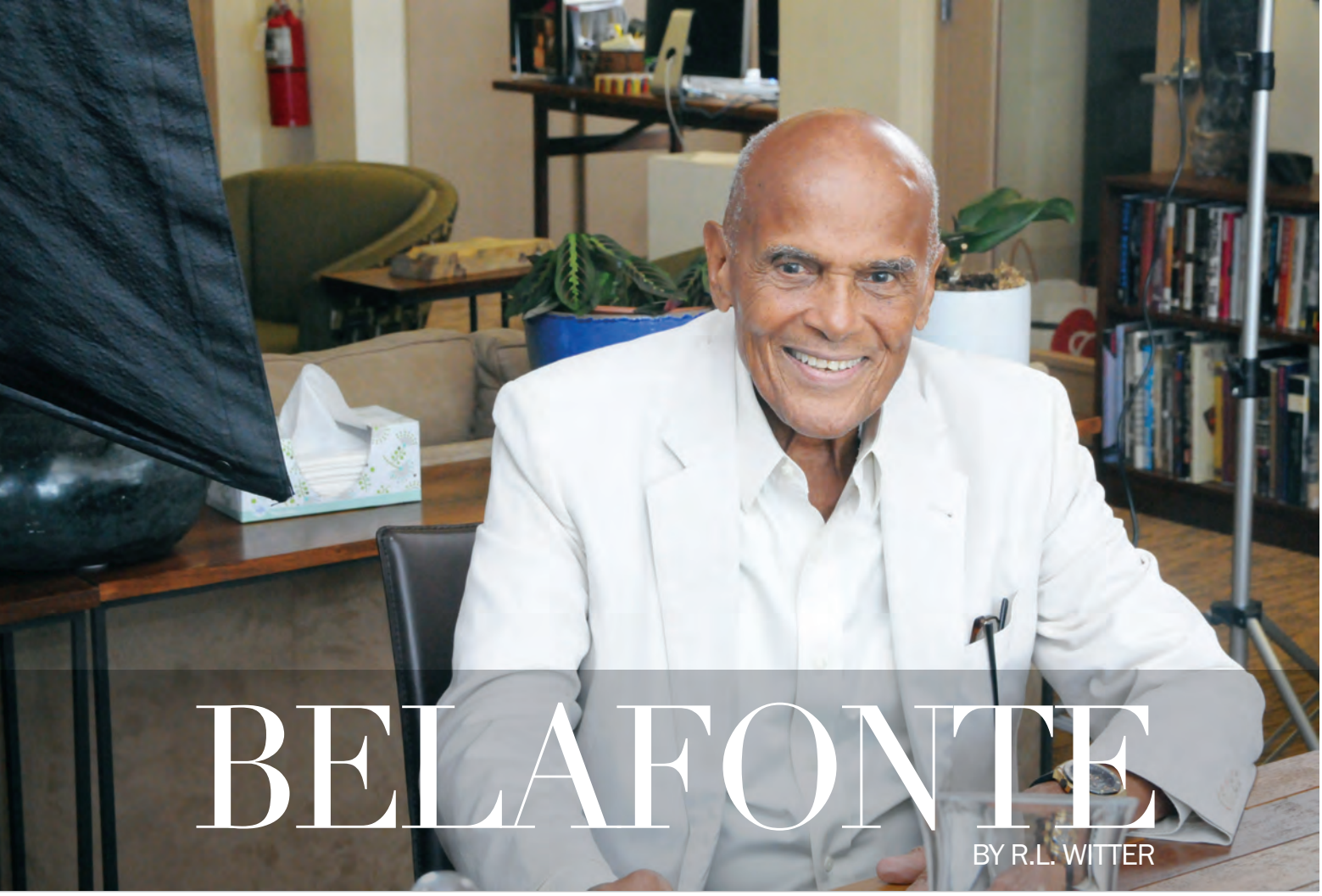

BELAFONTE

BY R.L. WITTER

Bob Gore

He's an award-winning actor, celebrated musical artist and producer, a dedicated activist, and a warm, humble, engaging man. He is Harry Belafonte. The piercing eyes; the distinct, raspy voice; the way he enunciates each word; the passion and wisdom with which he speaks—classic Harry Belafonte. As the world continues to spin and people continue to question inequality, racism, and other social ills, Mr. Belafonte continues his work on behalf of people of every stripe, tribe, and color, and he was generous enough to spend some time talking about his journey thus far, and beyond.

