

Charlton Heston was a gentleman and one of a handful of celebrity interviews (Sun Records Sam Phillips, Hank Williams, Jr.) to send me a handwritten note after my story appeared in the pages of the Chicago Sun-Times.

I think of his generosity when I see him get bullied by filmmaker Michael Moore in the 2002 documentary "Bowling For Columbine."

The movie was released in 2002, the same year Heston was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease.

January 17, 2000--

Like a ribbon around wild willows, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech entwined the scattered factions of America. The Aug. 28, 1963, speech before 200,000 people was the apex of King's march on Washington, D.C., for civil rights.

The march was called to prod Congress finally to confront the issues of civil rights and poverty. The peaceful demonstration came 100 years and eight months after the Emancipation Proclamation.

Among those who entertained or spoke at the Lincoln Memorial were Harry Belafonte, Charlton Heston, Marlon Brando, Sammy Davis Jr., folk singer Odetta, author James Baldwin, Lena Horne, and Peter, Paul and Mary.

Chicago gospel legend Mahalia Jackson stood before the sea of people and sang her cresting signature song "I Will Move On Up a Little Higher." Odetta sang "Come Go With Me to That Land/Oh Freedom/I'm On My Way," a.k.a. "The Freedom Trilogy."

Peter, Paul and Mary sang their hit "If I Had a Hammer."

"We were filled with conviction," the trio's Peter Yarrow said last week from his New York office. "We were not singing. We were not railing at the system. We were proclaiming the new era, the new imperative and the new sustenance we were saying from our hearts."

That new sustenance made for strange bedfellows.

Heston read a statement prepared by novelist James Baldwin. One of Baldwin's best sellers was "The Fire Next Time," an apocalyptic novel that preceded 1960s rioting in America's ghettos. Heston, now president of the National Rifle Association, attended the march as president of the Screen Actors Guild. He succeeded Ronald Reagan at SAG.

"The march is one of the things in my busy record in the public sector of which I'm the most proud," Heston said last week from his Hollywood home. "Especially since I did it before a lot of people. (As early as 1961, he was picketing in support of civil rights legislation.) But the Baldwin statement impressed me more than anything else.

"I wasn't crazy about that idea. Anything that goes out with my name on it, I write. Besides, Jimmy Baldwin was on the left fringe of the civil rights movement. I don't know how Dr. King felt about his being there. But the point is, he was there.

"When an awful lot of good parlor liberals didn't show up in case things turned nasty, Jimmy did. What's more, as a good writer, the speech he wrote for me wasn't what he would have written, but instead close to what I wanted to say. He died (in 1987) . . . in self-imposed exile in Paris. We'd both traveled some little distance to come together, though, as so many hundreds of thousands of people did that day."

The gathering was racially mixed.

Those who attended were in a celebratory mood that projected confusion, according to Yarrow, 61. The vibe was so high, he said, that there was a feeling something already had been accomplished - which, of course, was not the case.

"The force of the collective will of the people gathering was transformational to most of us who attended," Yarrow recalled. "It was the first time I'd experienced that euphoria with a connection to the ability of people to put their hearts, bodies and commitment on the line to feel a sense of inevitability and exaltation at the same time.

"Inevitability that we were going to move in that direction. And exaltation that it came from grass roots. There was an empowerment aspect ultimately to change the nation. This had nothing to do with money or power. It had to do with

justice. People think of it as a protest. It was not a protest as much as it was an affirmation. That's a very important distinction."

In an interview from New York, Odetta closed her eyes to remember Washington. "I see two streams," said the 69-year-old. "It is of all spectrums and all colors. I am witnessing these two streams coming together and making a river at the march."

Belafonte was the conduit for the entertainers. He organized a "celebrity plane" from Hollywood. Passengers included the twosome of James Garner and Diahann Carroll and Marlon Brando, who took to the stage brandishing a cattle prod from Gadsden, Ala. (a key city in the Civil War), to underscore segregationist hatred.

"Marlon is a piece of work," said Heston, 75. "We had one meeting up at my house before the march. Paul Newman was there, maybe five others. Marlon said, 'What we gotta do is lie down on Pennsylvania Avenue and stop the traffic. I said, 'No, we don't want to do that.' Then he said, 'OK, we could chain ourselves to the Lincoln Memorial.' I said, 'No, we live in a country where you have the right of peaceable assembly without violence, and that's the way we're going to do it. Or I'm not going.' And that settled that."

In a 1990 interview, Belafonte told me, "Dr. King was a man who was constantly thinking and was very sensitive to the fact that every utterance he made had ramifications. Everything he did carried results, some desirable, some undesirable. He was leading a people, but more than that, he was fulfilling an idea."

The entertainers met in Belafonte's hotel suite after the march. According to Sammy Davis Jr.'s 1989 biography, *Why Me?*, Belafonte requested that Davis call Attorney General Robert Kennedy in an effort to arrange a meeting between the celebrities and President John F. Kennedy.

Robert Kennedy led the fight for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He took Davis' call but was adamant that the president would only meet with civil rights leaders. Davis wrote, "He was right, of course. We'd served our purpose by getting our pictures in the papers. Now it was up to the legislators and the civil rights leaders."

Heston added, "We weren't that much of a bunch. It was a dozen, 15 people at the most."

And only two days before the march, Robert Kennedy told Davis that he had been moving up on the White Citizens Councils' "Ten Most Wanted List." The attorney general promised he would cover the entertainer's back.

In his 1988 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Parting the Waters (America in the King Years 1954-63)*, Taylor Branch wrote, "It was a rare moment for folk music, as the performers on the stage had gained celebrity status for themselves and celebrity for their overtly cross-racial tradition."

Yarrow scoffed at the notion of "celebrity" in 1963. He said, "Our lives were threatened on numerous occasions when we went to marches. Warner Bros. Records told us that if we went to Selma (Ala., site of a 1965 voting rights campaign) that they expected to lose the Southern market - and to a large degree, we did. The idea of being a 'celebrity' is so foreign to the spirit of it. We conceived of ourselves more as cultural workers in the way that musicians connected with political action are perceived in Central American countries."

It was an eclectic gathering of folk.

And King's speech was electric.

He took anguished, dramatic steps, reminiscent of his spiritual compatriot Mahalia Jackson, who knew how to travel from her low register to the mountaintop. (Within weeks, Motown Records released an album of the speech.)

King was more concerned with the way words sounded rather than how they looked on paper. Down the homestretch, he roared, "*I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.*"

And the words with which King concluded are inscribed on his tombstone:
"Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"