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HARRY BELAFONTE INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
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HARRY BELAFONTE
Friend and Artist
Interviewed by Taylor Branch
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Total Running Time: 2 hours 17 minutes

00:00:00:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
I'd like to begin by your first impressions of Doctor King. I know that first meeting up in the church you were in conflict about even going to that. Could you talk about that first meeting and how it came about and—and what happened and—and what first impressed you about Doctor King.

00:00:25:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:
Ok. My first meeting Doctor King came about when he called. He was down in Montgomery and he was on his way to New York to speak at the Abyssinian Baptist Church to a gathering of Ecumenical leaders, talk to the clergy here in New York. And he said that he was on his way to do that and that while here, he was wondering if he could have the opportunity to speak with me and I welcomed that, that chance, I, I didn't know him, I was curious as to who he really was. Here was this force that had all of a sudden appeared in the midst of a life of racial crisis and had seemed to be a force that could bring something to the table that was a little different than what we were used to hearing. And- so when he came, I told him that I would gladly meet with him if he would permit me to come to the church and listen to his speech to the clergy. It was at- in the Abyssinian Baptist, which was a church pastored by Adam Clayton Powell who was a forceful voice in black politics and in the black community. It was at his church. And I was curious that Doctor King was- here he was two years younger than I and this thing that he was to articulate was very

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curious to me. When I saw him, I was quite surprised at how short he was. And I looked at him and he just didn't fit anything I had- we had been used to. Here we were coming out of a life of Thurgood Marshall and Paul Robeson and Adam Clayton Powell. All these guys were giants standing next to Doctor King and here came this, this human being that just eluded tradition or traditional expectations.

00:03:20:00 Anyway, we met at the church down in the basement and in hearing him speak to the clergy, I got an opportunity to be introduced to the fact that whatever I would have with him was going to be the most unusual encounter I had ever had. We spoke, he told me about the conditions in the South, much of which I was familiar with. He told me about what he hoped to achieve with Rosa Parks and with the Montgomery Alabama Bus Boycott and with the- what was the dawning of the movement. I had anticipated after talking with him that any commitment I would make to him would last maybe a couple of years at the most if we worked really hard trying to repair race relations in this country, but nothing came as big a surprise to me as when I discovered that a couple of years wasn't even a blink in terms of time and space for what was coming. But after I talked with Doctor King, I understood that I was in the presence of something unusual, something unexpected, the way in which he formulated, the way in which he expressed his concerns about his right or his capacity to lead a movement, and that his overture to me and to others was in order to help him have a voice in his immediate area of accessibility, to be able to make sure that he was on the right path, to make sure that he wasn't missing any salient points.

00:05:47:00 I am- I'm hunting for- there was something about him that made me want to know more. I'd not met anybody quite like him; his calm, his rather measured way of speaking, his utterances were quite deliberate, and the bottom line was that he wanted to know whether or not this path he was on, this journey he was taking, whether or not I'd be willing to be part of his flock. I think the most important thing for me was not only an opportunity to serve a cause I'd already been committed to, talking about left politics and the change of the American landscape, but that

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somehow, he went beyond that. It was not just a matter of race. It was a matter of the larger humanity, what was happening to the world, and I decided that I would throw my lot in with his. I knew I could help him with the economics of the movement's needs; not all of it but certainly the portion that he was carving out for himself. And to the extent that I had anything to impart that might encourage him or help put him in touch with areas he was not familiar with was all fair game. So, I hooked up.

00:07:44:00 What I did not anticipate was that our relationship would've lasted as long as it did or that it went as deep as it ultimately did. We became very close and he began to show a dependency for what I thought- especially when I became familiar with his circle of close advisers. I met Andy Young, I met Abernathy, and as interesting as these men were, perhaps the most important for me was that Doctor King himself commanded a commitment, I guess is the best way to put it, because I got the sense that what he was talking about and where we were going was not short term. When he got through describing what he felt about Rosa Parks, and was going on with the rebellion in Montgomery was at the doorstep of something much bigger. This was not just about the bus, it was not just about this gentle woman who we discovered was- she appeared to be gentle, but she was a fierce- she had a fierce commitment to truth and justice. I had not known when we first heard of Rosa Parks that she had been so deeply committed to the cause to begin with. It was not just a coincidence that she became anointed, she earned the right to that choice, to being chosen, to do what she did.

00:09:57:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
Were there things about him that surprised you against your expectations of a southern Baptist preacher or whatever you thought you were gonna, gonna encounter in Martin Luther King? I mean, you say he's got a larger vision, but I think you also said that his humility was striking at the same time, which usually doesn't go together.

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00:10:20:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

Everything about Doctor King was somewhat off-center for me. Here was a man possessed with this intellect, with this cranium, that was bubbling over with information and need; he had a need to be understood. Also, he, he- his humility, nothing about him assumed anything. He wasn't trying to be loved or disliked, he wasn't trying to be a leader, he was want- he was the first person I'd ever met that had been touched by history, and had been touched by life, to be on the mission that he ultimately chose to take and to bring with him this sense of do-ability. Even now I struggle with trying to describe much that first meeting. Everything about him was on a-unfamiliar, but the way in which he stated his case, the way in which he stated his vision for what he was to do, even the expression of the great doubt as to his capacity to fill what he felt history was demanding of us and of the movement and of black people, whether or not he was the right choice to take on such a responsibility. But as long as the compass was pointed at him, he did not shy away from taking on the challenge and our task was to help him succeed.

00:12:31:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

How long after that was it before you met his parents, Daddy King and Mother King and what's your impression of how he came from them or of them as distinct from him as a family? I know you knew Daddy King fairly well, who's a character.

00:12:53:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

When I first met Martin's family was on a visit to Atlanta and I wanted to know where SCLC was, I wanted to know who Andy Young was, I wanted to know who Abernathy was and who are these circle of strangers that have all of a sudden emerged at the forefront of what was to become the biggest movement of the century from a, from a national perspective. When I met Doctor King, I understood the real meaning of patriarch. He was a huge force in the community as a black minister and

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very imposing. And when you met him, you understood almost in the first instance that you were dealing with the power.

TAYLOR BRANCH:

You're- I'm sorry, you're speaking of Daddy King now?

00:14:04:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

Talking of Daddy King, yes. What was also fascinating for me was the subservience that Martin reflected when talking with his father. In Daddy King's presence, you understood that Martin deferred to what he thought was a higher authority; not just as a parental condition, but as someone whose authority and whose view of where we should be going as a people held great substance for Martin. I didn't understand how strong that influence was until later on in our relationship. I had occasion to come up against Daddy King's opinion on an issue and took that challenge and survived, which is the important conclusion here, I survived. 'Cause to take on Daddy King in a way that's contrary to what he wants done is not an issue that one survives easily. But I think that the real power of deference that Martin continually revealed in relation to Daddy King- no, no greater way expressed itself than when it was concluded somewhat later, sometime later, when resources became more difficult to access, money was becoming more and more difficult to identify for causes, for bail, for all the economic needs of our struggle.

00:16:20:00

I had taken to Martin the idea that perhaps we should look outside of our rather narrow funnel of funding from the American scene, that we had a great constituency in Europe. In France and England and other places that I had been, there was a great sentiment that leaned very heavily towards the cause of black hope in this country and that Doctor King should become familiar with that constituency, that he should go to Europe and speak to the difficulties of our experience. Therein was when I had a clash with Daddy King. Cause Daddy King was very much opposed to that idea in its earliest debate. He felt that the struggle Black America was having with our issues

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was a domestic one and by taking it to the universal community, to a international stage was somehow an act that would be viewed as a betrayal of America, a betrayal of our familial environment. I'll never get that- when I was discussing the idea with the group in Atlanta, Doctor King expressed- I'm sorry, Daddy King expressed that the one thing he felt that we could not afford to do was to further exacerbate the difficulty we were having on the whole issue of justice anyway. He said, "You know, you'll get, you're gonna really get white folks out of sorts and they'll do things to us you can't imagine." And I remember saying to him, "Well, tell me something Daddy King, what could they possibly do to us that they have not already done that could be more villainous than we have experienced? What is it you are saying here?"

