meaning we find in our own commitments.

Both the film and the book not only tell Belafonte’s stirring life story, but place that life in the context of its times, and portrays it with the kind of depth and breadth that makes one wonder why it has not been told before.

Harry Belafonte has been honoured many times by such diverse groups as the American Jewish Congress, the NAACP, the City of Hope, Fight for Sight, the Urban League, the National Conference of Black Mayors, the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, the ACLU, the State Department, the Boy Scouts of America, Hadassah International, and the Peace Corps. He has received awards such as the Albert Einstein Award from Yeshiva University, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Peace Prize, the Acorn Award from the Bronx Community College for his work with children, and, in 1989, he received the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors for excellence in the performing arts. He was the first recipient of the Nelson Mandela Courage Award and was honoured at the White House with the 1994 National Medal of Arts from President Clinton for his contributions to America’s cultural life. He has received honorary degrees from City University of New York, Spellman College in Atlanta, Tufts University, Brandeis University, Long Island University, Bard College and, most recently, received the title of Doctor of Humane Letters from Columbia University. He is the 2013 recipient of the Spingarn Medal, the most prestigious award bestowed by the NAACP.

Harry Belafonte has been widely acknowledged and honoured for his outstanding contribution to the global performing arts. He has certainly used his global reputation as a performing artist, in his own words, “in the service of the human family”.

It is for his considerable humanitarian contributions, particularly to the struggle for peace and social justice, that the University of South Africa confers on Harold George Belafonte the degree of Doctor of Literature and Philosophy (*honoris causa*).