Harry Belafonte, Race, and the Politics of Success

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Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to examine the relationship between race, masculinity, and the politics of success as they relate to the figure of Harry Belafonte. During the 1950s and 1960s he was, by all accounts, a wildly successful performer and, due to his celebrity, avoided many of indignities which plagued the daily lives of most African Americans. Although this was typically taken as a sign of race's declining importance in American culture, the varied reaction to his success show that even 'success stories' of integration during this period were far from clear cut.

Résumé

Le but de cette thèse est d'examiner les rapports entre la race, la masculinité et le mécanisme du succès relatifs à la personne d'Harry Belafonte. Durant les années 50 et 60, il était, au dire de tous, un interprète à grand succès, et grâce à sa célébrité, il évita plusieurs de ces indignités qui harcelaient alors la vie quotidienne de la plupart des Afro américains. Même si cela fut typiquement interprété comme un signe de la diminution de l'importance de la race au sein de la culture américaine, les diverses réactions provoquées par sa célébrité démontrent que même à cette époque, les "histoires à succès" dans le domaine de l'intégration étaient loin d'être concluantes.

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Chapter One: Harry & Lena

On March 22, 1970, Harry Belafonte and Lena Horne appeared in a television special sponsored by the Fabergé cosmetics company and produced by Belafonte himself. Entitled simply "Lena & Harry," the special created almost no stir and the recording of it made available resulted in no hit singles.[1] Although this lack of public excitement for the show might be taken as a sign that Belafonte and Horne had drifted off into the grey-zone of public celebrity, these are probably the wrong criteria upon which to judge it. At this point in their careers they had achieved a status that did not tie their success so directly to the pop charts and spikes in Nielsen ratings. They had become adult pop stars who performed for a 'general' audience; they were professional entertainers.[2]

"Lena & Harry" was positively received the next morning by long-time television critic Jack Gould in the *New York Times* and the grounds upon which he gave his approval sketch out a set of criteria used for judgment which clearly support this assessment. Of the special's two stars, Gould remarks

> As probably the two outstanding black

[1] The music from the special was released as *Faberge Presents Music from the Television Special Harry & Lena* (RCA 1970). I thank Nuala Lawlor for bringing this recording to my attention.

[2] The special was aired live at 8pm on a Sunday. Such a placement in the schedule bespeaks both their stature in the industry and the audience they were expected to reach. The Sunday evening time slot had, at least since Ed Sullivan, been associated with family entertainment and variety shows.

> that can be savoured by all and has nothing to do with rock, Mr. Belafonte and Miss Horne need bow to no one in the mastery of their craft.[1]

In locating the performance generically, Gould explicitly opposes Belafonte's and Horne's performances to "rock" with the implication that, although rock music dominates the charts, it is simply a fad followed by a limited group of enthusiasts compared to music of a more general worth. Belafonte and Horne's music develops out of a more stable element in American popular music and culture, a culture of "entertainment" less partisan than the hit parade.

Although this thesis focuses on the late 1950s and early 1960s, this performance from 1970 will provide a way of getting at the issues which will be addressed over the course of the pages that follow. Harry Belafonte, an often overlooked popular performer, is a figure through which it is possible to analyse and discuss the way in which a particular set of meanings related to African American identity were constructed and deployed in American popular culture during the middle part of this century. It is not, however, the more confrontational sites of the civil rights movement that this points to, but the less vulcanic cultural landscape inhabited by the American middle class.

There is a fundamental disjuncture between popular representations of African American culture and economic

[1] All references are to Jack Gould, "TV Review: Lena Horne, Belafonte offer Poignant Hour", *The New York Times*, March 23, 1970, p 83.

manifested in conjunction with discourses which police African American sexuality. This dynamic is starkly apparent in the career of Harry Belafonte, both in the way he has been represented and received by the mainstream, which is to say the market identified with the white middle class, and the tensions which accompanied his reception within the black middle class.

