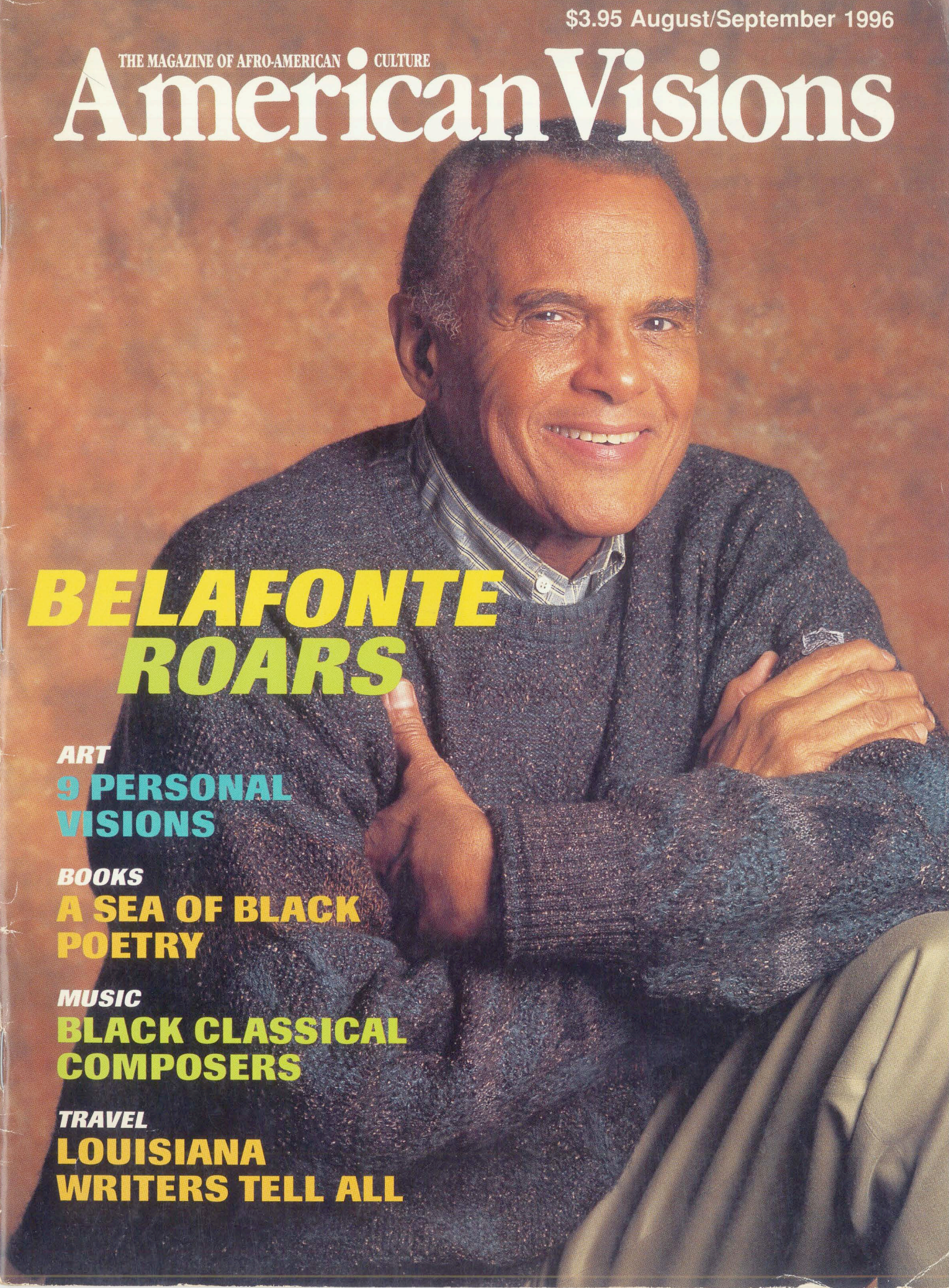
$3.95 August/September 1996

THE MAGAZINE OF AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE

American Visions



BELAFONTE ROARS

ART
9 PERSONAL VISIONS

BOOKS
A SEA OF BLACK POETRY

MUSIC
BLACK CLASSICAL COMPOSERS

TRAVEL
LOUISIANA WRITERS TELL ALL

BELAFONTE
THE LIONHEARTED

by Sharon Fitzgerald

The blue visor of Harry Belafonte's New York Mets baseball cap is pulled down over his forehead, making it difficult to look into his eyes. One wonders at first whether he is hiding a bald spot, shielding his gaze from the sun or shielding his identity from passers-by. Perhaps he is a Mets fan—just one of the boys. Unquestionable is the fact that while others may be unable to spot him, he misses very little.

Also indisputable is Belafonte's determination to comment on the world that he sees. Throughout his 43 years in the limelight, the artist has lifted his voice against social injustice. During the civil rights movement, he advised King and the Kennedys, marched and organized, and mobilized the Hollywood community. His were among the first denunciations of apartheid in South Africa. The landmark music collaboration "We Are the World," which raised millions of dollars to help relieve famine in Ethiopia, was ignited by his muse. As ambassador for UNICEF, he defends the rights of children around the globe.

Graced early on with celebrity, he constructed a platform upon which to challenge and serve. The roles are distinct, yet inseparable: performing is what he does; activist is who he is. "I did not become what I became after I made a dollar," Belafonte says. "I didn't become a politically active and socially conscious person when I became an artist; I was already that way. I found