FILM EXTRA

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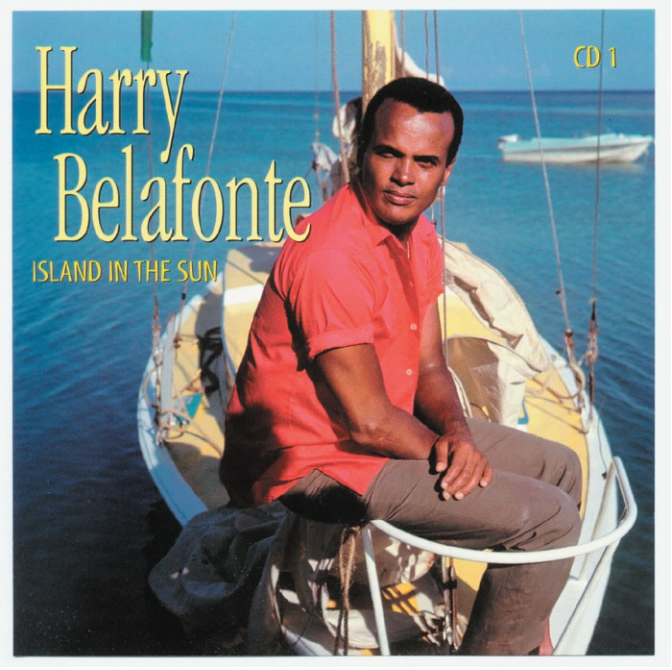
Harry Belafonte: *Sing Your Song*

Sing Your Song takes its title from advice given to a young Harry Belafonte by the legendary African-American singer, actor and political activist Paul Robeson. Belafonte has much in common with Robeson in combining great talent with political convictions and strong commitment. However, the two men had rather different careers partly because they faced the same problems at different times in the development of the American entertainment industry.

The documentary was made by Harry Belafonte's own family company and it tells his story through the commentary of the man himself and interviews with friends and colleagues. In this presentation I want to take a different perspective and explore some of the issues that the film mentions only briefly. In particular, I want to discuss the conditions in Hollywood in the 1950s and 1960s.



The image of Harry Belafonte at the height of his fame as a music star

At the time of his first major roles in Hollywood during the early 1950s, Harry Belafonte was recognised as genuine star material – a very beautiful and sexy young man with great talents. Yet by the end of the decade he so despaired of Hollywood that he founded his own film production company (using the proceeds from his extremely successful music career) which made two films in 1959 before Harry left Hollywood altogether, returning only in 1970 when the new trend for 'blaxploitation pictures' changed the profile of the film industry. With a second Belafonte production company he made two further films and later appeared as an actor in a couple more, but his film (and dramatic theatre) performances have been limited. Of course, he did not waste his time, filling it with political activism. The question remains as to whether the industry failed him or whether he was in some way not suited to film as a medium.

Hollywood and Black America

In his 'Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films' (1992) Donald Bogle demonstrates how five crudely drawn racial stereotypes developed in nineteenth century American literature and popular entertainment forms and how these became incorporated into American cinema in the twentieth century – first in the guise of white performers 'blacking up' but quite quickly in the casting of specific Black performers who became associated with a particular type: the Tom, the Coon, the Tragic Mulatto, the Mammy and the Brutal Black Buck. These types persisted up to the 1980s and their legacy is still evident in contemporary cinema, best exemplified in Spike Lee's excoriating satire *Bamboozled* in 2000.