I spoke with Mr. Belafonte on a Monday afternoon. He had been chatting with Philip Agnew, the founder and leader of Dream Defenders, just prior to our interview. I was not surprised, though thoroughly impressed, as many people don't know that Agnew founded Dream Defenders shortly after Trayvon Martin's death in 2012. But there was Harry Belafonte, sharing his wisdom and experience with a new generation. "He's done a lot…" he said of his young friend. "He's part of a legacy of young people who are deeply committed to social change, political change... I let these young people know not only of my existence, but try to make sure they understand the history that preceded them. They don't have to do what we did, but they should know what we did," he explained.

And Mr. Belafonte has done it all. Born in Harlem of Caribbean ancestry, he's seen his share of hard times and struggle. As a young boy he was sent to live with his grandmother in Jamaica when times were tight. "My mother was an immigrant woman. She came here with hopes that opportunity would be extended to her," he recalled. "Instead of finding America to be a place of enormous generosity, she found it to be very punishing… She used to say that poverty was her midwife. It was in watching her and her struggles with poverty that her tenacious capacity to confront injustice wherever she experienced it, that became the basis for my own DNA, politically."

He was arguably the first superstar performer to use his celebrity to bolster causes and bring about change in the

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world. He became the first person to ever have a platinum record when his album Calypso sold more than one million copies. This was in 1956, when there were no downloads or digital copies and people had to actually leave their homes to buy music. It was the days of Jim Crow, segregation, and second-class citizenship. And yet somehow, Harry Belafonte was on television, was in Hollywood movies, and was breaking records selling records. For many that might have been enough. But not for him; he had a calling, a duty, and the memory of his mother's words that pushed him to do more.

While some may only know Belafonte from movies like *Carmen Jones, Island in the Sun,* and *Uptown Saturday Night* or his musical hits "Day-O" and "Jump in the Line," others know him as a political heavyweight of legendary proportions. He's done and continues to do so much. "The generosity of the poor," he explained, "that generosity is part of my DNA. The minute I get something it's worthy of sharing and it's shared right away. Let's divvy it up and spread it around so that we can keep the body of our movement alive and in touch with what needs to be done and experienced." It is through his incredible philanthropy that millions of people around the world enjoy a better life today.

In the 1960s he financed Freedom Rides, financially supported Rev. Dr. King's family, bankrolled the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and helped organize the March on Washington. He was later named a cultural advisor for the Peace Corps by President John F. Kennedy. He broke barriers on television in the 1970s; traveled the world as a UNICEF Ambassador, produced "We Are the World," performed at *Live Aid,* raised money and awareness for children and AIDS in Africa in the 1980s. In the 1990s he shed light on Rwanda's struggle and raised more money for AIDS and children's education in Africa. The 2000s have seen him as an ACLU celebrity ambassador; the

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L–R: Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafone, and Charlton Heston during the 1960s.

leader of Bread and Roses, the cultural arm of 1199/SEU New York's Health and Human Service Union; and the recipient of several humanitarian awards.

Mr. Belafonte fondly reminisced about his childhood, remembering when he first became aware of unions through the presence of Pullman porters. "I remember big parades on Africa Day and Negro Day when I was a kid in Harlem. I could not wait for the contingent of Red Caps! They'd be walking, brilliantly dressed with their shiny buttons and I'd said, 'one day I want to be one of them.' I wanted to be a porter." He went on to mention people like A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin and how they worked together to mount the March on Washington. It was like the best history lesson ever taught, by the man who helped make that history and recalls it in vivid detail.