an opportunity in art to enhance that aspect of my existence. I found art as an instrument through which to focus on the ills of humanity and to show humanity in its higher achievements, its ability to do things that are far more dimensional than what we really do."

The uninformed identify him with "The Banana Boat Song" and with *Calypso*, the first album to sell 1 million copies. Belafonte's friends delight in telling "how Harry bought the building" when discrimination threatened to keep him out of a New York apartment. Students of African-American film and television applaud his creation of Harbel, the first production company to supplant racial stereotypes, back in 1957. Those who read liner notes recall that his mentorship of Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela introduced the African diaspora in living, musical form.

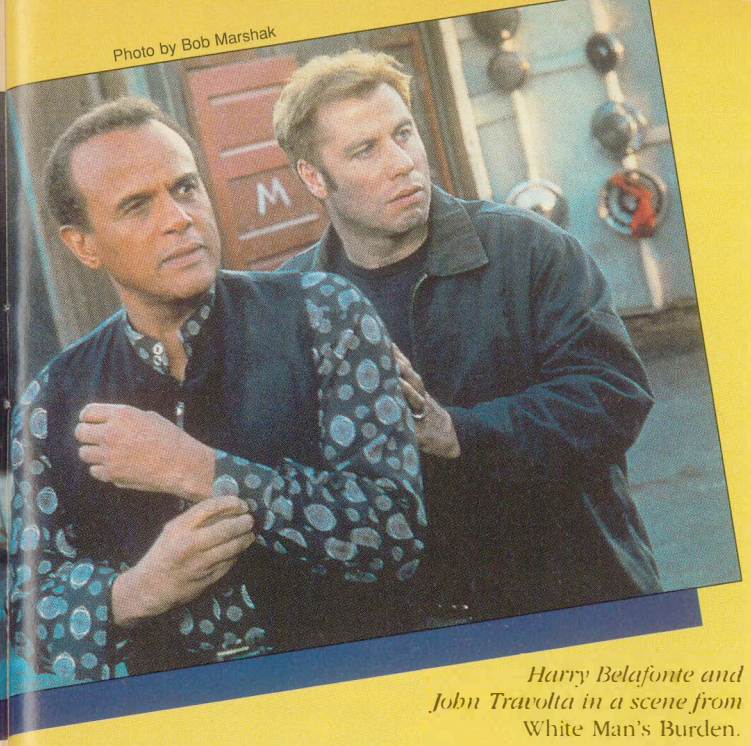
His radical spirit has so influenced our consciousness that it is surprising to realize that last winter's *White Man's Burden* (co-starring John Travolta) and the upcoming August 16 release *Kansas City* (directed by Robert Altman) are Belafonte's first major film performances in over 20 years. However, if past decades found him absent from the screen, they diminished neither his stardom nor his focus. At age 69, Harry George Belafonte Jr. is not known for wasting time. *The Affair*, a movie that he produced for HBO, aired last year. He has plans to direct *The Port Chicago Mutiny* for Turner Broadcasting. Accounts of his journey to Rwanda so impressed editors at Time Warner Books that he was asked to write about his experiences in Africa. Meanwhile, the concert dates, from which he has never taken a hiatus, continue selling out worldwide.

