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SARATOGA, Calif. No popular music performer is as much a cultural amalgamation as Harry Belafonte. He radiates the intensity of his native Harlem; he speaks in the gentle sway of Jamaica, where he grew up, and in his twilight years, he is strengthened by the hopeful rhythms of South Africa.

Belafonte is America's first Third World artist.

David Byrne and Paul Simon are armchair travelers when compared with the prolific global commentary of Belafonte. As early as the mid-'60s, Belafonte traveled through politically volatile Chicago with a troupe that included musicians from Harlem, Israel, Syria, Italy and Tanzania. The accompanying Belafonte Folk Singers featured 12 men of different color and dimension - one of which was future comedian Garrett Morris - who sang in all languages. And Belafonte's records float between the rumba of calypso to the rumination of American protest songs to the rich South African melodies of last year's unheralded "Paradise in Gazankulu" on EMI Records.

During a two-hour concert last Sunday at the opulent Paul Masson Winery overlooking the microchip lights of the Silicon Valley, Belafonte was supported by the likes of Brazilian Jose Neto on guitar; Sipho Kunene, a native of Cape Town, South Africa, on drums; Neil Clarke, a Nigerian, on first percussion, and African Chi Sharpe on second percussion. To capture just how unusual this melting pot was, imagine Trinidadian electric bassist Angus Nunes providing the tropical bottom to the Jewish folk classic "Hava Nageela."

So when Belafonte, still wearing a baggy silk shirt halfway unbuttoned, shuts his eyes and extends both palms before singing a jazzy uptempo version of "Day O," you know he has the whole world in his hands.

"Most of my experiences have been made up of artists who come from diverse cultures and different experiences," he said in a long Sunday afternoon conversation at his hotel in nearby Los Gatos. "It is those differences that enrich my own creative process. All these people get in one room and begin to attack a piece of material, and suddenly, there's a rhythm that begins to pollinate and a melody line begins to take you to another place. People don't quite hear what we do anywhere else.

"Other musicians touch on it and then leave it. But this (world music) is our main diet. So if you hear that music and try to translate that against an awesome machine like American cultural chauvinism - and even if you can get a little bit of a foothold - it's quite rewarding.

"It is that diversity that keeps me alive."

It is why, in front of the upscale and homogenized standing-room audience at the winery, Belafonte teased in mock ominous tones about moving into the neighborhood. It is why he sang "Global Carnival," whose buoyant guitar and Africalypso rhythms should have made it a hit single from the "Paradise in Gazankulu" album. In a raspy voice (because of throat problems, he canceled

one night of the four-night stand here) Belafonte sang:

"It's the first annual Global Carnival . . .

"Israel and Palestine forming a conga line

"Ayatollah and the pope doing the limbo under a rope

"Princess Di and the IRA, they jamming with a rasta from Montego Bay

"Forget the left, forget the right, we're gonna have a party tonight."

Belafonte's honey-soaked style is most often associated with calypso party music. The skewered phrasing of calypso and its snappy 2/2 and 4/4 meters took Belafonte by storm in Jamaica, where he lived between the ages of 8 and 13.

"Actually, the only other thing I heard was the London Symphony Orchestra broadcast overseas by the BBC," Belafonte said. "I still can hear Sir Thomas Beecham playing over the hills of Jamaica. It was that and hearing the fishermen and the people in the fields who sang calypso when they worked. And, the skeet sellers, who all daylong, created wonderful lyrics to sell their wares. That was my environment, that is where I learned the folklore of the Caribbean."

Belafonte too often is pegged by the hits off his landmark 1955 album, "Calypso" - approachable and gentle interpretations of fertile Lord Burgess melodies such as "Day O," "I Do Adore Her" and "Jamaica Farewell." "Calypso" became the first album to sell a million copies. Until then, Belafonte had been singing from the traditional American idiom, covering folk songs such as "John Henry," "Shenandoah" and "Scarlet Ribbons." Crossing West Indian calypso with American folk was the first of Belafonte's many musical hybrids.

"It was only an experiment on my part," he said. "I noticed how audiences liked it and came back time and time again, really getting into calypso sing-alongs. By the time I recorded it for RCA - much to their reluctance, because it didn't fit the tastes of the day - they were shocked at my success. I was just surprised. For that form to become that indelible and universal means a great deal to me."

How universal is it?