00:18:44:00 I always felt that Daddy King had an edge to him which was a reflection of a lot of black thought and thinking in relationship to White. There was a sense that the power of white folks should not really be challenged too vigorously because their capacity for punishment and cruelty was vast and that we should not do anything that evoked that response and Daddy King I think was a part of that temperament, as part of that, "we're in a bad enough position, don't do anything to make this thing worse than it is." And I had difficulty in understanding how much worse could it be?

00:19:41:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

I remember another potential example of that was after the nineteen-sixty election when Kennedy called to Doctor King when he was in jail played a role in the election of Kennedy and Daddy King wanted Doctor King to endorse Kennedy in gratitude and Doctor King decided not to do that, he said, "I'm not in partisan politics." I think I have a memory that you talked to Daddy King about that too. He was pushing hard saying, "You gotta pay him back." Does that strike a memory?

00:20:19:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

In part. Daddy King I don't think ever was fully approving of where the movement was going. He saw nothing but chaos, he saw nothing but rage. He saw these young,

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young people, not only in Atlanta, but certainly up here in New York and with the bombing, the birth of SNCC and the kinds of passion that poured forth from these young people, many of whom are not much younger than his son, Martin. A lot of people forget how old Martin was. He was really quite young when he stepped into this space. He was twenty-four and twenty-six and that's a fairly young age to emerge with a kind of platform and vision and the kind of depth of understanding that was expressed by Daddy- he was well beyond his years, but he looked much younger, and Daddy King didn't trust where this movement was going. He saw nothing but mayhem and anger and he feared for his flock, he feared for his community and the fact that his son was at the spearhead of it was even more threatening for him.

00:21:58:00 When I took Doctor King and we went to, to Europe, a deal was struck with Doctor King- with Daddy King because one of the ways in which he gave us a tacit- his tacit approval and blessings for Doctor King going to Europe was if he went under the auspices of the church, and the American Church in Paris, which was the leading religious institution- American institution in Europe, gave the church as a platform for Doctor King to speak. That satisfied Daddy King as a safe zone. About five days before we were to leave to go to France for this platform, for this speech, to meet this community, the church called and told us that the invitation that had been extended to Martin would be withdrawn because the State Department has stepped in and said that, "This man is coming, he's unpatriotic, he is not speaking to the best interests of America, he's a provocateur, he's a Communist," and that intimidated the American Church in Paris and they withdrew the invitation.

00:23:45:00 Daddy King saw the withdrawal of that invitation as a sign that the mood from the opposition was not going to be very pleasant and that withdrawing this platform from Doctor King, the American Church, was just the first shot across our bow giving us a sense of what was to come. I maintain that that one shot was not sufficient enough to collapse the movement. Daddy King's fear of retribution and what was yet to come, signaled by what was going on, was not the place for us to pause. We had to move

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through that and what I did was to- we kept the date, it'd already been promoted that Daddy King- but I called some of the leading cultural voices and powers in Europe. I called Yves Montand, I called Simone Signoret, I called Peter O'Toole in London and gathered- and got the feeling from them that they were willing to become part of a bigger display. So here we were, the church withdrew its invitation, the State Department was invoking this sense that Doctor King coming was not to the best interests of America, and instead of shutting us down, it opened up a greater opportunity for us to meet a larger community.

00:25:24:00 So, we went to the Palais des Sports, which is almost like the Madison Square Garden of Paris, held thousands upon thousands of people, an infinitely larger group than the five hundred people we would've spoken to in the church, here we were now in the biggest arena in Paris, thousands of people showed up and Doctor King gave one of his more important speeches at that time. In order to ensure the audience or to ensure that there would be an audience for Doctor King, I often coupled his presentations with a concert. I would either open up singing some songs or doing the concert and then introducing Doctor King to speak, that was the case in Paris. Yves Montand performed, all the artists performed and in the middle of this celebration on the cause of justice in the United States, Doctor King spoke and gave a very eloquent speech that I thought launched us for our first visit to Europe in a very responsive and a very positive way.

00:26:44:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
That was March of nineteen sixty-six. You've got the State Department turning against Doctor King, but you find that the reception in Europe was pretty spectacular. This is March of sixty-six when you went on to Stockholm, so just pick up with that reception.

00:27:03:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

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One of the things that made Doctor King's visit to Europe so powerful was the fact that favorable forces, or forces favorable to our cause, were in charge of the environment. By that I mean that the King of Sweden not only as the second stop after Paris, the King of Sweden became the patron and endorsed us and gave us his blessings. Olof Palme who was the Prime Minister was a very, very strong force for progressive politics in the day and he gave us all the blessings and the authority to speak. In Stockholm, we used that space to televise Doctor King's visit to all of, to all of Scandinavia and if it had not been for Olof Palme giving us all of the blessings that he did as the Prime Minister, I don't think how our mission would have been anointed in quite the way in which it ultimately turned out to be from a very favorable reception that we had.

00:28:44:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
Two more quick questions before we take a break.

HARRY BELAFONTE:
None of these questions are quick- or answers I should say.

TAYLOR BRANCH:
The answers, aren't, I know. Did you have any contact with Doctor King in nineteen fifty-eight when he was stabbed in Harlem and went into the hospital? This was early, but here in New York.

00:29:03:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:
Yes. I had met Martin by this time. When he was stabbed, it sent a huge shock through our community, through the people in the city, through the nation really, but Doctor King was not yet the Doctor King he was to become. And although this was a sign of how rocky the road was going to be, what was really very puzzling and deeply troubling was the fact that it was a black woman that stabbed him. The idea

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that he would be done harm was always in the pallet. You always knew on the canvas of life, that his- that harm coming to him was part of the expectations for what the backlash and the response would be. But for it to come from a black woman was not only shocking, but most puzzling to us. It was Doctor Kings behavior in that moment, his willingness to forgive and to take to lighten the fact as he's said himself, had he sneezed, he could've been dead because the point of that instrument that he was stabbed with was right there at the heart, at his heart. It was the way in which he wanted to be forgiving to the woman who did that and for us to find reason to be compassionate. It was very puzzling that Martin took on this mantle, took on this, this image and it was constantly evoked at moments in his path that he would take extreme situations that were considered by many of us to be very negative where he found a moment to pause and to be forgiving and to be embracing and therefore set by example that this mission was far deeper and far more encompassing than we had anticipated by the way in which he behaved.

00:31:51:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

You had a trip to Atlanta in nineteen sixty-two, to Atlanta to perform with Miriam Makeba and others where there was controversy over segregation in the South. Do you have memories of that? I know you played the Atlanta Civic Auditorium and it was one of the first times it had been integrated. You integrated the Cabana Hotel but then a restaurant kind of threw you out? What's it like to be personally involved in those controversies over segregation that seem so strange in retrospect.

00:32:30:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

Challenging the institutions of segregation in public spaces, especially in the world that I perf- I was a performer. And a lot of places that I worked where the fee was the most attractive was in many instances places where the race issue was entrenched. No blacks could come, segregation was the order. Not just in the South; when I first

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came to work in New York, the Waldorf Astoria for instance, here was this institution of American achievement and a very exclusive bourgeois center that when I signed up to perform there, it didn't want to desegregate the Empire Room, which was the name of the club inside the hotel. So breaking down institutions of segregation was always part of my big mission. When it came time to go to Atlanta, the mayor spoke very kindly to us, welcomed us. When we talked about going into the Civic Auditorium, that it would have to be desegregated, he responded, sure with some energy on the part of the local voices, but we got that city center opened to us.