If the types remained in place for a long time, the film industry's overall approach to Black stories and issues did change over time. Up until the late 1960s, audiences were still segregated in the South and Hollywood was still concerned about which movies it would attempt to show there. In the 1930s and 1940s, independent producers made films specifically for the Black audience. Hollywood also made a small number of high profile all-Black films such as the musical *Cabin in the Sky* in 1943, but in mainstream Hollywood films, African-Americans were restricted to the five types and they usually played servants or comic relief. Belafonte would have been familiar with this scenario as he was growing up in New York in the 1940s, but when he first appeared in films in 1953 things had started to change a little – there was a move towards an 'integrationist', 'liberal' take on the development of stories with Black characters. Even so, the types changed only marginally. Belafonte's contemporary and fellow 'West Indian' 'island boy' Sidney Poitier was

first into the movies and he soon became trapped in Tom roles as the educated 'good Negro', who in three films is partnered by the equally 'good wife' played by Ruby Dee. By contrast, Belafonte found himself offered potential 'Buck' roles and his first three films for Hollywood in the 1950s found him alongside the 'Tragic Mulatto' played by Dorothy Dandridge.

Belafonte's frustration in these roles probably explains why he didn't become a major film star, instead turning to television and his musical career. In *Bright Road* (1953) and *Carmen Jones* (1954) Belafonte plays opposite Dandridge who was the star name for both Black and White audiences. Bogle sees Belafonte's 'failure' in these roles deriving from his smooth gentle style – not 'gutsy' enough to be the 'Buck' that the institutional practices designed him to be and not offering audiences an alternative to Sidney Poitier's 'noble Tom'. This perception is enhanced by the overtly sexy performance of Dandridge in *Carmen Jones*.

Island in the Sun (1957) places Belafonte and Dandridge as Black characters in teasing controversial relationships with the White colonialists in an unnamed island in the 'British West Indies'. Belafonte plays a young radical politician who has a tentative relationship with an 'older woman' played by Joan Fontaine. He also provides the memorable song. Everything looks set for a full-blooded colonial melodrama, but the film is stifled by Hollywood's fear of open miscegenation. Belafonte appears more Tom than Buck. (A few years later, Belafonte's other young acting colleague from the early 1950s, Brock Peters broke through as a genuine Buck character in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and in the British film, *The L-Shaped Room* (1962). Dorothy Dandridge never did escape from her typing as the 'Tragic Mulatto' and died from an overdose in 1965.

In 1959 Belafonte decided to try to find scripts which he could produce himself and he formed a production company, Har-Bel. The company produced two films with Hollywood studios in 1959. The first of these, was *The World, The Flesh and The Devil* which seemed to situate Belafonte in a similar role to *Island in the Sun*. He is one of only three people to survive an apocalypse – the other two are Mel Ferrer and Inger Stevens. The film did indeed suffer from the same strangulation of the Hollywood Production Code in attempting to tackle any of the big social issues that the scenario inevitably brought to the fore, but the critics were generally impressed by the production and the performances. Belafonte was happier with the second production.

Odds Against Tomorrow is described by Belafonte as one of the two acting roles that he really enjoyed and in which he felt fulfilled. The film has grown in status over the last fifty years even if it wasn't a commercial success at the time. Belafonte surrounded himself with friends such as Shelley Winters and Robert Ryan. The film was directed by Robert Wise, one of the most versatile and successful directors of his generation, but there is some confusion about the script which was credited to the Black novelist John O. Killens but seems to have been written by the black-listed Abraham Polonsky a victim of the HUAC hearings (Belafonte himself was under surveillance by the FBI and the activists helped each other where possible). A *film noir*, *Odds Against Tomorrow* features Belafonte as a musician, separated from his wife but very attached to his small daughter, who is in debt and finds himself forced into a scheme to rob a bank alongside a racist played by Robert Ryan. Shot in New York and New England, the role offered Belafonte the chance to show what he could do without confining him to the outdated types.

In 1970 Belafonte decided to return to the cinema with a new production company. By now Hollywood had changed. The momentous social and political events of the 1960s were finally having an effect in Hollywood – the Production Code gradually disappeared and new kinds of Black films were being made – the so-called 'blaxploitation films'. These were extremely successful, so much so that *Shaft* (1971) is said to have 'saved' MGM at a time when mainstream films were failing. The new films responded to and worked with Black militancy and confidence.

