

Musician, actor, activist – Belafonte followed his own beat

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

One singer you won't likely hear on a '50s oldies station is Harry Belafonte, yet he was one of the most popular singers of that decade. He made a name for himself in the emerging folk music genre, with five gold albums between 1955 and 1963. For a time, he was outselling Elvis Presley. His repertoire anticipated world music; he incorporated musical traditions from the Caribbean, Africa, Ireland and the U.S. in his singing. By the early 1960s, his brand of smooth traditional folk was overtaken in popularity by grittier singer-songwriter acoustic music, rock-and-roll and soul.

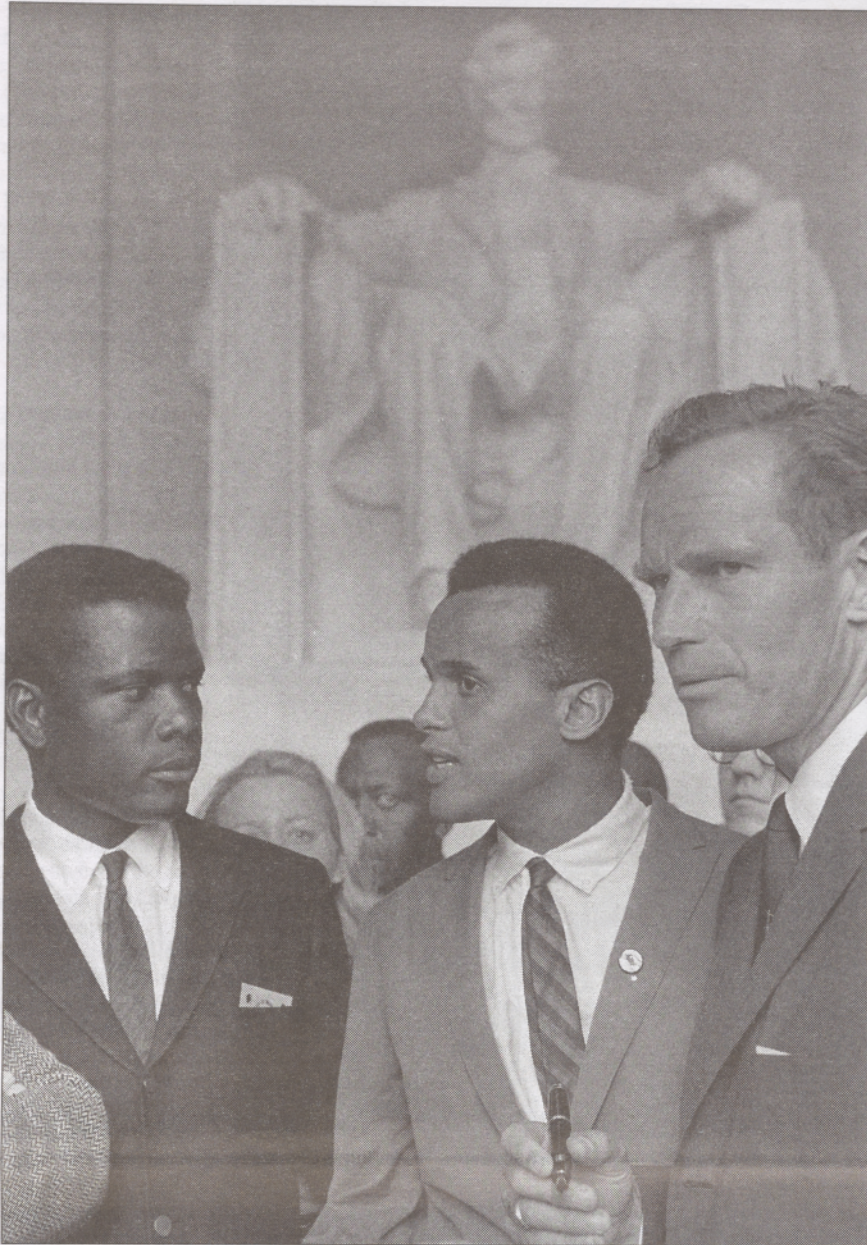
Belafonte was a "breakthrough" African-American artist at a time when black performers usually needed special permission to play for white audiences, especially in the South. Even in New York City, racially mixed audiences were discouraged by the authorities. Belafonte wasn't content just to rake in his royalties; he saw his purpose as promoting a multicultural integration that emphasized black pride and the strengths and values of struggle that African-Americans would bring to an integrated United States.

Belafonte was drawing on the legacy of 1940s New York City, where Communist activists, both white and black, mixed with jazz and folk musicians, espousing a radical version of integration that incorporated socialist concepts of economic justice. The radical activists of that time, including Belafonte's mentor, Paul Robeson, were mostly red-baited out of the public eye. However, Belafonte himself escaped being blacklisted and instead became a star.

"Becoming Belafonte" covers its subject's life as a musician, actor and activist from the 1940s to 1970. Belafonte never gave up the political project that he'd signed on to. He became a close confidant, strategist and financier of Martin Luther King, Jr. He maintained his commitment to reach out to white as well as black audiences.

Smith documents clearly the influences that helped make Belafonte both a star and a radical activist, an unlikely combination. There are fascinating glimpses of the way that "old-time," "hillbilly," "rhythm and blues" and "union" music were redefined in the 1940s as the genre we know as folk music. The book documents at length the strictures facing black artists.

For example, in some venues in the early



Left to right, Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte and Charlton Heston pause in front of the Lincoln Memorial during the 1963 Civil Rights march in Washington D.C.