"We've got to stop thinking—as the opposition has forced us to think—that somehow, we are reaching back again into the civil rights movement and recreating it," Belafonte cautioned. "That movement never died; nor will it… What we're doing is reaching to the next stage of the liberation movement of black people since the advent of slavery. We've been here with Frederick Douglass, we've been here with Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer. Each generation, in being responsible for itself, is a necessary extension." He continued: "We go into moments of hiatus, calm, and rethinking in our movements—whether it was

slavery, the migrant era in America, or the industrial workers being organized. Each one of those things in their time and of their generation was the next logical extension of what had to be done to liberate ourselves from the cruelty of the free enterprise system."

In addition to his work for civil rights, social justice, combatting poverty, and many other causes, Mr. Belafonte has always valued culture and even had a hand in bringing hip hop to mainstream America. "I've always believed that the one gift they've never been able to take away from people who are oppressed is their voice," he explained when asked why he produced the 1984 film *Beat Street,* the first big budget film to highlight rap, graffiti, and breakdancing as parts of a larger hip hop culture. "Music has always been the metaphor for the language of rebellion that we couldn't write…I also understood that the enemy consistently took back our base that we had and exploited it to their own advantage, and that soon, they would be doing that with hip hop. I felt we should get in as quickly as possible and establish an image of an alternative choice, to do things in a way other than what it would eventually turn out to be by what happened when they commercially turned hip hop into a weapon against liberation, rather than a tool for it." Belafonte is also credited with taking hip hop to Cuba and incorporating rap music into Cuban culture in 1999. "The little bit of good that *Beat Street* did and the artists that I've met like Common and Chuck D.—they are very political. They believe in their art and try to make a difference. So that's what I saw when I looked at hip hop and first experienced it."

At 88 years-old, Belafonte is more passionate and well-informed than some people half his age. He continues to work with various organizations in his unending quest to improve the lives of people of color and the under-served around the world. He shared with me that he had recently read *The New Jim Crow* and *Roy DeCarava: a Retrospective,* and that he had enjoyed *12 Years a Slave* so much that he and Steve McQueen are currently discussing a project on

With Khalil Muhammad, Ph.D at the Schomburg Bob Gore

At Abyssinian Church, Harlem Bob Gore

Belafonte's mentor, Paul Robeson. He has also secured the rights to *King Leopold's Ghost,* a historical book that explores the exploitation of Congo, and Martin Scorcese and HBO have committed to doing ten hours on the colonizing of Africa in a dramatic presentation. He gave a shout out to the artists at the Schomburg, and chuckled as he mentioned that he and Cornel West are currently discussing Ta-Nehisi Coates being heralded as possibly the next James Baldwin. "I say, let's not debate whether he is today's Baldwin or not; let's discuss the work!"

Having revealed to me that the only bucket list item he is unlikely to accomplish is space travel, I had to ask what still keeps him going after all that he has seen and done. As quick as a flash and without hesitation he responded:

> *What keeps me going is simple: poverty. It still exists, it permeates, it still crucifies. It's still the central theme for unbridled free enterprise . . . When you study economics they say that you need to have cheap markets in order for our system to survive. Cheap markets, if you put a face on them, mean that somebody's got to be poor. Somebody's got to be broke; somebody's got to be suffering; somebody's got to be in prison; somebody has to have their life upside down. And as long as that exists, wherever I go I make sure I identify with those who are caught in the systems of poverty. In not only keeps me informed, it keeps my thinking very current. It helps validate who I am and what I do, and what I think and the choices that I've made for alliances in my life. I think that if it had not been for poverty and how my mother chose to confront it, I wouldn't have become the rebel with a cause that I am because my mother often said to us, 'never go to bed at night knowing that you could have done something during the day that ended injustice in some aspect of its existence in which you didn't take advantage of it.' It's morally unacceptable and it is politically and socially tragic.*■