00:34:17:00 As a matter of fact, I remember when we were performing the attendants of this institution were busy taking down the "for colored only" signs and you could see spotted around the auditorium when you stood on stage these huge patches of white space where all of these signs had been taken down in time for the concert. The proceeds from that concert went to the movement. And I brought Miriam Makeba because not only was she a remarkable artist, but I was very much in tune with the fact that Black America needed to be more familiar with its African- African-ness, with its African roots, and one of the ways I could contribute to that would be to bring these artists from Africa, which I brought several. And for us it was very fortunate that Miriam captured the public imagination so intensely, so taking her down to Atlanta for many of the people in the audience for the first time to hear an artist from Africa sing in the indigenous tongue was a huge- favorable thing to do. And Atlanta was the, was the, was the seed for launching.

00:35:48:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
But in the midst of all of this success, they did turn- I don't know if you were there personally, but they turned away Doctor King from the dining room in the hotel, were you there for that in a sense of witnessing?

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They turned us all away. As a matter of fact, if I remember correctly, the restaurant that I- that we went into eat in in Atlanta was called King, I think the King Diner.

TAYLOR BRANCH:
The King's Inn.

00:36:12:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:
King's Inn. And... the King's Inn... and the irony of the moment, that here we were in this cause in which Doctor King and in this place called King's Inn and it shut the door to us. And by the time that we got through with that moment, they not only let us in, they gave us the kitchen. It was- it... it was a strange time, a time of interesting encounters, people who are in our minds' eye somewhat villainous turned out to be saints and people who were somewhat saintly turned out to be villains. America was really in a huge upside-down moment on this issue. Not as upside down as it was yet to be, but in the early experiences of confrontation, wherever we walked there was always this sense that we were unwelcomed and Doctor King led us through that I think quite capably.

00:00:00:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
The first time he came to your apartment, was it after his trip to India? Do you remember the first time he came to your apartment and your relationship became more personal than just a movement supporter?

00:37:44:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:
I think it was after he had been to India. I'm not too sure about this. We can recall it fairly quickly, but when Doctor King came to New York and we met, my apartment at that time was a fairly large area and I was able to give Doctor King his own private quarters. He had his own bedroom, his own kitchen, his own entrance to our, to our apartment. And whenever he was here on quiet time and not in public display,

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he often stayed at our home, and he used it to bring his friends and to have conferences and exchanges and debate. What was significant about that time was that it was when I first came to meet Stan Levinson. And of all the people in Martin's life, and all other people in our movement, I think the most understated, the most under recognized- I'm often amazed that when all of the disciples of our movement stand in public spaces and speak historically about our journey, any mention of Stan Levinson is so absent from their vocabulary that I get the sense that it says more about us than it does, because Stan was a huge force in Martin's life. He had huge intellectual influence, he had great political influence, Doctor King hardly made a major move or wrote a major speech where he didn't refer to Stan for approval and for critique and for blessings, and I think of all the people that one can speak about in Doctor King's life, perhaps one of the most important if not the most would've been Stan. And in coming to New York and staying at our place which he did often, gave me an opportunity to know Stan in a more intimate way than I would have known him just meeting him through movement events.

00:40:28:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

Harry, when did it come to- did you become aware of the fact that Doctor King's personal- that he didn't care about personal finances and take care of the family, I know that that was later on, but was it also early that you were trying to bring some order to his household? Like Coretta- you know, the life insurance, that sort of thing, was that later or did that start early?

00:41:01:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

I became aware of Doctor King's financial situation almost from the very first day of our meeting. Not too shortly after we met in New York, I had occasion to call his home and that's how I kind of met Coretta and when I called- because Doctor King had been arrested and I had understood that in these situations, I had to be really ready with bail money and all of the legal strain that those moments historically were

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placing on us and that I wanted to be most prepared for the times when he was arrested to be able to get him bail immediately and to set him on course with our campaign and that he should not really suffer from the economic deprivation. It happened when I called because when Doctor King got arrested, one of the things I did was to call Coretta almost instantly to say, "Here, how are you, how are the kids, where are you," and to make sure that she was accounted for cause I felt one of the services Doctor King needed was for him to get the sense that his family was not going to be vulnerable to any external interventions, that they would be well taken care of, that there'd be economically no hurdles for them.

00:42:57:00 And when I called Coretta to start this campaign, this historic journey of calling her, she was distracted. She kept having to- "Just give me a minute, Harry," and she'd go off and do something, attending to one of the needs of the children. And I could sense that she was doing this alone. And I asked her didn't she have any help domestically? And she said no, and I said, well, why? She said, "Because Martin will not permit it." And I said, "But why wouldn't Martin permit it?" Well, he makes only I think- what's something like five thousand dollars a year as his ministerial compensation, and he had no money, and didn't want to start having people servicing him domestically because people would think he was using the movement money to begin to get staff and help and stuff. And I said, "That is absolutely ridiculous, that he's here in the middle of this movement doing all of these things and he's going to get caught up in what people are going to think if he has somebody helping you. Well I've- from this moment on that part of your life is changing because I am going to personally pay for staff."

00:44:30:00 So, I- we gave her a secretary for her own personal needs to at least- and somebody to help her domestically, to take care of the children, all of whom have not been- I think Bernice was born just about then, but... When... when I did that, I think it meant a lot to Doctor King, that I'd taken that kind of stand and gave him no vote. I mean, he could've stopped us if he wanted obviously, but the idea of- and how we did it- so between Stan and myself, I don't think that Doctor King or his family was

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ever financially left barren and without assistance. One of the first things that I did was to make sure that the children would be economically provided for in terms of their education. All of the things that I felt that Doctor King would've been responsible and would've had to have done was constantly being invaded by the demands of the movement and I felt that if the movement is going to take his time and he's going to lead this a martyr, then the rest of us had the responsibility to make sure that there would be no distractions, economic or otherwise. And in fulfilling that, or at least being attendant to that space gave him a sense of security. In buying him that time and that space and giving him that comfort I think made him feel even more secure in going out to do what he was doing.

00:46:43:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

This film, we're going to make a big jump from first impressions and acquaintances over the early sixties because the film is going to concentrate on post Selma, but I would like to ask you one question about Selma. When the march was finally over in March of nineteen sixty-five and got to Montgomery, you went down there for the end and a quote I 've always remembered that you can see- that you said, was that, "If I could sing," If you could sing, "if I could sing what's in these peoples' hearts and minds, then I'd be happy." When that march all came together, can you talk a little bit about the culmination of the Selma march and if you had any conversations with Doctor King about what this meant as a stage in the movement?

00:47:39:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

I think Doctor King, although he did not moan or in any way feel denied the platform where the- I th- I think his preoccupation, or what could have been a major preoccupation, was always about the cost of things, in two ways; one was the economic factor, the dollar factor, and what would it cost to continually convene rallies and marches and what not when he knew that he was leading people in to harm's way, that somebody gonna die. He was least of all concerned about himself,

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but he was always aware of which one of these dramas, which one of these events would end up with somebody paying a terrible price and he was very, very conscious about that. When he set out with the march from, from Selma to Montgomery, from Montgomery to Selma, he was concerned that to get an audience and to get the attendance that was req- that he would like to have had, might be somewhat diminished because the forces in Selma, the Klan and everybody else would work tenaciously trying to disrupt our march in the process. And as had not been a not too uncommon practice, we discussed the environment and who were our allies and who were- and that I would do a concert and at this concert, along with others coming down to participate, would set a mood. It was concluded by Doctor King that what we would do would be to, to set the pace of the march so that before we marched into Montgomery, most of the people would arrive just outside of Montgomery and that they would be held there overnight for several reasons.

00:50:33:00 Number one, people would be tired, it would be nice to have rest- but he also wanted to get it at a time when the press would have daylight and opportunity to be able to cover the whole journey. So, we talked to a religious order called St. Jude, it was a home for Catholic nuns, and when we spoke to the authorities at St. Jude, they willingly gave us the campus on which to hold the concert because we could not get permits in other places around, but St. Jude gave us safe haven. And the night before- the night when the group arrived, it rained furiously. It was, it was terrible. The entire region was one big pool of mud and there was where the march has arrived and we who were to perform are goodly number of high profile artists that committed to that, Tony Bennett, Joan Baez and others, we got- it was so muddy that every time I started to step some place, I'd be up to my knees sinking slowly into the earth. And we had to find a place that would give us stability. So, what one of the young men did was to go around to all the funeral parlors in the region and get caskets. And we had dozens of caskets set on top of this muddy field over which they laid these two by four platforms and that was our stage and everybody stood on the stage. And I remember Doctor King, I- looking at all of these coffins and what not, and he said, "I

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hope this is not an omen.” I said, “Well, what does that mean?” He says, “You know, I’ve never given a speech or sermon standing or anything on nothing but coffins. What’s the symbolism here?” I said, “The symbolism is, is that I hope we get out of here okay.” But it was this little drama like that, but he...

