

“Active Voices”

Mahalia Jackson’s gospel anthems and Harry Belafonte’s interpretations of calypso music took on special relevance for the civil-rights movement.

By David J. Garrow, *Wall Street Journal*, August 8-9, 2026, p. C12.

Mahalia Jackson: Moving On Up A Little Higher

By Timothy B. Tyson & Mary D. Williams

Liveright, 232 pages, \$28.99

Daylight Come: Harry Belafonte and the World He Made

By Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

Penguin, 374 pages, \$30

Both Mahalia Jackson and Harry Belafonte burst upon the national music scene during the 1950s. Jackson (1911-72), “the greatest gospel singer of all time,” as Timothy B. Tyson and Mary D. Williams rightly call her in “Mahalia Jackson, Moving on Up a Little Higher,” emerged out of Chicago’s black churches to widespread fame. She had moved to the city at age 20, following a New Orleans childhood during which, while being raised by an aunt, she “suffered beatings that left emotional scars.” Music was Jackson’s escape—“I just knew I wanted to sing.” Mr. Tyson and Ms. Williams, who both teach at Duke University, note that Jackson’s rise was aided by a close, longstanding alliance with congressman William L. Dawson, a prominent figure in the black Chicago Democratic machine.

A 1952 appearance on Ed Sullivan’s television show “launched her mainstream success,” according to the authors; over the balance of that decade she became the black performer “most frequently appearing on American television.” A remunerative European tour that same year proved more joyous than some of Jackson’s Southern U.S. travels

during that age of segregation. Listeners loved her signature song, “Move On Up a Little Higher,” but “as soon as I walk off that stage,” she once said, “I’m just another colored person. Where can I stay at night?”

Belafonte (1927-2023) too, had a tough childhood, enduring abuse from his often-absent Jamaican-born father. Dyslexic, Harry dropped out of school in the ninth grade, joined the Navy, and served two weeks’ military imprisonment before returning to New York City to work odd jobs and scrape by. He drifted into Harlem theatrical work and met a fellow 19-year-old who would become a lifelong friend—Sidney Poitier. Belafonte began singing at downtown nightclubs with a repertoire of Caribbean folk songs adopted from the Greenwich Village music scene. By age 25 Belafonte was touring nationally, and one listener, the film impresario Otto Preminger, cast him as the male lead in his 1954 movie, “Carmen Jones.”

Belafonte’s career took off. His 1956 album, “Calypso,” featuring the song “Day-O,” spent 31 weeks at the top of the charts and became “the first million-selling LP in history,” Joshua Jelly-Schapiro reports in “Daylight Come: Harry Belafonte and the World He Made.” This made Belafonte “bigger than Elvis,” the author boldly claims. While “the vibrating clarity of Harry’s voice” suggested “a fantasy Antillean world easy on the ears and minds of Americans,” he writes, the singer’s tight black pants and unbuttoned shirt were also “key to the appeal that Belafonte cultivated for the mostly white crowds at his concerts.” Belafonte knew that being “black, but . . . not *too* black” was essential to “the sex appeal I brought” to his white female fans.

Mr. Jelly-Schapiro emphasizes that Belafonte’s “Caribbean roots were inseparable from his American success,” making him “an erotic symbol” who was “far more palatable to whites than were black entertainers descended from America’s slaves.” Barack Obama’s mother once told her young son that Harry Belafonte was “the best-

looking man on the planet,” and Mr. Jelly-Schapiro correctly notes that Mr. Obama’s “graceful mien and popularity among American liberals” are reminiscent of Belafonte’s own.

But Belafonte’s celebrity exacted a toll, as he documented in a late-life autobiography that Mr. Jelly-Schapiro draws on heavily. “I collapsed mentally,” he confessed to an interviewer in 1957. Belafonte began psychotherapy, initially with Janet Kennedy, an analyst whose two successive husbands, Stanley Levison and Jay Richard Kennedy would each become significant figures in Belafonte’s life. Belafonte “often visited Janet Kennedy’s couch in the late afternoon, when their sessions could segue easily into cocktails and dinner” at the Kennedys’ elegant apartment. “Harry’s psychic debt to Janet,” Mr. Jelly-Schapiro writes, “quickly grew deep,” and soon Jay Kennedy—a name the man had adopted years earlier, after leaving the Communist Party—became Belafonte’s domineering manager. Later, an angry falling out severed both relationships.

