

MODERN

Harry Belafonte Turn the world around

On March 1 of this year, Harry Belafonte turned 80. He himself hardly seems to really believe it: "80 is a symbol that everything's over," he recently quipped in a newspaper interview, only to add that "in fact, nothing's over," but he did have a little pain in his hips and walking was no longer quite as easy as it once was.

He certainly never had it easy. He was born in New York, his father a sailor from Martinique, his mother and a temporary worker from Jamaica, and at the age of eight he was sent to live with his grandmother in Jamaica. Aged 12, he returned to New York, dropped out of high school at 16 to enlist in the Navy, where he still was at the end of World War II. At the end of the 1940s he studied acting alongside Marlon Brando and Walther Matthau. The latter two were soon known to a broader public, but Belafonte initially did not manage to break through. In order to earn money he started writing songs and working as a singer in a night club. For his first public appearance he was accompanied by the up-and-coming Jazz musicians Charlie Parker, Max Roach and Miles Davis. They were part of the same crowd.

"When I got up to sing, Charlie Parker just walked up, hooked up his horn, and Max Roach got up and just decided to play drums, and a very reluctant Miles Davis got up and played trumpet. I always say I had the most important debut in the history of music. Those guys were the new heroes. They were just of the dawning of modern jazz. They made me more important than I really was."

He turned down an offer from a major label saying he did not want to sing superficial Pop. And then came his first hit in 1953: "Mathilda" – to this day one of the songs he is associated with. His definitive musical breakthrough then came in 1956 with his album "Calypso" and the hit "Day O (Banana Boat Song)". The LP was at no. 1 in the Billboard charts for 31 whole weeks, and was the very first album to sell more than one million copies in a year.

"I'm proud of that song. You've never seen anything until you've seen 25,000 Japanese or Germans singin' 'Day O'!"

Otto Preminger, the director under whom Belafonte worked in 1954 on the film "Carmen Jones", suggested he play one of the two lead roles in his film version of "Porgy and Bess", but Belafonte turned down the offer as he condemned the original screenplay by DuBose Heyward for being racist. "It was a path down which I could then say: We must be far more conscious of what opportunities we chose and select. We have opportunities we can use. And I decided to chose that one." Belafonte henceforth concentrated on his career as a singer, which did not stop him from championing equality and justice. At that time, he enthusiastically supported the ideals espoused by Martin Luther King's, with whom he became friends. He fought alongside King and Bobby Kennedy for an end to racial segregation and he also protested against the Vietnam War. When, after Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968 the civil rights move-

ment became more radical, Belafonte often found himself the butt of criticism in the musicians world. For example, that same year soul singer James Brown called him the "token nigger of Hollywood". But Belafonte refused to be put off. And continued down the path he had chosen. In 1985, he initiated "USA for Africa", a project which, with the song recorded by Michael Jackson ("We Are The World") generated over 44 million dollars from album sales for the starving people of Africa. In 1987, by now four times a father, Belafonte was made a UNICEF ambassador and increasingly started to champion children's rights. He had started tackling the task 30 years earlier when he had founded a clinic in which children from poor families could receive free medical treatment.

Quite in passing, as it were, he won numerous Grammys, and was the first Afroamerican to win an Emmy for his solo TV show "Tonight with Belafonte" (1959). Harry Belafonte has never chosen the easy path and nevertheless, or precisely for that reason, is today one of the best-known and most respected artists world-wide. He still does not mince words. Be it that he strongly criticizes the current US administration and the President, or in the past when he took a stance against apartheid in South Africa and against dictator Pinochet in Chile.

"A good dose of aggravation everyday is the best thing for your health."

Incidentally. How has his hearing fared after all those years making music?

"Through the years and the bigger concerts I was developing a hearing problem. I went to have a hearing test quite late in life and discovered that I was losing hearing. And eventually I had to get hearing assistance. Good hearing is extremely important. It has a lot of impact on personality. Because I noticed that as my voice changed I had to speak more loudly, people thought that I was speaking more aggressively and I didn't mean to be aggressive at all. I just think people should be very, very conscious and protective of their hearing."

The interview is over. I am deeply impressed by Harry Belafonte the human being, by his openness and humor. I could have spent a few more hours chatting to him. I suddenly remember an episode from the Muppet Show with him as the guest star, that I saw back as a kid. One of the songs was "Turn The World Around", and he announced it back then by saying:

"We're here for a very very short time. The question is: Do I know who you are, do you know who I am? Do we care about each other? Cause if we do, together we can turn the world around."

Matthias Westerweller

Photography: Bryan Adams