What some might label a comeback Belafonte describes partly as seizing the moment and partly as getting on with unfinished business. "I don't know how much time I have left in life," he says. "If I'm lucky, I might squeeze another good 10 years out of it. I don't know how long these opportunities are going to be at my door. Given how these things work, life has been exceedingly generous to me—that I should have endured this long to do the things I'm doing."

Born of Jamaican parents in New York City on March 1, 1927, Belafonte has a documentarian's memories of Harlem. He remembers the days when Joe Louis strode along 125th Street and when Duke Ellington, coiffed in a do-rag, could be seen shopping for fish. He recalls glimpsing the omnipresent Langston Hughes at a local bar and breaking bread at Small's Paradise with artist Charles White.

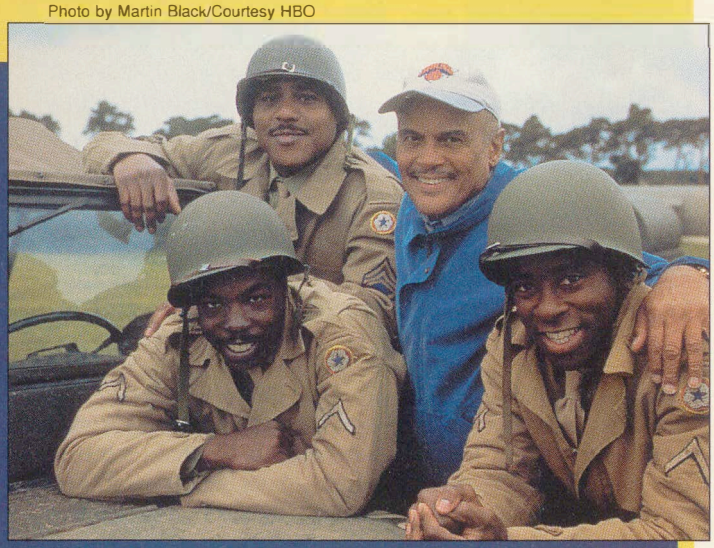
"We were more cohesive," he says of that Harlem community. "We knew what to aspire to. Our chil-

Photo by Bob Marshak



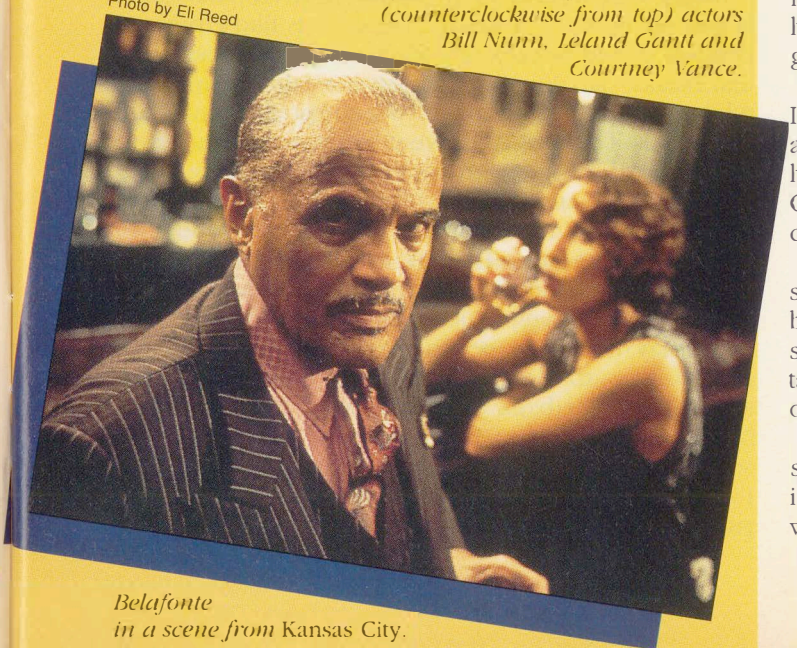
Harry Belafonte and John Travolta in a scene from White Man's Burden.

