

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • CELEBRITY

The Man with the Cash in the Suitcase

Harry Belafonte and the Business of Bailing the Movement Out

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Contribution Track • ERA VI-Living Record • Harlem, New York

Who He Is

Harold George Belafonte Jr. was born March 1, 1927, in Harlem, spent part of his childhood in Jamaica with his mother's family, and returned to New York to build a recording and film career that made him, with the 1956 album *Calypso*, the first LP artist in history to sell more than a million copies — carried by "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)." He crossed into film with *Carmen Jones* (1954) and *Island in the Sun* (1957), and became, in 1960, the first Black performer to win an Emmy Award.

The Money Behind the Movement

Belafonte's most consequential role in American history may not have been on a stage at all. He became a close confidant of Martin Luther King Jr. and one of the civil rights movement's most reliable sources of ready cash — helping raise the money that bailed King out of the Birmingham jail in 1963, and, during Freedom Summer in August 1964, flying into Mississippi with fellow entertainer Sidney Poitier carrying roughly \$60,000 in cash to fund the effort on the ground. He helped organize the 1963 March on Washington and is widely credited, alongside other entertainers, with helping bankroll the Freedom Rides and SNCC's voter-registration work, though the precise scope of that funding is not detailed in any single source consulted for this entry.

"My social and political interests are part of my career. I cannot separate them." — Harry Belafonte

A Life of Continued Advocacy

Belafonte remained politically active for the rest of his life: organizing internationally against apartheid in South Africa, helping produce the 1985 charity single "We Are the World" for African famine relief, and serving as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador from 1987 until his death. He remained an outspoken critic of U.S. policy into his later decades and served as honorary co-chair of the 2017 Women's March on Washington. He died April 25, 2023, in Manhattan, at ninety-six.

NC Local Lens

No documented connection between Harry Belafonte and North Carolina, Fayetteville, or Cumberland County was found in this research pass — including a specific check of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's founding at Shaw University in Raleigh, an organization Belafonte is broadly credited with helping fund, where no direct Belafonte reference turned up. This entry claims no NC connection, while noting that key North Carolina newspaper and archive collections could not be checked in this research pass and the gap should be treated as open rather than settled.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Freedom Rides funding claim: widely repeated but found corroborated only within Belafonte's own biographical sourcing, not independently in dedicated Freedom Rides histories — verify before stating as settled.

Date of first meeting with MLK: some secondary sourcing implies 1953; standard accounts place it closer to 1956 — unresolved, needs his memoir *My Song* for a firm date.

NC connection: this pass could not reach NCpedia, DigitalNC, or Fayetteville Observer archives — treat "no connection found" as provisional.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. Harry Belafonte, with Michael Shnayerson, *My Song: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).
2. "Harry Belafonte," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harry-Belafonte>.
3. "Complete National Recording Registry Listing," Library of Congress, National Recording Preservation Board, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/recording-registry/complete-national-recording-registry-listing/>.
4. "Harry Belafonte," The Kennedy Center Honors, 1989, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.kennedy-center.org/>.
5. "Harry Belafonte, Actor, Singer and Civil Rights Activist, Dies at 96," obituary coverage, April 25, 2023.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.