00:53:09:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
Selma is the culmination of the drive for voting after the Civil Rights Act, so you were there at kind of a pinnacle moment of the movement, did he share that with you because you’re quoted as saying, “If I could sing what’s in these people’s hearts,” that- because it all worked, that “you’d be happy.” Was he happy because you could almost feel the Voting Rights Act being made out of that march?

00:53:31:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:
Well, there’s no question about that ‘cause the- well, I think all of us who were caught up in Doctor King’s space were constantly being rewarded by the following fact; he always walked into a place that was filled with danger and with potential for cruelty, yet he faced it down. He always came to the conclusion “we’re going to do this anyway.” And I think Selma was perhaps- he always felt that the most threatening place he’d ever been that really deeply provoked him was Chicago, which was in the North. Second to that, he found that this march to Selma was perhaps one of the most dangerous things he’d ever attempted to do. And...

00:54:35:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
The film is emphasizing post-Selma and it’s very shortly after Selma that Doctor King tells his staff he wants to take the movement into the North. They were experimenting with Rochester, Philadelphia, Boston, as possible places. They ultimately decided to go to Chicago, but it was controversial within his staff whether to go north at all because you might sacrifice the Northern media, who would be no longer sympathetic the way they were when you were down south. And Doctor King

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said it's important to show that race in America has never been just about the South, that we need to show that. But it was controversial to take the movement north, do you remember that? How did you feel about his decision to go north after Selma into a movement in Chicago?

00:55:26:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

Here in New York where Doctor King had a very strong base with the labor movement, a lot of the major labor organizations, unions were headquartered in New York and in Washington DC, his journey in to our space up here was quite regular. He spoke at a lot of different places in the North, synagogues. He made sure that he covered those bases. His invasion into the North really was based upon what he had experienced out of Chicago. He had felt that in many ways dealing with the South was a more predictable outcome and more manageable than in the North because in the North, the racial hypocrisy was very subverted. It gave the illusion and the appearance of being not like the South, the South was the center of all evil and that the North was a place of a higher experience, and Doctor King said, "No, that's not the case." That's when he went into his whole sense that the one place he most feared was Cicero and what happened to him when he went in to Chicago to start it. The distinction between North and South soon paved way to the fact that the movement knew no geographical lines, that the movement now had become more pervasive, was reflective more of the truth of what America was about than just what we were experiencing in the South.

00:57:41:00 That paralleled something else that was important, especially in the North, was the position that he took on Vietnam because in spreading the Gospel on his vision for what was going on in Vietnam, it was very important, the platforms that he had in the North to be able to say those things. I do not know that... everything that Martin said or did he was quite prepared for because a lot of stuff that happened was quite spontaneous. You had an experience with a situation A which evoked a whole new sense of, "how do I deal with this?" Whether it was in Selma, whether it was in

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Montgomery, whether it was in Atlanta, whether it was- I went with him for instance to Houston. I talked to Aretha Franklin and she and I went to Houston because he wanted to be introduced to that part of the American audience and public.

00:58:54:00 And when we went to Houston, the convention hall at which we were scheduled to be was tear-gassed. They had put teargas bombs into the air conditioning system and forced us to move to other venues. Each experie- I think that what I'm getting at was that no one place held a clearly defined set of conclusions, "If we go there, this is what will happen." You always had to be prepared for what we did not expect and that constantly kept Martin at the ready. I don't know how else to put it. He was constantly absorbing information about each location to become location specific so that people understood how deeply connected what he was doing was to their immediate experience. This is in your community. This is not just something taking place in some faraway place that you may never visit. This is really what America is about. And by making those parallels, he was able to bring a cohesiveness to movement mentality that although we had reasons for studying geographical opposites or differences, that those differences should never keep us uninformed about how much alike all of this was for our total interests. I'm stumbling through this because there's so much to... it's just not easy.

01:01:01:00 I remember, I think it was- there was a labor leader by the name of Cleave Robinson and Cleave was perhaps one of the most forceful voices out of labor, and we talked about going down to the marches in which Doctor King tried to appeal to as broad a cross-section of Americans as he could, labor was very important. He met a lot of times with the labor movement, Walter Reuther and others and convinced them that they should throw their lot in with us. He kept us constantly in a state of chess. He would do something that evoked a certain response and all of a sudden, the movement had to make a shift, not from what it was doing, but to expand on what it was doing. And the team around Doctor King had to be the visionaries, had to be those who sought these quarters of resistance out and to find the solutions to how to lessen that resistance. To that degree I think the team that surrounded Martin did the

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task well. A lot of them paid a terrible price for the commitment, but as long as Doctor King stayed the course, the rest of us felt that anything that was happening to us was not that much- was not that important.

01:03:10:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

Did he talk to you about the attacks in Chicago that summer when they- when he was stoned and the level of violence that was really- it took months to get the movement going, but by the summer they were having marches and they were some of the more violent responses in the white neighborhoods where the marches went to make witness for integrated housing and integrated neighborhoods.

Up to and I'm including the moment of his death or the time of his death, I think- excuse me, I think that Doctor King referred to the experiences in Chicago more regularly than almost any other experience. I think Chicago was a—was a huge awakening for him. I'm not quite sure how he envisioned it, but he always saw the North and for those of us who lived in the North, as people who experienced- whatever experiences we were having were lesser of all the evils, unless you know the South and what's going on in the South and what's going on in the South, you have no idea how bad the situation is because in the North, you're somewhat insulated.

01:04:47:00 Well, that concept or that thought from his perspective was immediately changed when he met- when he encountered Chicago and Cicero and what he did. And in making the decision to move into Chicago, was he felt that very strongly that to begin to unearth the silent prejudices, the silent racism that so dominated the North, to rip that apart and to let the world see that the North was really not very much better than the South, if not even worse because it was hidden beneath this façade of the more democratic place to live. He felt that Chicago and what went on in the North was perhaps as significant if not more in many ways to what was the, again, extension coming from the Montgomery Movement up to this moment, that the

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bigger picture was really what was taking place in the places that didn't debate it much- the North. What went on in New York and Chicago and then Detroit and all those places that- where there was racial seething, he... he had a lot of homework to do and he sure drove us all to look at things and to see things through prisms we'd not quite been challenged to do before.

01:06:29:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

It's commonly said that he was depressed by the way the news media turned against him over Vietnam when he criticized Vietnam. But did you have a sense that the news media turned against him over the North? Because the Northern media had been very favorable covering his movement when it was in the South, but not so much when it came to north.

01:06:55:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

Not just the press, but the way all of America turned on him when he stepped into the Vietnam drama was perhaps the single most challenging moment for Martin. He came to a point when after having looked at the Vietnamese crisis, and having studied the history of the Vietnamese people, and did a rather in-depth investigation of what that conflict was about, felt that America's presence was not only morally ill-founded and unacceptable, but its direct impact upon the movement was that the distraction that the nation felt with Vietnam and the divi- divisiveness of that moment in history had a serious impact on the needs of the black movement. It robbed us of resources, it robbed us of the public attention, yet what that war represented and what our policy in relationship to people in the struggle for the rights to free speech and free choice was embodied in what was the heart of the struggle of the people in Vietnam. And I think to articulate that gave him an opportunity to couple the struggles in this country and the struggles America had with its foreign policy and what it did to, to paint everybody- the same way the oligarchy tried to paint Black America. Anybody in struggle for doing what the Vietnamese- was a

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threat to our democracy. Anything black people was doing for their liberation was a threat to democracy. And these couplets of how we made foreign policy and how we dealt with domestic issues had a great parallel and therefore these things were necessarily joined at the hip. You can't do one without the other, and especially when he came to the point where numerically black bodies were paying more of a price for Vietnam than almost any other national group, any other culture, any other ra- I mean white people were not dying proportionately to the extent in which young black men were dying because we were in the forefront of the Vietnamese conflict. And that that- and that that racial fact further exacerbated the issue of racial discrimination.