Photo by Martin Black/Courtesy HBO



Belafonte on the set of The Affair *with (counterclockwise from top) actors Bill Nunn, Leland Gantt and Courtney Vance.*

Photo by Eli Reed



Belafonte in a scene from Kansas City.

dren had real role models that they saw every day. My mother could easily say, 'Don't be like your Uncle Lenny; be like Paul Robeson.'"

Belafonte admits that Harlem's richness did not eliminate its deficiencies. The trappings of poverty—inadequate housing and education, underworld activities—also textured this terrain. His uncle, Lenny Love, was a well-known rumrunner and a controller of Harlem's numbers racket. Eventually, the dangers of the city caused Belafonte's mother to send her children to live in Jamaica.

"Our mother sent us away from all that, hoping we would survive this thing called life," he says. "There I got to see poverty on the plantations. Most of my family members were workers on land owned by absentee landlords, British nobility who were not living on the island. They chopped sugar cane, chopped bananas, loaded ships. They did all these things under tremendous difficulty, pain, anguish.

"But they did them also with strength and hope. And in that context they would sing—and sing because, as was known by almost every member of the diaspora, song was sometimes our only relief from the burden of life. We could communicate, tell the tales, aspire to things.

"I saw black men down at the docks who were singing work songs like 'Day-O' as they loaded and unloaded boats," he continues. "When I sing 'The Banana Boat Song,' some people glimpse it as a fanciful little tale that charms and delights the listener. But for the singer, it talks about a human condition that was very real to me, very painful and extremely oppressive.

"I am very fortunate. All these experiences fed into my character—my psyche, my personality, my values, my intellect. The one thing that all this had in common was my exposure to oppression, looking at how sophisticatedly it is manipulated to arrive at any given goal."

After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, Belafonte returned to Harlem, where he worked as a janitor's assistant. To thank him for repairing her Venetian blinds, one of the tenants, the actress Clarice Taylor, gave him two tickets to the American Negro Theater.

"I'd been to movie houses, and I used to watch stage shows when I was in the Navy, but I'd never been to the theater before," he says. "There was a sanctity: the place was like a sanctuary. Everybody talked in hushed tones, which was not the usual mode of conduct when we'd go public on a joyous evening.

"And then the curtains opened, and out on the stage walked these black people, telling a story. And it had rhythm; it had a purpose; it had a mission. I was absolutely overwhelmed, and I thought, Jesus

BELAFONTE

"I can't be around this long and watch all of black life being defined by 'the hood.' We have given legitimacy to dope and guns and violence. Despite our verbiage, it has become very heroic."

Christ, what a hell of a place."

After the performance, he waited backstage to thank Taylor ("and to make sure that the tickets were not in lieu of my Christmas gratuity"), but his affinity to odd jobs took hold, and he began helping the stage crew disassemble the sets. By 3 a.m., he discovered that Taylor had long since departed and that he had been invited to return the next day to stand in for the carpenter.

"That's how I got into the theater, and that's who I am today," he says. "While I was there, in came Paul Robeson, and in came Du Bois; in came all of these giants. And I said, 'The theater: damn, what a place to hook up.'

"And then I read my first play. Our director, a very good young black painter named Charles Sebree, decided to do an Irish play with a black cast called *Juno and the Paycock*. It was amazing how much like West Indians the Irish sounded. And Sean O'Casey was a revolutionary writer, an Irish guy struggling against the British. I thought it was just like the struggle we're having and Marcus Garvey. We have great empathy for this stuff.