Implicit within this discussion is the history of certain forms of African American masculinity and manhood. By tracing the career of Belafonte, we are confronted with another version of the question "What does it mean to be a black man?" While no attempt to answer this impossible question will be offered, some of the terrain upon which it was debated will be looked at. I believe that questions about gender roles and sexual identity have often served to articulate discomfort concerning the increased social and economic mobility of blacks in the post-war period. Taken together, these elements have played a crucial role in defining authentic 'blackness' and the 'true' black man. They also define the politics of success in American culture.

It is not simply that men of colour are not typically represented as well-to-do members of the community, but that even when such figures are presented to the public their reception betrays the social and economic inequalities which continue to constitute the 'colour line' in American society. This has often meant obscuring realities behind idealised representations, or

American identity. Both of these trends have often drawn on a stock of preconceptions about black men and their sexual behaviour in order to express and support such arguments. It will be the aim of this introduction to explore the way in which this peculiar situation is manifested in "Lena & Harry", and it will be the aim of this thesis to examine the way in which these tensions first developed in Belafonte's career in the mid-to-late 1950s.

In the *Times* review, Jack Gould approaches the special both as a commercial enterprise and as a form of entertainment. He ends his review by offering the following comments about the special's production

> The production was designed and executed by Mr. Belafonte's production firm. Perhaps that accounted for its magnificent quality and renewed the validity of the argument that blacks should have some measure of unhampered access to the airwaves, and it is to the credit of A.B.C. that it occurred.

Gould's comments are an interesting spin upon the politics of economic autonomy that had become increasingly prominent in connection with the rise of black nationalism. It is, however, significantly different in both style and substance from the firebrand rhetoric of Stokely Carmichael or H. Rap Brown (see Carmichael and Hamilton 1967).

Gould takes pains to establish Belafonte and Horne as representatives of African America collectively. The two singers "picked selections that reflect the

Gould's comments about the performance, references are made to the realities of black life that are testified to through the two singers and their behaviour on stage. Even Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Down on the Corner" is turned into a vignette about "the second home of so many black youngsters." It is from this perceived base of racial solidarity, reliant as it is on rather stereotypical kinds of African American behaviour, that Belafonte's production firm is taken as a success story from the increasingly vital struggle for black business across the country. It is, however, a different sort of economic venture from the urban cooperatives that were being advocated as part of the 'black power' agenda.

This divergence from the politics of economic guerrilla warfare becomes clearer as more is made of the degree of professionality with which these two performers handled the show. Gould writes: "The hour was, without the slightest reservation, one of the most poignant, dignified, professional and touching presentations that the TV medium has known." As was noted above, the two singers are praised for "the mastery of their craft." What is interesting, however, is that Gould's comments about Belafonte's and Horne's professional demeanour are linked with a certain degree of restraint and control in addressing racial issues. At one point Gould writes, "It relied on the pure merit of performances and lyrics and entailed no preachment or the slightest suggestion that the fate of blacks

taste made vital points on today's agonies without overtly calling attention to them."

It is not difficult to see that there are severe contradictions at the heart of this approach to racial politics and economic activity. The call for greater black involvement with the production of television is tempered by Gould's celebration of subtlety and understatement when dealing with racial issues. It is not unfair to say, in exact opposition to more radical civil rights movements, that race is significant for Gould only in so far as it can be evacuated of significance. It is deployed only in order to show that, ultimately, skin colour does not matter and to reassert the belief that market-based democracy defends rather than diffuses civil liberties.

The attraction to this point of view on the part of the white middle classes, its unacknowledged source, is not difficult to explain. Having just finished a decade which was scarred by the eruption of racial strife across the nation, both in northern cities and across the southern states, there was a desire on the part of this group to move away from open confrontation with problems that caused such deep-rooted turmoil. It was, after all, in 1970 that Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote a memorandum to President Nixon suggesting that race as a political issue could benefit from a period of "benign neglect" (quoted in Cose 1993:3).