01:09:59:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
Most of his staff including Stanley Levinson opposed his forthright speech at Riverside, saying you're already exposed and the President and the administration will turn right against you when we're at a point of alliance and trying to salvage some things. He decided to do it anyway at that Riverside church speech against the advice of his staff. Do you recall, did you counsel him? Do you recall the decision to give that speech and were you part of it?

01:10:37:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:
Very much because he wrote a big part of it in our home. Doctor King did a lot of writing in our home and when he came to the Vietnamese speech he struggled with it, up to and including going to California where he completed it. And then I have on my wall in the hallway a copy of his writings and the notes that he made and he had a habit of using a yellow pad to- just constantly making notes and he'd crumble up these things at the end of a evening or a moment and toss it away and I'd just do a swan dive right into the garbage pail and retrieve those papers because you're always left some really profound sentence or something that I thought was worth retrieving and saving. But Martin's take on Vietnam- there were two things about Vietnam; one

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was Stan and others took... took deference to what Martin was doing because on the communist issue, if Doctor King stepped into this place and began to defend the rights of the Vietnamese people to do what they were doing, it would put an emphasis on supporting communism and all of the evils of that philosophy and our movement and our nation through McCarthyism was preceded not too far before we started the movement, but what was going on with McCarthyism, the false patriotic choices we made about Americas rela- the issue was that those who were opposed to him doing it was not out of patriotism or the fact that we felt the war was correct, they felt that the choice for Doctor King to take that burden on as well would subvert his efforts for the black movement.

01:12:56:00 And he said in the final analysis he felt one was inextricably bound to the other, that they were one and the same. The decisions that were being made to do what was being done in Vietnam were- those decisions would be made by the very same people who'd choose to maintain the segregation law and rules in America. The villainy always at the same doorstep. And I think that that extent, making that alliance or making those similarities was, was, was the correct thing to do. I was on his side to do it. Stan and others- Stan was on his side to do it, but his caution was about burdening the movement with the whole issue of Communism. But I think in the final analysis Doctor King- of course history turned out to be on his side.

01:13:58:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
It was only a few days after that speech at Riverside on the fourth that there was a big march to the UN, a massive march. In fact, they did the Riverside church speech to try to get his message out in whole before that big march and they- Stokely Carmichael marched, a lot of the radical elements in the movement marched and they came to your apartment on the night of that march to discuss what was going on. There was some contro- do you remember that evening when they came to your apartment after that big UN march? By then Doctor King was already very depressed, some people say to the point of tears that- he said- that the reaction to his

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Riverside speech was so hostile by the people that said they were for- against the Vietnam war like the New York Times and then he had that march in- at the UN and came to your apartment in an atmosphere when his speech was being attacked and he was being attacked.

01:15:09:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

It's hard to ascertain if there was ever a moment when whatever Doctor King stepped out to do was not met with some sense of fear and apprehension and containment by voices from the left who one would've thought would've been readily embracing of everything that Doctor King did. The issue of Vietnam is certainly one, but then Cuba emerged, and a lot of places in which the socialist philosophy was central to acts of liberation from countries in Africa and Asia. The Soviet presence did a lot to fuel the policies of a lot of the countries in the developing world because that was the only resource that could match the awesome power and onslaught of the west. Most of the countries that spoke of democracy, most of the countries that went off to the Second World War to fight Hitler to end race and "Deutschland uber alles" and all that stuff were the very same countries and societies and sovereign states that were colonialists, that had dominated the world of color, of- much to everyone's surprise, than not that they were pro the French being in Vietnam, but when the French understood that they could not maintain the war against the Vietnamese people and Algeria which they were involved in at the same time, that this global front on which the French was finding themselves fighting these wars of rebellion... was, was... was a huge problem because rather than once the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu and they were ready to let the Vietnamese have their day, Kennedy and Johnson and everybody just stepped into that space and refused to let it go on to the belief that somehow if the Vietnamese were permitted to succeed, we would be doomed to this international communist threat.

01:18:10:00 But everywhere and everything that Doctor King did, whether it was stepping into Vietnam, going into the North, going into this, looking at the women's relationship to

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the black movement, always met with some knee jerk, with some resistance and some people always said that you're blurring- you're blurring the truth when he said, "No, the truth is being revealed in a greater dimension than we have been able to articulate and so we have a need and right to be in these places because it's all part of the same canvas."

01:18:48:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

Doctor King spent much of his life venturing into the white world, into synagogues, into churches, into places that was not reciprocated. I mean, to this day not that many white people go into black institutions or black organizations. Did he talk to you about what it was like to spend so much of his time among with white people. Was that a subject of humor or profundity, because he's often misinterpreted, but he's constantly going there to offer his message into white audiences and go to dinners with white people he had never met before. What was that- do you have a sense what that was like for him?

01:19:39:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

In Martin's earlier life, in his youth at the university, as a matter of fact, as a student, his first real love was a white student. He adored this young lady and was deeply pained when the wrath of Daddy King and everybody else came down on him when he suggested that he was i- that he wanted a love relationship with this young lady. It betrayed everything that Daddy King had in mind for his son. The reason I evoke that is because I think one of the things that attracted him to my environment was that here I was, a very prominent black American, who had an international platform that was fairly intense, not just from artistic base and a fan base, but my politics seemed to have sustained pretty well when I gave interviews to the French press or any place in the world. And what he was fascinated by was the fact that my wife then was a young woman named Julie Robinson who was white, and a dancer, and very attractive, and that she and I were married and brought children into the world and at

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no point was her presence in my life ever obscured. She was always up front and in place, and Doctor King watched the environment around me accept that and treated us with a lot of kindness and respect, and I think he saw himself and what had happened to him if he had chosen to take on an interracial relationship, would he have survived that journey in the way in which I appeared to be surviving it.

01:22:03:00 He... by having Stan Levinson for instance in his world, he was very tempered on the- not on the issues of the behavior of people trapped in the conflicts of race but understanding how indelibly connected the white animus was to the whole process of the need for change. He... he understood with great clarity that as much as white people were to learn about the whole fabric of our whole social intercourse, integration, it was also important for black people to understand a more d- white people in a more one-dimensional way, and that one of the ways in which this dimension could be revealed was to see the way in which white people reveal themselves in their commitment to the black struggle.

01:23:18:00 So, if my white neighbor all of a sudden is out there espousing the black cause and they and I never discussed it, but historic events forced them to take a position, was a healthy part of the national debate; as a matter of fact, a healthy part of the universal debate, because the issue of race was not just- America may have been the most up-front proponent of racial segregation and the apartheid system, but it was not the only practitioner. And what happened with him and Chicago and other places was that he could do something in Chicago and in the North, he could live in the midst of a white society with relationships that were psychologically on a very different level than living among white people in the South who were instructed by and touched by a history and a culture of racial separation. However, he knew that that was only that thick in relationship to the problem, which was much bigger. But by using Chicago and New York and other places to displace- to display a harmony among interracial relationships was for him symbolic to the Southern psyche, to the Southern challenges.

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01:25:00:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

How important was humor for him in dealing with all the complexities and disappointments of this? I know he was also depressed at times. When did you first notice it, what were the personal signs? Did he have trouble sleeping? Was he gifted in gallows humor? What about the personal side of him? Could you talk about that a little bit, we've been talking about big issues all this time.

