



HARRY BELAFONTE INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Harry Belafonte, Musician and Civil Rights Activist
April 10, 2017
Interviewed by: Taylor Branch
Total Running Time: 31 minutes and 16 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

00:00:04:00

HARRY BELAFONTE:

I am what I am not because America gave me opportunity, I am what I am because I have become what I am despite suffocation that Americans more often put in my path than the windows of opportunity.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Learning

King in The Wilderness Collection

Harry Belafonte

Musician and Civil Rights Activist

Meeting Dr. King



00:00:38:00

INTERVIEWER:

What first impressed you about Doctor King? Could you talk about the first meeting and how it came about?

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HARRY BELAFONTE:

My first meeting with Dr. King came about when he called. He was down in Montgomery. And he was on his way to New York to speak at The Abyssinia Baptist church, to a gathering of ecumenical leaders to 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 chance. I didn't know him. I was curious as to who he really was. He 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. 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 the Abyssinia Baptist Church pastored by Adam Clayton Powell, who was a forceful voice in Black politics and in the Black community. It was at his church. I was curious. I thought King was...here he was two years younger than I and this thing that he was to articulate was very curious to me.

First impressions of Dr. King

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HARRY BELAFONTE:



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 Dr. King. And here he was, this human being that just... eluded tradition: traditional expectations. We met at the church down in the basement. And 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'd 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 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 he worked really hard. I tried to repair race relations in this country, but nothing came as a 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 as I taught with the 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 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. I'm hunting for...there was something about him that made me want to know more. I had not met anybody quite like him. His calm, his rather measured way of speaking. His utterances were quite deliberate.

Working with Dr. King

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HARRY BELAFONTE:

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, talk about left politics and the change of the American landscape...but, that 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. 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 the areas he was not familiar with, it was all fair game. So I hooked up. But I did not anticipate that our relationship would have lasted as long as it did, or that it went as deep as it ultimately did.

Racial Segregation

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INTERVIEWER:

You had a trip to Atlanta in 1962 to Atlanta to perform with Miriam Makeba and others, where there was controversy over segregation in the South. Do you have memories of that?

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HARRY BELAFONTE:



Telling the institutions of segregation in public spaces, especially in the world...I was a performer and a lot of places that I worked where the fee was the most attractive, well, in many instances, places of where the race issue was entrenched: no Blacks could come. Segregation was the order—not just in the South. When I first 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, they didn't want to desegregate the Empire Room, which was the name of the club inside the hotel. So breaking down institution segregation was always part of my mission. When it came time to go to Atlanta, the man spoke very kindly to us, welcomed us. We talked about going into the Civic Auditorium. That it would have to be desegregated. He responded, I'm sure, with some energy on the part of the local voices. But we got that city center open to us. As a matter of fact, I remember when we were performing, the attendees of this institution were busy taking down the for colored only signs, and you could see spots around the auditorium when you stood on stage, these huge patches of white space where all these signs had been taken down in time for the concert. The proceeds from that concert went to the movement. I think what most people have not been able to discern is what you know of Dr. King or what has been revealed about Dr. King is always within the sphere of profound and serious challenges to social behavior.

Dr. King's Sense of Humor

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HARRY BELAFONTE:



But I don't think anyone possessed the capacity for humor. Both in receiving 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 and meeting the challenges of parenthood. Nowhere was that humorous side of him more revealed or revealed as well as it was in a night in 1968, I think it was. Yeah.

Hosting The Tonight Show, 1968

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HARRY BELAFONTE:

I had hosted The Tonight Show for one week. I'd been invited by Johnny Carson and NBC to do it. In the first instance, I had to turn the request down because while I admired Johnny, he was always very, very good to me and and the most, embracing. But to fill that space, no one can do it quite the way Johnny did it. 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 humor in everything, and gave America a really important look at itself in those late night hours through his prism. 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 all you're doing is competing with the tragedies of the 7:00 news. So when they offered me this and 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 Sarnoff 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 want to give the appearance of knowing what the hell I'm talking about. And I can only do that with people with whom I was deeply familiar, who had a handle on issues of the day who would be of interest to the viewer. 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...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, and find another way to open the show. And just as you'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 to apologize for my lateness. He said, but, I'm having quite a time with the transportation world. Our planes are 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. Well, thank you for that. And, what are you doing in New York? Oh, I'm, I'm going on the air. I'm late, you know, and that's all I had to say was that I was late because this young man, put his foot on the gas, and when he hit from the airport towards my getting here, really became, most, disoriented. I'd never been anything that drove as fast as he did. I just finally had to tap on the shoulder and say, young man, I want to thank you for trying



to make me on time, but, I'd rather be known as Doctor King late than be known as the late Doctor King. And, he said that to the audience, and then, of course, it got appropriate laughter and whatnot. Well it 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 more...well he had so many. But this was a wonderful response. He pointed out that he wasn't so much interested in the 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 would have felt his mission was well worth it.

Personal Relationship

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HARRY BELAFONTE:

Dr. 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 that 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. It 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'd drawn 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 has called on me to do. Well, I was God at fault to be with as much regularity as he spoke to Martin, because maybe I could have been more like Martin, more like Harry, had I heard that voice more often. And a lot of times I said to Martin, Where is God now? And, he would look at me and he said, he's taking care of the nonbelievers.

Dr. King's Assassination, 1968

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INTERVIEWER:

We need to talk about Doctor King's death.

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HARRY BELAFONTE:

There's 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. It is one thing for those who invited Doctor King into this 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, 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 would never be fixed and never be repeated. The loss was profound.

Last Visit with Dr. King

00:22:34:00

INTERVIEWER:

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.

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HARRY BELAFONTE:

He 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 a movement of young people in Newark who had threatened to burn the city down. He just said, I'm sorry. I was at a meeting in Jersey, and I set the tone to this group of young men. I am just very saddened that I didn't win them over. They're hell bent on violence and I'm saddened by that. I think in many ways I have more in common with them than I have 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



of the suspicion that we are integrating with all this talk about integration, we are integrating into a burning house. And Andy, who was present at that meeting said it well, that's a rather...we all felt rather bleak assessment from our leader, whom he 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 that Dr, if your suspicion is that we're integrating into a burning house, what are we supposed to do about that ? And Dr. 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 burning down, we're not just going to have to let it burn, we're going to have to put it out and make America whole.

Commitment to Nonviolence

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INTERVIEWER:

How have you maintained your commitment to nonviolence throughout the period when a lot of people have abandoned it, in the Black Power era and otherwise? Is that from Doctor King, or is that your own?

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HARRY BELAFONTE:

I had not before meeting Dr. 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 that if it came to...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 servicemen had always been lynched in America, even while in uniform. The harvest of death that faced Americans at the end of the Second World War was huge in this country. Hundreds of men, some in uniform, were lynched all through the South, which started this major campaign of the anti-lynching bill of 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. We are a minority living 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. I have opted not to get rid of the rage because white America doesn't permit that. It is not enough for me in my 90th year of life, to have lived almost a century with a nation that seems to be in pitch perpetual reconciliation. It's always redeeming itself, because it has been unwilling and incapable of turning off a 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're 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 chooses 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 suffocation that America's more often put in my path than the windows of opportunity. But when Doctor King stepped in, he methodologically 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 under 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 is going to repair these things when they break down? And who's going to supply you with the necessary instruments of destruction? Just from a practical, tactical point of view, your argument holds no, no, no....there's 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. So I began to listen to him and look at all of the advantages of nonviolence. And then he concluded that it in fact was the best way.

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