Opinion surveys taken at the time reveal that

the vast majority of whites (85%) cared little if "a Negro with the same income and education as theirs moved into their block" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997: 221). However, there were numerous other surveys that suggested that the openness regarding racial issues was not so cut and dried. In the wake of the riots that plagued American cities in the middle sixties (1969), 28% of whites believed that the unrest had little to do with civil disobedience but was "mainly a way of looting." This complemented the view held by 50% of those questioned in the same survey, which called for greater police presence in the black community and a tougher stand on 'law and order' (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997: 171).

At the heart of these poll results was the view that the civil rights movement had benefited blacks but abused whites. The time for large-scale intervention into the inner cities by government was over, halted by white resentment at money "wasted" on urban (read "black") problems. "Are there no poor whites?" a future member of the Newark city council remarked in 1970, "The Negroes get all the anti-poverty money" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997: 173). Older views about the widespread criminality of African Americans remained, and perhaps even spread in the late sixties and early seventies in spite of the 'success' of integration.

In line with this view, Gould's piece suggests that the merit of Belafonte and Horne's special was that it

Belafonte as a member of the American entrepreneurial class. For this reason, "Lena & Harry" was a double success. It was both an entertaining hour of television and a topical performance which did not pique either white liberal guilt or racially based resentment for government programs which dealt with so-called 'black problems.' It offered a quiet sort of politics.

In the discontinuity between Gould's reaction to Belafonte and the white popular sentiment about blacks it is possible to delineate one of the uses to which mainstream America put the image of the black middle class. The symbol of the independent and well-to-do black man (Belafonte) is presented as a means to contain the fear and guilt that white America continued to feel in the presence of black skin. It is the illusion of integration without real social change that is maintained.

The show kicks off with a duet called "Walk a Mile in my Shoes," which for the length of the song seems to be an angry call for greater understanding concerning what remain vaguely defined issues. The music, which begins with a pronounced jazz organ lead, slowly builds to a horn and tambourine driven crescendo common to the glossy soul of the period. The song culminates with a trumped-up finale sung in tight harmony by Belafonte and Horne. Its musical references are clearly to the late-model soul being produced by Chips Moman in Memphis (who had recently lent his expertise to Elvis Presley

It is difficult for the modern listener to come away from this song without feeling that 'Walk a mile' is not 'right' for either Belafonte or Horne. While part of this may arise from the quality of the material, this is not the whole story. A large part of the performance's unsatisfactory nature arises from the clash between the arrangements and the vocal style of the two singers. From the way in which Horne and Belafonte interrelate on stage to the cadence of their voices and the way they climb the musical scale, both of them seem over-produced and out of step with their ersatz-soul backing. The song fits them like a tailor-made suit made for somebody else.

Another element of this uneasiness, not unrelated to this stylistic clash, may be the discrepancy between Belafonte's and Horne's histories as performers and the material they have chosen. They had matured and come to first fame in the supper clubs, cabarets, and Broadway stage of the 1950s (see Shaw 1961 and Horne 1965). This system for artistic development had almost ceased to exist even by the time of this recording. The last time that the two performers had collaborated was a 1958 recording of *Porgy & Bess*, Gershwin's folk opera. However, in spite of numerous changes in New York nightlife and taste in popular music, they remain identified with this period and these forms of expression.

Ultimately, they are not 'right' for this song, not

contextual circumstances. This kind of incongruity speaks to the specificity of performance and codes of performance, the way in which they are rooted in particular times, places, and cultural contexts and are articulated through constructs like genre, style and biography. The effect of the relationship between these signs which organize performance and individual performances is, moreover, one that is shared with, if not constructed by, audiences. These connections build through processes which are both intentional and which develop less purposefully, through habit or repetition for example. The result is that Horne and Belafonte are already connected in the public's mind to certain modes and genres of artistic expression, modes and genres which are in conflict with this performance.

More than simply organizing the generic and aesthetic characteristics of their repertoire and recordings, such connections also implicate performers in the class and gender relations as well as the racial politics of a period. Belafonte and Horne performing a song with connections to contemporary soul music and lyrics that suggest political engagement is clearly an act of social significance, if only because it involves the transgression of previously assumed boundaries. This is a complex way of saying what is usually expressed in a single sentence or phrase in everyday conversation (see Feld 1994). The difficulty is determining what sort of act it is, to whom it signified and how. Gould's

white middle classes in the late sixties and early seventies, but there exist others. It is not as simple as saying this is a song about "race" or "community," there are worlds lurking behind such explanations.