01:25:29:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

I think Doctor King's attraction to the arts was never just about celebrity. He had a profound appreciation and profound understanding of the importance of Shakespeare. He understood Othello, he understood the arts to be a component and a power for which there were miraculous things going on, what you could do with a song. He was in love with Mahalia not just because she was a religious force and energy but because she was an artist- *[Sound of dishes in background]*

01:26:21:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

I just want to make the observation about Doctor King and-

TAYLOR BRANCH:

Go ahead.

HARRY BELAFONTE:

His... his... depression. Doctor King's expression of his anxiety about this whole world in which he found himself was not based upon some abstract, some neurotic disorder, some unfounded preoccupation. His fears were very real because the conditions were very real. Obviously, his apprehension of things to come historically proved out to be justified, after all he was assassinated, he was murdered, in a moment and in a place that was most unlikely. It wasn't at the rally, it wasn't at a space where he was in the midst of some prophetic moment, it was in a motel. In a

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way it was forever present, and I had noticed that he had a tick and he had occasion to get caught. It wasn't consistent, it wasn't across the boards, but it was apparent in enough situations for us to know that there was a psychological problem here. And then one day we came upon a time when that tick was no longer evident, was no longer on display, and I said to him, I said, you know, "What happened to the tick? You're not hiccupping very more- much more. Is that gone?" I was under the assumption that he may have taken some medication. He said, "No, it's gone." I said, "Well, how'd you get rid of it?" And he said, "I made my peace with death."

01:28:33:00 And he- once he had made his peace with death, I think his anxiety took a shift, because although he was in a constant state of anxiety and apprehension about what may come, his sense of self, which may have been under some duress and what he was exposing his family to and the world to, was put to rest. And he no longer gave the appearance of- The depression, I think, came because with all of his knowledge, with all of his experience, with his wisdom, he really was not quite ready for the human heart to reveal as much villainy as he experienced. Especially once he- because he used to preach this, "let us greet animus with love and you will necessarily conquer hate, it'll overcome," and yet stepping into this space, giving as much love as he did, what he saw was more hate than he saw resolve and I think that kept him in a constant challenge, not only in his belief in God, and where are the miracles, and when does God step in here and do something that changes this impossible condition, but am I doing the right thing? Am I- so the anxiety was from a concern for where he was going rather than anxiety about safety and about himself personally.

01:30:33:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
His, his optimism, which I think is what you're talking about, was always at war with his realism, that you could hear it in his voice. Do you think that his optimism got more challenged towards the end of his life or do you think he maintained it through all of that furnace that you were talking about?

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01:30:57:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:
You cannot do what Martin does or did and very few members of the human race have ever done that. I don't know of anyone besides Gandhi and Jesus that's on display for having done pretty much what Martin's done. But Martin's... would you give me, give me- frame the question again?

TAYLOR BRANCH:
His optimism- did you ever feel that his optimism was in danger, maintained—

01:31:39:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:
Oh yeah, I got- now I know where I'm headed. You cannot be Doctor King and do what Doctor King did and not by necessity live in a place of perpetual hope, perpetual promise. You cannot take the journey he took and not have some belief that there's not only resolve in the final analy- but when that resolve comes, the human race will be in a healthier place in the end than where it found itself in the beginning. He firmly believed that he should stay the course. What I think he was distracted by was that it was so entrenched, that it was so deeply rooted that even the love that he brought to the table was not sufficient enough to win a more receptive public. He often worried more about others than he worried about himself, I think. I think he came to peace fairly early. He was only thirty-nine when he died. He had to come- and he was twenty-six when I- twenty-four, twenty-six, when we met. That was a thirteen-year period.

01:33:10:00 I watched the transformation take place from the man that I met in the first instance in the apartment sitting down talking about the Abyssinia Baptist Church ecumenical speech, to the man he became in the end. I think... I think Doctor King's disciples failed him. I think they failed his promise. I think- and this is not a critique to- it's not putting anyone down, it's not forcing expectations on people for which I have no right to have those expectations. One lives one's life as one greets the inevitabilities

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of life, but I think that he felt- each victory that he had in winning over the Kennedy's and ultimately winning over Johnson and he never compromised in what he was about in order to win their favor., they just eventually saw the wisdom of his philosophy and the wisdom of his movement and yielded according to the evidence of that onslaught.

01:34:50:00 Bobby Kennedy, for instance, I think in the final analysis, was won over spiritually, deeply to the cause of the black movement, of the liberal- of the liberation movement. He was not that way in beginning. He became that and as he became that, Doctor King was deeply rewarded, that certainly a person of Bobby Kennedy's stature, of his social reality as a power in government of making decisions and doing things was for Doctor King a huge validation of what he was doing with the movement. But I think it frustrated him up until the very last moment that we had been driven to such extremes, that... I speak of the fact that his disciples were faithful to him in the moments of the journey, in the execution of his, his wishes, but I think while we were looking to get segregation out of the way, get an integ- get democracy on point, we didn't understand, it's one thing to fight the struggle for liberation, it's another thing to deal with the governance of liberation. I think that he felt very- look, Andy Young had to go off to become elected. When black people got the right to vote in the South and Johnson did what he did, the question was, now that we got the right to vote, what do you do with it. There's no tradition in this practice, and who do you vote for. And obviously the people that were always the first choice for whom the voting constituency would choose were people that they felt comfortable with who were out of the movement.

01:37:26:00 Jessie Jackson, his credentials already fairly defined by where he came from, Andy Young is pretty much defined because of where he came from, John Lewis, really premiere example. These people had to leave the movement and the organization of communities into a bigger challenge which was, how do you deal with the life of legislative power, of making laws, of putting bills through and I think that once those forces left our movement, the movement lost community organization, lost its

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direction. That we went into a period where the leadership almost en masse went to the next tier of the demand, which was to become elected officials and to help steer the ship of state. Well that took away from the movement and it left the movement somewhat looking for who it was and where it was to go.

01:38:44:00 What I am most distracted by and saddened by is that in the black community in particular, it's true in White as well, but the extent to which the black community has not heralded in a very important and a triumphant way what Doctor King brought to us is a great loss to our history and a great loss to our people. Young people know nothing about Martin, know nothing about the depths and the details of that struggle. It's not preached about in our pulpits in the church except on the Sunday that anoints black history month. It is not a part of the national debate. It's not a constant in our midst, but that's not true just about Doctor King, it's true about almost every leader. I look at- recently came from Rutgers University and a speech on Paul Robeson and I looked at what he had achieved as a forerunner to Doctor King. I look at, whether it's Frederick Douglass or whomever, I look at, I look at the cause of black women, why isn't there more said about Fannie Lou Hamer, why isn't there more said about Ella Baker, why isn't there more said about all of these forces in our history? Where is America in relationship to itself?

01:40:33:00 And I think that the experience that we're having with the Trump culture, the Trump journey, is a clear indication that this nation is still caught up in a deeper villainy by the way in which we choose our leaders, and what we anoint them in doing. But what's puzzling to me is, for instance, how in the name of all that's holy does Black America let Trump get away at what he gets with, with not one word coming out of our area in protest to this man's existence? Where's the NAACP, where is SNCC, where is SCLC? Where is black life and its righteous indignation in relationship to what Trump says and does, not just for the cause of black people, but the cause of America? Where is, where is the liberal forces in general but in specifics- and specifically, where is the black cause, where is the black movement, where is the

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black voice? Why are we so mute? And I think therein lies the great question on King's legacy

01:42:01:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

I just wanted to ask you, we have been and will talk about a lot of serious and profound things, but I know there was a lot of humor and comradery in your relationship with Doctor King.

01:42:13:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

I think what most people have not been able to discern is that what you know of Doctor King or what has been revealed about Doctor King is always within the sphere of profound and serious challenges to social behavior, but I don't think anyone possessed the capacity for humor both in receiving it and responding joyously to a great story or to his sense of appreciation for the joy- more joyous side of life. His behavior around children always fascinated me because there was an almost physical difference in his behavior when he was among children, I'm talking about young children, his delight in them, his pleasure in them, his own preoccupation with his children, and his great concern about whether or not as a parent was he able to meet any of the obligations and meeting the challenges of parenthood.