In 1957 Belafonte divorced his wife, Marguerite, who already was raising their two children single-handedly, and married Julie Robinson, a white dancer. By then the nascent Southern black-freedom movement was emerging. Mahalia Jackson visited Montgomery, Ala., to help mark the first anniversary of that black community’s remarkably successful campaign to desegregate city buses. That protest’s young leader, Martin Luther King Jr., also contacted Belafonte. The ex-communist Levison became King’s closest white confidant and adviser.

Both “Mahalia Jackson, Moving on Up a Little Higher” and “Daylight Come” strive to make as much as possible of their subjects’ contributions to the civil-rights struggle, and both overreach. Mr. Jelly-Schapiro’s lightly sourced summary of these developments badly garbles the complicated history, and “Daylight Come” makes no mention of Jay Kennedy’s subsequent role as the Central Intelligence

Agency's top source on the civil-rights movement: He would regale agency officers with notional stories of Belafonte and Levison as competing subversive influences on movement activists.

Mr. Tyson and Ms. Williams correctly declare that Jackson's "astonishing musical success completely overshadowed her political life"—and rightly so: While Jackson raised tens of thousands of dollars for the movement by performing at dozens of benefits, the authors' claim that she was "one of the crucial civil rights figures of the twentieth century" is risible.

By 1966 Jackson was a close personal friend of King, who often visited her home, but her deep ties to Chicago machine stalwart Dawson and her "old friend" Mayor Richard J. Daley stood in stark tension with her efforts to help "lift up" King's unsuccessful campaign against the pervasive civic racism that profoundly harmed black Chicagoans' lives. The two most comprehensive histories of the Chicago Freedom Movement—"Northern Protest" (1993) by James R. Ralph Jr. and "Confronting the Color Line" by Alan B. Anderson and George W. Pickering (1986)—each mention Jackson only three times.

"Mahalia Jackson" is otherwise usually sure-footed on civil-rights history. The same cannot be said for "Daylight Come," which features many glaring factual errors. These range from inconsequential—Belafonte's longtime Manhattan home was on the fifth floor, not the eighth floor, of 300 West End Ave.—to profound: As a senator, John F. Kennedy did not vote against the Civil Rights Act of 1957, he voted for it.

Mr. Jelly-Schapiro accurately calls Belafonte "the crucial bridge" between Southern civil-rights groups and Hollywood stars, and he, too, raised tens of thousands of dollars for the movement. But Belafonte was neither "a leader of the movement" nor King's "best friend." "Daylight Come" also features some infelicitous descriptions. King

was not “plodding and peaceful in affect.” Nor should the rural Alabama citizens blocked from voting by overtly racist registrars be considered an “illiterate underclass.”

It seems a bit uncharitable to label Belafonte “a debauched showman” in the mid-1960s, when he became a Las Vegas habitué with an affinity for “adult mischief.” But Mr. Jelly-Schapiro does not soft-pedal “the intemperate radicalism” that characterized his subject’s later years, as when he called Gen. Colin Powell “a house slave” for the presidents he served. “Daylight Come” also acknowledges what the author calls Belafonte’s longstanding “weakness for charismatic leaders whose left-wing verbiage belied darker sides,” such as his “long and significant friendship” with the Cuban dictator, Fidel Castro. Visiting Cuba annually, Harry loved “the peace of Havana’s streets”—not surprising in an oppressive police state.

Mahalia Jackson died at only 60; at her funeral Belafonte mourned her as “the single most powerful black woman in America.” Belafonte lived to 96. His songs may be fading from American memory. Jackson’s have not. She, like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith who came before her, remains an enduring touchstone of black musical culture.

Mr. Garrow’s books include “Bearing the Cross,” a biography of Martin Luther King Jr.