"That was the first time I knew what I wanted to do. I took the GI Bill, the money given to returning veterans, and I registered in the best school I could. The New School for Social Research had just created its drama division, which was called the Dramatic Workshop. I went there at age 19. My classmates were Walter Matthau, Marlon Brando, Rod Steiger, Tony Curtis, Bea Arthur."

Complimented on his singing voice by observers at the workshop, he began appearing in jazz clubs after class to make money. At one spot, the Royal Roast, he occasionally sang with Charlie Parker.

Even as he caught on as a jazz-folk-calypso singer, Belafonte's acting career was rocketing. The year 1953 was stellar: He made his film debut in *Bright Road* with Dorothy Dandridge and was nominated for Broadway's Tony award for his performance in *John Murray Anderson's Almanac*.

"Multidimensional" and "provoke" are words that pepper conversations with Belafonte. From the start, pursuing dimensions has been in the forefront of his intentions, each artistic and political effort revealing a search for truth and reflecting his humanitarian values. Fusing art and principle, he has toiled to transport both beyond the predictabilities of performance and idealism. The dream has yet to be realized.

"I am of the firm belief that if we do not begin to get a whole new set of visions and attitudes in our vocabulary, we are going to be locked in the same places that we've always been in," he says. "Before, it was all slavery and domestic workers and Uncle Toms. On the threshold of the 21st-century enslavement of black people, there are caricatures more dangerous than the Uncle Tom stuff. I can't be around this long and watch all of black life being defined by 'the hood.' We have given legitimacy to dope and guns and violence. Despite our verbiage, it has become very heroic.

"After the price we have paid to move the agenda along so that we could begin to do loftier things, how is it that we have failed so dismally now that the time is here for us to be doing that? Every now and then we get bits and pieces. We get a little bit of Mandela. But where are Henri Cristophe and Toussaint L'Ouverture?

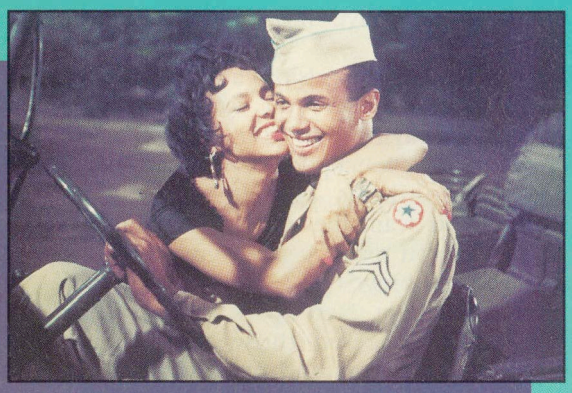
"My problem is not with any of these young directors. I think they do what they are permitted to do and can do. None of them is truly independent. They may speak with a sense of independence, with a sense of individuality, but in the final analysis they are going to be conditioned by certain powerful restrictions and demands.

"The studios don't care about your nuances and your poetry and whatever else. They're telling you that the only way we can make money is to attract people to come in and see something that is now. It's a simple economic equation: 'I don't want to show a bunch of niggers going through slavery if I have a chance to show Arnold Schwarzenegger at $35,000 a weekend.'"

With the recent *White Man's Burden,* Belafonte hoped to pluck a resistant chord. The film's premise devised a simple what-if reversal of fortunes: affluent blacks make up the abusive establishment, and whites are mired in poverty and prejudice. When Thaddeus Thomas, the wealthy businessman portrayed by Belafonte, arrogantly levels the blue-collar existence of Louis Pinnock (Travolta), the stage is set for retribution and revelation. For one weekend they are linked together—Thomas as hostage, Pinnock as kidnapper—awaiting the opening of the bank vaults on Monday morning. But in this dark and tragic morality play there can be no ransom.

"To have to do a *White Man's Burden* today is almost as if I'm back to square one," Belafonte says. "Again, I am trying to find a way to break this rather severe sound barrier on race, on human relationships. I'm trying to find ways in which to get into people's psyches, another approach to their hearts and minds."

Belafonte with Martin Luther King, Jr.



Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge in a scene from Carmen Jones.

Compassion is at a premium in *Kansas City,* Robert Altman's kaleidoscopic portrait of 1940s midwestern gangsters. In the film, Belafonte takes the role of Seldom Seen, a jazz club owner and lord of the Negro underworld who rules his territory with a ruthless finesse reminiscent of Vito Corleone. When a small-time white hood disguises himself in blackface and robs a pigeon en route to one of Seen's high-stakes card games, there is hell to pay.

In one mesmerizing and murderous juxtaposition, Seen, leaning next to his car in a dark alley, amuses his driver with a racial joke while several feet away his henchmen stab a traitor to death. Seen's detachment makes the fact of violence all the more chilling. One only glimpses the flashing knives, yet their tragic cacophony can be heard in the background. The audience's dilemma is deciding which sound to tune into: a murder among thieves or the punch line of the boss' story.

The script's suggestive approach to bloodthirstiness appealed to Belafonte's sensibilities and satisfied concerns that had caused him to turn down the role when Altman first offered it. "It is so out of my persona," Belafonte recalls telling him. "The character is so reprehensible. Bob looked me dead in the face and said, 'Well, excuse me, Harry, but who started spreading the rumor that you were an actor?'

"I had to really step back and think about it. I began to think about how I would play it, what the nuances would be, and that he said there would be no violence. I think the greatest violence is that which is the most silent, the most underplayed. With Seldom Seen, it's all in the way the man looks and speaks. It's for you to get inside his head—to wonder, What is he conjuring up?

"Whenever I do anything," he continues, "I look for its racial characteristics, its violent characteristics: What is this picture doing to reinforce the evils of our society? What are we doing to reinforce prejudices that should be nonexistent? When you have a lot of those criteria, it's hard to find material, especially if you are a black actor and looking for work."

Both renegade and romantic, on-screen Belafonte glistens with qualities that should have secured his spot on Hollywood's A-list. Back in 1954, after his tempestuous performance with Dorothy Dandridge in Carmen Jones, his destiny called out, "Matinee idol!" Audiences swooned and awaited more opportunities to see him bare his chest and pursue ill-fated passions. Instead, his next love scenes—with actress Joan Fontaine in *Island in the Sun* (1957)—challenged America's miscegenational taboos, but were limited to smoldering glances.

This look-but-don't-touch technique would later propel Sidney Poitier and Denzel Washington through other interracial close-ups. But Belafonte, intent on stirring the waters, found the results less than satisfying. He decided to harness his influence and create projects that he believed in.

As an independent producer, he discovered loyal allies among the artistic community, but had difficulty enlisting the support of studio executives. He made the rounds with Harbel's first proposals before at last connecting with United Artists. His company's three film presentations—*The World, the Flesh and the Devil; Odds Against Tomorrow;* and *The Angel Levine*—delved into provocative subjects, were dramatized by some of the industry's most respected talent, but met with mixed reviews. Throughout these projects rumbled the complex and controversial issues of power and race.

Yet while Henry Fonda upheld justice in *Twelve Angry Men* and Marlon Brando tackled the mob in *On the Waterfront,* black actors were relegated, at best, to roles of restraint and long-suffering. And Belafonte was deftly trying to muscle in. *Odds Against Tomorrow* adjoined underworld and racial tensions. In *The World, the Flesh and the Devil,* three after-the-bomb survivors (one black, two white) searched for their individual and collective humanity. As a streetwise celestial in *The Angel Levine,* he played guardian to Zero Mostel.

Even within the imaginary haven of Hollywood, there is a necessity to assert one's unique vision of

BELAFONTE

"If I died tomorrow in a pauper's grave, I can't say that I died because of my cause. I died because there is villainy and evil in the world. I didn't die because I fought against it. I would die spiritually if I didn't."

good and evil. Such assertions remain difficult for African-American actors and filmmakers because, subtly, the underlying goal remains validation by, or in spite of, an oppressor. Some black actors find this interchange of opponent and aspirant untenable and head for the horizon.