01:43:51:00

Nowhere was that humorous side of him more revealed or revealed as well as it was in a night in nineteen sixty-eight, I think it was. Yeah. I'd hosted the "Tonight Show" for one week. I had been invited by Johnny Carson and NBC to do it. And... I had- in the first instance I had turned the request down because I admired Johnny, he was always very, very good to me and the most embracing, but to fill that space, no one can do it quite the way that Johnny did it, that it was something he created, it was out of his own persona that this routine emerged where in the late-night hours he could take the simplest of stories and turn them into magical tales and make- and find

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humor in everything, and gave America a really important look at itself in those late night hours through his prism.

01:45:13:00 And for one to step in that space, if you can't tell a joke and if you can't bring some humor to your moment, then you're- all you're doing is competing with the tragedies, seven o'clock news. So, when they offered me this, I made that plea. I said, you know, "I can sing some songs, I can do some things, but that's not my gig." Well, Johnny was most persuasive. He came back at me and so did [unclear] and NBC and we finally ironed out how to do it. The way in which it was concluded was that I could name my own guests and I wanted to name my own guests because I wanted to give the appearance of being intelligent. I wanted to give the appearance of knowing what the hell I'm talking about. And that I can only do that with people with whom I was deeply familiar who had a handle on issues of the day that would be of interest to the viewer.

01:46:19:00 So when I submitted my list, Bobby Kennedy was on the list, Doctor King was on the list, Lena Horne was on the list, Wilt Chamberlain was on the list, Paul Newman was on the list, Sidney Poitier was on the list- it was a really quite stunning week lineup and on the night that Doctor King was to appear, by the time he went on air, he had not shown up. He wasn't there, so we had to make quick adjustments in the lineup, in the program, find another way to open the show and just as we're about to do that, in walked Martin all out of breath and really quite disgruntled. And he went on the air and he said, "Well, I'd like- I'd like to apologize for my lateness," he said, "but I'm having quite a time with the transportation world, my planes were late and everything gets thrown off, and I'm sorry, but the plane was late coming in from Atlanta. And when I got to New York I caught a cab and when I got in the cab, the cab driver recognized me and he said, 'Welcome Doctor King.' I said, 'Well, thank you for that.' Said, 'What are you doing in New York?' 'Oh I'm- I'm- I'm going on the air and, and I'm late,' you know, and that's all I had to say, was that I was late 'cause this young man put his foot on the gas and when he hit from the airport towards my getting here, I really became most disoriented. I've never been in

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anything that drove as fast as he did.” I- he said, “I finally had to tap him on the shoulder and say, ‘Young man, thank you for trying to make me on time but I would rather be known as Doctor King, ‘late,’ than be known as the late Doctor King.’”

01:48:47:00 And he said that to the audience and he of course it got the appropriate laughter and whatnot, which gave me the opportunity to say to him, “Well, do you- what do you- do you fear for your life?” And then he gave us an answer that I think was one of his or, or- he had so many, but this was a wonderful response. He pointed out that... he wasn’t so much interested in length of life as much as he was interested in the quality of life, and as long as he spent his life moving humanity forward, moving the world- trying to make it a bit of a better place than the way he found it, he’ll have felt his mission was well worth it. He loved the arts, he loved comics, he delighted in Godfr- in Dick Gregory. Dick Gregory was a regular- had a steadfast commitment to the movement and was in attendance more than almost any other artist I know, myself included. And Doctor King delighted every time Dick Gregory made the commitment to come to an event because he knew that it would be a chance to laugh and a chance to turn a rather serious historical commitment into moments of humor.

01:50:41:00 I also want to make this observation before this is over. There are certain things that emerged in that time in my life. The voices that were the most potent and the most powerful in my world at that time, was first and foremost Paul Robeson, then there was certainly Doctor King. Then there was A. Philip Randolph, and perhaps a voice that’s very rarely noted that I think was one of the most potent and one of the most powerful. He came late to the movement, but when he arrived, he arrived with righteousness and a profound sense of the order of things. No articulation was greater than James Baldwin. I think James Baldwin was a unique package of what our struggle was about. He articulated it magnificently. You saw in James Baldwin the hurt, the experience with race, he saw the anger and the pain with which he lived in America, why he went to France to live away from the oppression. And I think that he more than anyone else reflected the perpetual state of rage that exists in many of us, myself included.

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- 01:52:42:00 I've opted not to get rid of the rage because White doesn't permit that. It is not enough for me in my ninetieth year of life, to have lived almost a century with a nation that seems to be in patch- perpetual reconciliation. It's always redeeming itself because it has been unwilling and incapable of turning off the faucet of race hate. As long as America does not squarely deal with the issue of race and what it has meant to this nation, it will never be a joyous place to really be. They are constantly referring to the dreams and the hopes of this country. People are in perpetual clash with a system that is in many instances more cruel than people are willing to acknowledge and when Doctor King chose us to go from Vietnam to the streets of Chicago, Cicero, or Selma, it's because there's a package here that represents what America is, that America must deal with. And I don't know how to get rid of the rage and the emptiness. I am what I am not because America gave me opportunity, I am what I am because I have become what I am despite the suffocation that America's more often put in my path than the windows of opportunity.
- 01:54:40:00 It's a sad story because there is a potential to this nation. I'm not governed by what Washington did or Lincoln or Jefferson, I'm really committed to the promise that's America because of what Sojourner Truth did. Why did she struggle so as a slave to find redemption, to find hope in this country? For what all of the black men and women who have been at the forefront of change, that's what makes me- why do I want to be an American and why do I breathe hope into the- what we have experienced? It's because of what these men have said and what they have done and I don't know that it's gonna end well. No sooner had we come to a moment that I thought was filled with the greatest moment of promise for this nation, then the nation suffice- suffocates and suffices to live with the- with a person like Trump. The fact that we are not in a righteous rebellion against him and not permitting him to prevail says something about the deep undercurrents of what is the will of America.
- 01:56:16:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

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Harry, that's good. We need to talk about—about Doctor King's death because we've only got a few minutes left. Could you tell what stories you'd like to tell as a witness, beginning with how you learned about it and going to what, what memories you can bare to share about saying goodbye?

01:56:48:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

There has been a lot of historical tragedies that give us time to reflect on much that has been lost to us in the cruelty of the issues of race, none more profoundly robbed me of an important part of what I thought my life would be than when Martin was murdered. His death was not just a great loss for the historical dynamic that he brought to the table, but in a deep personal sense I lost a friend, I lost somebody who I adored, somebody who brought into my life something that will never be replicated. I often looked forward to my conversations with Martin, and what was done by James Earl Ray.... I don't know that there's any... there's never any way to overcome that, there's never any way to really- I have often said the irony of it 'cause that was the February of nineteen sixty-eight when both Bobby Kennedy and Doctor King went on the air and both those men were given an opportunity to tell a rather different constituency than they would've been able to speak to when they spoke publicly, although they were always on television.

01:58:48:00 But that year, that both of those men should've been murdered robbed America I think of an opportunity to have a history that would've been very, very different had both those men lived and it is one thing for those who invited Doctor King into their space just on the forces of what history dictated, and then there are those of us who had intimate moments with him as a person, as a brother, as a member of the family, as someone you broke bread with and told stories, and to hear Doctor King speak of his fears and his doubts was almost in many instances equally as rewarding as hearing him speak about what he knew to be the history he would help create. Once he was taken out of that space, something was taken out of my life that will never be fixed, will never be repeated. The loss was profound.

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02:00:06:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

Last time you saw him was March twenty-seventh in your apartment when he talked about, I believe, if you could tell the story, integrating into a burning house, but he also teased you about his Harvey's Bristol Cream.

HARRY BELAFONTE:

He also spoke about?

TAYLOR BRANCH:

His Harvey's Bristol Cream and that somebody had been drinking it.