Today, the record seems like little more than a curiosity from the grey-area between high-kitsch and collectible nostalgia, one of a thousand releases gathering dust in used record bins across North America. Belafonte is known best for his *Calypso* album and the rest of his career is treated as a footnote. Lena Horne is best remembered for over-the-top versions of showtunes and standards. This recording is simply another artifact in the voluminous history of popular music and public performance which deserves little or no attention compared to other more significant events.

However, to see the record simply as the outcome of two aging stars attempt to capture the 'now sound' of popular music is an oversight, not because it is untrue, but because it leaves so much unsaid. Such a pat interpretation of the song is unreflectively reliant on innumerable narratives which deploy a problematically racialised and gender- and class-biased logic. It effectively separates this recording from its social context, not in the name of formal autonomy, but due to the flagrant irrelevance it ascribes to this song. However, this record, like every cultural artifact, is embedded in the thickness of its historical moment.

Jack Gould's review offers a reading of the special

importance behind a liberal view of market democracy. The specificity of Belafonte's blackness is repressed as he is constructed as a cultural entrepreneur and stage performer. His cultural identity is secondary to his economic activity. Furthermore, this seems to operate in concert with the diffusion of sexual tensions, the management of his masculinity. Contemporary estimates of Belafonte and the musical milieu in which he worked are very much products of this view.

Today, the dominant reading of Belafonte's career is that his success was one that transpired, for the most part, beyond the concerns and interests of the black community, in a vaguely defined, white-identified, "mainstream". While given a place in histories of cinema because he was one of the first black men to appear in interracial, big-budget films, the tendency has been to assess his work as mealy-mouthed expressions of racial politics (Null 1975, Leab 1975, Bogle 1995). When Hollywood needed a safe representative for African-Americans, Belafonte was waiting in the wings. Belafonte was a watered-down black man for popular consumption.

More substantial evidence of this view can be found in the treatment given his singing career. In most histories of African-American music he is not usually mentioned, or if he is, only in passing. Belafonte's reputation as a singer, when it is discussed, is criticised in a manner similar to his films. His recordings are treated as ersatz versions of authentic

and Easy Listening musics, his resemblances to Steve and Eydie much better documented than those to Charlie Parker or Little Richard. His music has been more prevalent in the recent films of Tim Burton than those of Spike Lee.[4] In sum, the urgency with which Belafonte approaches the racial strife of the period seem to pale in comparison to the soul music of Marvin Gaye (*What's Going On,*) Stevie Wonder (*Innervisions*) or James Brown.

The connections that are made, and those that are not, between music and social action speak to the way in which particular genres and the performers that work within them, are politicised. Gould's review represents an approach to music which, while acknowledging links to 'black music', effectively dissolves the import of such a category. An idealised image of race in America, where skin colour is subjugated to the open market, is the end-product. In the process, the very real disadvantages of African Americans within the economic and social structure of the United States are denied. The readings of his career that have ensued over the last thirty years have reflected this pattern, seeing in his career the wholesale commodification of 'blackness.'

At one point in 'Walk a Mile,' Belafonte sings "There are people on reservations, and out in the ghetto/ And, you know, brother,/ there but for the grace of god go you and I." He then launches into the chorus, which admonishes his 'brothers and sisters' for

[4] Belafonte's "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)" (Belafonte 1956) and "Jump in the Line" (Belafonte 1957) both appear in Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1990).

understanding his problems. If the song were not being performed by two prominent African Americans in a genre commonly associated with 'black music', it would be difficult to read it as anything but a defence of class interests rooted firmly in liberal bourgeois ideology of autonomy. However, the song *is* a "soul" song performed by two black celebrities and, therefore, the intimations to racial politics are difficult to avoid.