Belafonte first worked with Zero Mostel on a New York-based film by the Hungarian exile director János Kadár. *The Angel Levine* (1970) has rather slipped out of view now but it provided Belafonte with a role as an 'angel' who attempts to help an old Jewish man – who refuses to believe that the Belafonte is an angel at all. The narrative does however relate to ther New York-set films of the period and it speaks in some ways to Belafonte's links to political activists and to questions of identity.

Far more obviously in tune with the 'new Black cinema' is *Buck and the Preacher* (1971). This is a very interesting film in many ways – not least because it works with the old social types and transforms them. Sidney Poitier stars alongside Belafonte and also directs. Ruby Dee also appears – again as Poitier's wife. But this time, Poitier is quite literally 'Buck' complete with fearsome handguns. He plays a form of 'wagonmaster' attempting to help former slaves at the end of the Civil War to journey West. He's opposed by ex-Confedrate soldiers employed to drive the freed slaves back to Louisiana where the plantations are short of labour. Belafonte plays a con-man 'preacher'

(a role that appeared in the older Black Westerns of the 1930s) who falls in with Buck . When a wagon train is robbed by the raiders and the pioneers are facing starvation on the plains, Buck and the preacher with the Ruby Dee character rob a bank. Bogle argues that the sight of the three characters on horseback was exhilarating for Black audiences. There is also an interesting use of the local Native American population in the narrative.

In our final clip we'll look at a short extract from the film that Harry Belafonte tells us was his best experience as an actor – Robert Altman's 1996 feature *Kansas City*. The film is set in Kansas City in 1934 – faithfully recreated by Altman's team much as in 1974's *Thieves Like Us*. The convoluted plot involves a young White couple (Jennifer Jason Leigh and Dermot Mulroney). He robs a prosperous Black man (disguising himself with burnt cork, the traditional make-up for 'blackface) but then finds himself held hostage in a local music joint where the main character is 'Seldom Seen' played by Belafonte. In the meantime his wife hatches up a plot involving a local politician in order to put pressure on for her husband's release.

The suspicion is that Altman concocted the film in order to stage some wonderful jazz performances recalling his own youth in Kansas City, but at the same time he creates a rich evocation of African-American culture in that period and this is what must have attracted Belafonte. A similar sense of Southern community can be found in Altman's later *Cookie's Fortune* (1999).

Summary

In his later career, Belafonte appeared in one other leading role in *White Man's Burden* (1995) a 'role-reversal' story in which Belafonte is the wealthy man and John Travolta is a poor worker. The production companies involved were Quentin Tarantino's A Band Apart, HBO and the French company UGC. The film was written and directed by Desmond Nakano, a socially committed writer who Belafonte presumably wanted to support. Unfortunately the film was poorly received by critics – but it did make some money at the box office and has been shown on television.

Harry Belafonte's trunacated film career remains something of a mystery. Given his statements about working with Altman, it might have been very different if he had found similar directors in the 1950s – but the institutional racism of Hollywood at that time would have made films like Altman's impossible.

By not 'giving in' to the typing of roles for Black actors, Belafonte made a stand – he 'sung his song'. And by forming his own companies to make films he created a role model for later producer-directors. *Sing Your Song* rather skates around some of the issues – including Belafonte's relationship with Poitier – who clearly did compromise and became a big star. (Poitier also went on to be a director of films with Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor in the 1970s and 1980s.)

Whose to say that Poitier did not have the right approach? How damaging was his acceptance of what the White industry demanded? On the other hand, although Belafonte was clearly right to fight, could he have achieved more through film by compromising more – or was he unlikely to have achieved Poitier's level of success anyway. In his comments about *Kansas City*, Belafonte says something very significant when he explains how for too many years Black actors had been forced to perform as 'someone else' not as themselves. Perhaps singing *your* song is the key after all.

Sources

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