02:00:33:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

Doctor King visited my home with great regularity and we also made sure that his space was filled with the things that brought him pleasure. He had his own room, his own entrance to the apartment, and there's always something at his disposal, including his favorite drink. He was not a drinker, but he did take a sip every now and then and he loved Bristol Cream Sherry, was one of his delights. The sweetness of the liquor and the taste, I liked it as well. But he had a bottle that was his own and every time he came to visit, he would get his bottle of Bristol Cream Sherry, take it off the shelf and he'd look at the last pencil mark he put on the bottle to make sure that nobody was dipping into his brew while he was away. But Martin's moments when the curtain was drawn and he was not on public display was a man who I think revealed as much in his deepest concerns about his right to do what he was doing, about the fact that he was touched by that calling in history disturbed him because he didn't quite understand it. He referred everything to divine intervention, to divine power, "It's what God called on me to do."

02:02:34:00 Well, I wish God had talked to me with as much regularity as he spoke to Martin

'cause maybe I could've been more like Martin than like Harry had I heard that voice

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more often. And a lot of times I said to Martin, where is God now. And he would look at me, he said, "He's taking care of the non-believers." He would respond. And I said, "Well, Martin, there's just so much around that if you believe in God, why is it like it is? Why does it never seem to get any better?" He, in the depth of that belief, that religious commitment, those voices that he heard really existed for him. And the profundity of what all of that revealed had to do with Martin's faith. I think his faith in the people he met, his faith in the teachings that he had studied, his, his deep embrace of the intellects of wisdom that he acquired through his academic studies, his constant reference to Thoreau and all of the things that he constantly- I never knew of these guys, never heard of these people till Martin came in one day and in the midst of some rather casual moment he would evoke what Nietzsche said and what Thoreau h- and I'm sitting there saying, well who is Nietzsche? And he just brought his wi- there was never discrimination. He would talk to audiences down in, in anywhere and Daddy King used to say, "Just get in there and talk the gospel. Stop all with this college stuff and all these highfalutin people you keep evoking, people don't know who they are." He said, "Yes they do." And there were no- [*Telephone ringing*] beautiful timing. [*Telephone ringing*]

02:05:12:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:

Harry, two more questions. Number one, could you tell the story of the last time Doctor King was in the apartment? It was the Poor People's Campaign, he was on his way to Memphis and I believe he said something to Andy that he was worried about integrating into a burning house of America. You told me that story.

02:05:37:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:

There was a strategy session. Strategy sessions had taken place with great regularity. New York was kind of one of his destinations where he was able to meet a lot of the players of the North in the civil rights movement, the labor m- crowd, and wall street, and everybody else. And in this particular day he was late for the strategy

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meeting and he exp- apologized when he arrived that he was so late, but he had just come from Newark where he had met with a group that was following in the path of, of, of a movement of young people in Newark who had threatened to burn the city down, who was following the dictates and the leadership of a very famous black writer at the time named LeRoi Jones, later became known as Amiri Baraka, and he just said, "I'm sorry, I was at a meeting in Jersey and I had to talk to this group of young men and I'm just very saddened that, that I didn't win them over. They're hell-bent on, on violence and I'm saddened by that. I think in many ways I have more in common with them than I had with anybody else, but the one thing about violence and that being so much a part of the DNA stops me in my tracks." And he said, "I'm afraid that with all that I've spoken about with integration and with all that I've spoken about the human heart and change, I am of the suspicion that we are integrating- with all this talk about integration, we're integrating into a burning house."

02:08:18:00 And Andy who was present at that meeting said, "Well, that's a rather- Well, we all felt it was a rather bleak assessment from our leader whom we relied on for inspiration and for hope and for leading us through this mess, for him to say we're integrating into a burning house was a rather depressing note. And then Andy said, "Well, Doctor, if, if, if your suspicion is that we're integrating into a burning house, what are we supposed to do about that?" And Doctor King, without much hesitation, said, "Well, Andy, we're just going to have to become firemen." And that one little statement said it all. No matter what the condition is, we have to find the solution and if the house is going- is burning down, we're not just gonna have to let it burn, we're going to have to put it out and make America whole. He was constantly on that path, it was constantly his take on how to fix problems.

02:09:42:00 TAYLOR BRANCH:
That's really good Harry. You were often a mediator or a truce-host between Doctor King and his critics in SNCC who called him more radical- called him not radical

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enough, called him “de lawd” and all that, and you mediated. When he came on your show, on the “Tonight Show,” the first question was about the Poor People’s Campaign and he said that he thought nonviolence was applicable not only to war and racism but to-

HARRY BELAFONTE:
War on poverty.

TAYLOR BRANCH:
And that he was gonna do that and you agreed with him and that’s what the conversation was about. So, he saw nonviolence as the lynch pin more or less is what you’re just saying there. You’ve always been associated with the flare of the militants and the truth of the militants and yet you’ve never really abandoned nonviolence. So, my question for you is, how have you maintained your commitment to nonviolence through the period when a lot of people had abandoned it in the Black Power era and otherwise. Is that from Doctor King or is that your own? My question is, how do you see your, your bridge between militancy and truth telling and, and the not abandoning nonviolence and the commitment to nonviolence?

02:11:14:00 HARRY BELAFONTE:
I had not before meeting Doctor King ever taken the option of violence off the table as a way in which to bring America to a reckoning. There was no question in my mind if it came to- after all I was in the Second World War, I’d been trained in all of the military culture and I knew how to use a rifle, and more often than not, when people said to me, “Where did you serve during the Second World War?” I would say, “I served on the fourth front.” And the fourth front was the South. During my service years as a member of the armed forces, we were brutalized because of race. Black soldiers and black service men had always been lynched in America even while in uniform. The harvest of death that faced Americans after the Second World

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War was huge in this country. Hundreds of men, some in uniform were lynched all through the South which started this major campaign on the anti-lynch- on the anti-lynch bills of a federal law, so that in a sense, the commitment to violence was always an accepted aspect of our destiny until Martin walked into the picture. And when he- Martin- it is true that we had A. Philip Randolph, we had Gandhi, but Gandhi, and the way in which we interpreted what he achieved, was based upon the fact that he represented hundreds of millions of people who owned the state, who controlled all of the aspects of governance in India.

02:13:14:00 Therefore nonviolence, its application was more froth with opportunity than denial. We are a minority in the belly of the beast and as long as the white nation persists on its racial laws and its racial utterances, we are destined to ever be in a place of reaction and rebellion. But when Doctor King stepped in, he methodically would look at guns and look at violence and challenge those who would seek the gun as the solution, to explain how the process would work onto their vision. How would violence work in America? You're in a minority, you don't own a munitions factory, you got no access to bullets and dynamite. Who gonna repair things when they break down and who's gonna supply you with the necessary instruments of destruction? Just from a practical, tactical point of view, your argument holds no substance. But beyond the foolhardiness of that, morally you cannot defeat the enemy by becoming the enemy. You have to become who we are.

02:14:38:00 So, I began to listen to him and look at all of the advantages of nonviolence and then concluded that it in fact was the best way. Now, that thought coupled with the fact that I was a very important economic resource for the movement gave me ample traction, so when I was with SNCC and with those young men, I would say to them, I had this dual power, a power of helping them strategize what they were to become and at the same time, speak against violence. I understood the leverage, I understood that if you need a hundred thousand dollars, you can't get it from anybody else quickly as you can get it from me, but here's what we have to look at, and eventually I broke code with them. When Doctor King came in town, or when I met with Doctor

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King and with SNCC in these conferences, always underlying the debate was the fact that they knew that an important part of their funding was at stake if they couldn't arrive at a solution with Doctor King. And from time to time there were utterances to move that way, but it was never fulfilled because Rap Brown and Stokely, those guys really believed that in the long run, the gun was going to have to be the answer. I liked Doctor- 'cause when Doctor King came from Newark and said we're integrating into a burning house, that's what I always thought of. No matter where we go with this movement, violence is going to always be knocking at the door and the role that we play in that is frustrating Doctor King and frustrating the outcome of his teaches.

TAYLOR BRANCH:
That's good.

02:17:05:00 END OF INTERVIEW