Bob Dylan's first appearance on record was as harmonica player on Belafonte's "Midnight Special" LP. Belafonte is a major influence on the tropical allure of Jimmy Buffett, who has claimed he wanted to be Harry Belafonte as a child growing up near Mobile, Ala. Buffett has employed former Belafonte percussionist Ralph McDonald, and Buffett's upcoming single will be a reggae cover of "Jamaica Farewell." Locally, Belafonte's 1961 popularization of Stephen Somvel's "Jump in the Line" has long been a staple of Paul Cebar and the Milwaukeeans' live show.

Belafonte, however, was never artistically content with his calypso roots. His music began to reflect his travels, and today his sound combines the

music of American jazz, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti and the British West Indies.

A similar musical expression has been paralleled in the PBS series "Routes of Rhythm," which was narrated by Belafonte and has been seen in other parts of the country. It is scheduled to air soon on WTTW-Channel 11.

The three-part series depicts the movement of Afro-Cuban music through West African Yoruba culture (still very much a dominant part of the Tropicana stage show in Havana), the troubadours of southern Spain and, finally, the rumba rhythms of the Cuban hills. Belafonte said there is an option for a second installment of "Routes of Rhythm."

"All of these impactations have helped mold the unique thing I do, but a lot of it never took hold," he said. "It was never duplicated. There wasn't a rash of calypso singers who came after me. There was a long time between me and the success of reggae. At this time in life, I can articulate that if Americans understood and liked the (calypso) music of the West Indies - albeit that it was served up kind of soft - then maybe I can use the same applications to lead people to understand what is coming out of South Africa now."

For almost his entire life, Belafonte has displayed that dignified social responsibility through his art. He always has been drawn to art that was socially relevant.

Belafonte's first keen social attraction was author Mark Twain. For RCA, he recorded an album named after the author, and in 1953, he sang "Mark Twain" in "John Murray Anderson's Almanac," which was Belafonte's Broadway debut. Twain led to John Steinbeck, who touched base with Hemingway, and later, Belafonte sought social reflection from Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. Musically, Belafonte basked in the political folk statements of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Leadbelly and Big Bill Broonzy.

"All those things gave me a perception of the power of art that was never repeated when I looked at art used in any other way," Belafonte said. "When I went to the movies, the man that really turned me on was Charlie Chaplin - this little peasant running around defying the system, speaking out for the underclass. There was a great richness in that which could last forever. That energized me. Music as a tool for social expression and protest always has been the most significant dimension for art. That's the baggage I carry, and it's worth carrying."

The political message is oblique in some of Belafonte's material, sometimes by design. Belafonte used "Day O" as an example, calling it "just about as big a slogan" as any song he ever recorded.

"When that piece came to me as a folk song out of Jamaica, people looked at natives of the Third World as people who were relegated to a second-class system," he said. "I thought, 'Well, if I can stand in front of white audiences and they can hear that you work all night and your pay is a drink of rum, it's tiring and you want to go home,' I could get into the whole issue of unions and organizing. But that song didn't require all of that. If you look at all my songs, with very few exceptions, most of them hook up to a human experience that moves an audience to a human relevance."

"I think that's what enabled me to maintain a relationship with a global community long after mechanisms of exploitation had been denied me. I don't have a big hit record. I don't have a big movie. I'm not on television. But for somebody who has been as exclusively left out of mass media discussions, it's amazing to me that people listen."

I don't think I've ever spoken with to someone whose life has as been as spiritually fulfilling as Belafonte's. In January, 1985, he set the wheels spinning for the "We Are the World" concert, telling entrepreneur Ken Kragen about an idea for a benefit to raise funds for Africa. Belafonte is vice president and spokesman of USA for Africa and only the second American to hold the title of UNICEF goodwill ambassador. And last December he was honored by first lady Barbara Bush at the prestigious Kennedy Center Awards dinner. It's certainly a cliché question, but I asked Belafonte about life after mortality.

He closed his eyes and the room tumbled into thoughtful silence.

Belafonte finally answered, "Outside of my immediate family, I'm not sure how significant being remembered is. I think the quality of my life while I am here and what I wake up to every day is important. I'm not too sure about the immortality part. I don't know who the greatest singer was in Shakespeare's day or who was the greatest vocalist in the hills of Peru.

"In America, there is a need to be No. 1 and to be on top, even after you are dead and gone. That's a quest that frustrates me. First of all, I couldn't live up to it. Then, there's the variables of what is valued as great today may not be so great 100 years from now. I guess I say that with some sense of reservation, because my audiences have endured with me. Not at \$100,000 a night, but a few thousand people in each city I go. Then, I have enough significance for you to fly here to want to do an interview. I guess that wraps it up. It's obviously been worthwhile.

"I hang a shingle and people still show up."