"I just couldn't stand it," Belafonte says of his 20-year leave from the movie business. "I couldn't get with the rhythms of Hollywood. Up until the time we made *Uptown Saturday Night,* there was not very much going on in terms of movies that dealt with African-American interests in any really dimensional way."

Disenchanted with the moviemaking process, Belafonte redirected his energies toward Harbel's television presentations. He won an Emmy in 1959 for a segment of CBS' *The Revlon Hour* called "Tonight With Belafonte." Emmy nominations were bestowed on other Harbel productions: "The Strollin' Twenties" (written by Langston Hughes and starring Sidney Poitier, Diahann Carroll, Sammy Davis Jr. and Duke Ellington) and "A Time for Laughter" (featuring Richard Pryor, Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley and Pigmeat Markham).

"All of these things were done in the face of a popularity that the world had given me," Belafonte says. "This gave me some assurance and some sense of confidence that I could do these things and not have to watch my back. I don't have to worry about whether or not Hollywood likes me or doesn't like me, because if they don't like what I am doing, I can always pick up and go sing a song in Paris or Tokyo."

However, possessing multiple talents is not enough, as Belafonte learned from his friend and champion, Paul Robeson. "I think most of us who lived during his time are beneficiaries of everything that he did," he says, "because he sacrificed so much and moved so much along. He set the code for certain kinds of behavior. He and Du Bois made the United States government know that black people are not going to roll over and have you rape them; you will be in for a fight.

"Their perception was that we were weak, bumbling, submissive, genetically flawed people. Along comes a colossus like Robeson, who says, 'Fine, take me on, but I'm going to do you battle, and by the time I get through telling the world who you are, you will wish perhaps that you had not taken me on.'

"I don't consider myself to be anywhere near what Robeson was. I don't have his courage, his wisdom, his strength, his insight. I tried to acquire some of it, but he was a monster of a power—a wonderful one. To have had him as an example—to know what to do with your life, where to put your art, what to put it in the service of, how to provoke thought, how to get people going—always gave me the best of the playing field.

"He once said to me, 'Harry, get them to sing your song [and] they'll want to know who you are.' I have an affirmation that those who would do me ill because they say I am too political and that I should entertain more are the ones who have missed the boat and have missed the vision and have misunderstood.

"How do you separate vision and mission and art from entertainment? Do you mean, make you laugh? Or are you saying that you do not want to have your conscience touched? So what you are really asking me to do is become part of your anesthetization. You want me to become part of the opiate that keeps you away from a greater truth so that you will do nothing."

After purchasing that New York City apartment building, Belafonte ejected those who had not wanted to be his neighbors and quickly transformed the building into a co-op. "I didn't want to be a landlord," he says. "I had aversions to that. I didn't want to own nothing. So I told the people, 'You buy your apartment and I'll buy mine, and then we'll run this thing together.'"

Within the Belafonte home today there remain no signs of that particular battlefield. Instead, the rooms are peacefully filled with books; art by Charles White and Diego Rivera; African artifacts from Belafonte's travels; and framed, handwritten correspondence—gifts his wife picked up at auction—from a gallery of leaders, including Toussaint, Du Bois, Eleanor Roosevelt, Emile Zola. Generations of loving photographs of his friends, children and grandchildren populate the baby grand piano.

The lucidity with which Belafonte evaluates art and the world remains uncompromised when he considers his life's achievements and its legacy. "If I died tomorrow in a pauper's grave, I can't say that I died because of my cause," he says. "I died because there is villainy and evil in the world. I didn't die because I fought against it. I would die spiritually if I didn't.

"And who has had the better time? Me? Meeting Dr. King, meeting Nelson Mandela, meeting Eleanor Roosevelt; giving and getting counsel from John and Bobby Kennedy? Talking to Aristide? Moving history? Or the guy who sits in Beverly Hills who don't want to touch any of this? Tell me, whose life is richer?"

Sharon Fitzgerald is a freelance writer in New York City. Her last article for American Visions, *"Spike Lee: Fast Forward," appeared in the October/November 1995 issue.*