1950s, Belafonte could not eat or stay in hotels where he performed. Even in the 1960s, TV sponsors would take exception to Belafonte singing and dancing with a white woman. Interracial touching was forbidden. As Belafonte gained popularity, he worked to expand the opportunities for black

performers in movies, concerts and television. He eventually insisted on artistic control on his shows, using it to push the limits of the color bar. In one notable week, when he filled in as host on "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson," he exposed white and black viewers to black leaders

who had rarely been given voice on TV.

Belafonte faced conflicts that shed some light on popular culture today. Translating artistic success into political influence had its limits. He was never able to adapt his musical style to the radical currents of the 1960s. His notions of multicultural integration were out of step with the rising ideas about black nationalism, as black artists began to question the value of working with white artists or trying to convince white audiences of the need for racial justice.

Ironically, Belafonte's real aspiration was to be an actor; he started his singing career to finance his acting. His early acting career was limited by the opportunities available to black actors; later on, his attempts to create roles for himself by producing his own films backfired, as the messages in his films failed to gain traction with either black or white audiences.

Smith writes that she wanted to "reintroduce this peerless cultural figure in all his dimensions... I focus on how he crafted a public persona that enabled him to navigate the minefields of racial discrimination, anticommunist blacklisting, and the demands of stardom..." The weakness of Smith's account is that she focuses too much on this public persona. She seems to deliberately avoid writing much about the inner Belafonte. What kept him focused on political goals?

Sometimes he was personally betrayed, as when, in the late 1950s, his psychiatrist and his manager turned out to be FBI informants.

Sometimes he was criticized in the black press, as when he divorced his African-American wife to marry a white woman.

Smith brings a low-key, almost deliberately dry style to the subject. She makes long lists of performers that Belafonte worked with and venues where he performed, but rarely explains their significance in the broader cultural context. She carefully avoids making any comments that might be construed as criticism of her subject.

The result is a relatively tedious account about a fascinating subject – the reader will learn a lot about what Belafonte did, but relatively little about who he really was. Ultimately, one can't be understood without the other.

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TOXIC, from page 5

could be filmed, recorded or quoted.

Methvin Jr.'s multiple attempts to get statements from the VA and Monsanto also failed. "For some reason, nobody wants to talk about this," says Loring.

Methvin Jr. says he's heard from more than 3,000 veterans who believe they are experiencing health problems directly resulting from their exposure to toxins at Ft. McClellan. "That's a small number compared to the number of vets who went through there. As of right now, the rough estimate is 650,000," says Methvin Jr., and that's not including civilian employees and children. Because exposure to some of the poisons found on the base can change a person's DNA, the effects can be passed on for generations, resulting in birth defects, autism and other malaise.

"Some of these vets and the stories they have to tell about their health problems and the things they've experienced due to exposure from their training at Ft. McClellan are just so utterly heartbreaking," Loring says.

Some veterans' groups are pushing for legislation, introduced two years ago, that would create a Ft. McClellan health registry to test and chronicle soldiers' impact from exposure. Another bill that's

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— JASON LORING
PRODUCER OF "TOXIC SERVICE"

been introduced in the House of Representatives would extend benefits to the children of toxically poisoned veterans and create a center at the VA that would specialize in diagnosing and treating toxic exposure. However, lacking any political priority, both bills continue to languish in committee.

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While the military recognizes that Ft. McClellan is highly toxic, it does not recognize the link to health problems it's caused veterans, say Methvin Jr. and Loring. They hope their film will bring the issue to the forefront so that sick veterans can get the medical care they

deserve.

On Jan. 17, veterans of Ft. McClellan plan to march from the Washington, D.C., Department of Veterans Affairs to the White House to raise awareness of the issue.

In the meantime, veterans like Roland file claims with the VA that may never be approved. Around Christmas her appeal will have reached the 420-day mark – the average amount of time it takes to hear back on a claim from the VA, she's been told. Now living in an apartment in Milwaukee, she says getting the compensation claim approved would be the best Christmas present she could hope for. Her credit cards maxed out and her savings gone, she's already put some of her belongings back in storage in case she ends up living out of her vehicle again in January when her lease ends and her rent goes up.

She often wonders what her life would have been like if she hadn't been so stubborn about cutting her hair 32 years ago and had followed in her father's footsteps and joined the Navy instead.

"I signed the dotted line. I was willing to die for my country," says Roland. "I just never thought I'd be dying like this."

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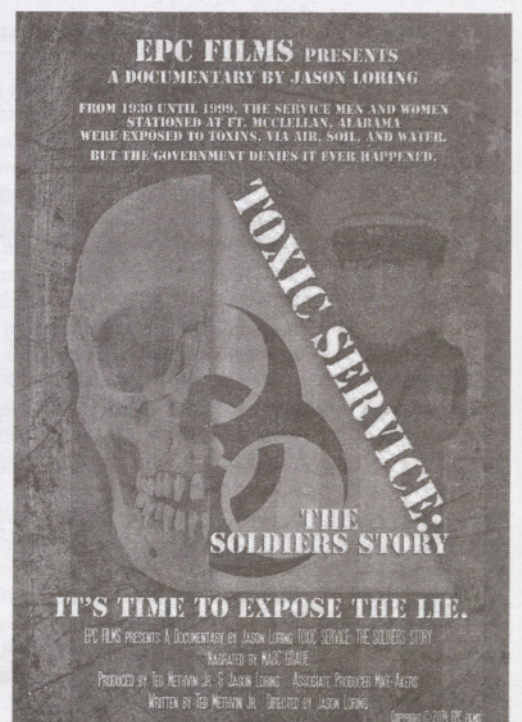


PHOTO COURTESY OF EPC FILMS
This documentary about the toxicity of Ft. McClellan and the soldiers who trained there is slated for release in select locations by 2015. Producers Ted Methvin Jr. and Jason Loring are currently seeking screening locations in Portland.