Coming from Belafonte and Horne, the song seems to suggest that the pressures and difficulties of being black and affluent in America are as restrictive as those faced by the hungry and dispossessed in the ghetto. Moreover, the repeated use of 'brother' and 'sister' cannot help but suggest that those who make such judgments about the singers are themselves African American. What is most strange, however, is that the lyrics are addressed to those very people with whom Belafonte and Horne identify in the song (Belafonte sings "you and I...",) in other words affluent Americans.

The song develops a situation in which two affluent African Americans defend themselves from their social and economic equals. While ostensibly pleading for understanding between people, the song advances a stridently individualist cultural politic and, by extension, a tenacious defence of the black middle class and the values of bourgeoisie living. This is an essentially reflexive criticism that is being expressed.

Gould in the *Times*.

Although there was no explicit theme given to the special, the performances all focus on the urban environment and also highlight Belafonte's and Horne's blackness. It is not difficult to see this special in the same cultural moment as James Brown's "Say it Loud! I'm Black and I'm Proud," Melvin Van Peebles *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassssss Song* (1971), or, perhaps more directly, Della Reese's *Black is Beautiful* (1970). Together they represent the explosion of black nationalism into mainstream American popular culture. However, as already noted, it would be difficult to argue that Belafonte and Horne form Reno's counterpart to the Black Panther's urban revolution.

This is evident in Belafonte's performance of "Ghetto," a song that nostalgically celebrates the joys of ghetto life and is undoubtedly the counterpoint to the special's opener. In spite of Belafonte's fond recollection of jukeboxes playing and neighbours fussin', the song ends with the promise that, if there is a "hereafter," there aren't going to be any more ghettos. In spite of the social and economic solidarity that the ghetto offers, and the song praises, heaven is going to be a white-picket place. The promise of economic affluence is deployed as a direct analogue to heavenly salvation in much the same way that the loss of such affluence in "Walk a Mile in my Shoes" is constructed as a sign of God's ill-will, damnation.

position as it had evolved since the post-war period. This social group forms the necessary complement to Gould's de-racialized liberal mainstream. While the black middle class shared a desire for economic security and social achievement with their white counterparts, the call for a more subtle approach to race suggested by Moynihan, Gould and others must have seemed absurd given how far there still remained to travel towards a superficially fair, let alone equal, society.

The middle class that is referred to is not, however, that which was dissected by E. Franklin Frazier in his landmark study *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957). It is a different group who had ascended the social ladder in the period following World War Two. The migration of blacks from rural to urban settings and the mass migration of workers from the south to the north (roughly 3 million between 1940 and 1960) radically altered traditional patterns of African American settlement (Kronus 1971). Simultaneous with these shifts was a rapid increase in the number of blacks that possessed white-collar jobs, from 1 in 10 to nearly one quarter of all African Americans (Thurnstrom and Thurnstrom 1997: 186, Landry 1987: 86). The black middle class more than doubled its size in less than twenty years.

As these statistics suggest, most of this group had only recently ascended to the "successful" world of middle class life and thus often retained direct

from the urban blue-collar milieu, this group were subject to criticisms about the kind of people they were becoming and want to become. While they were black, they definitely didn't see like 'brothers and sisters.'

Apropos this crisis of authenticity, this historical circumstance was also an occasion through which the "true" meaning of what it meant to be black was debated. As Charles T. Banner-Haley has recently asked, referring to 'new' black middle class,

> Who is authentically black? Those who are immiserated in poverty, victimized by a social system that seems to have relegated them to a perilous existence fraught with crime, drugs and death at an early age? Or are the authentic voices those who have "gotten over," those who have made it successfully through the system and, while still conscious of their heritage, are more concerned that there families remain secure...? (Banner Hartley xi-xii)

The power of this debate stemmed from both a long-standing tension between community and individual achievement and from the fact that these questions had come to centre around and be read through the potent signifier of racial identity and 'authentic blackness.'

It is, therefore, impossible to take stock of Belafonte without also making note of nationalistic critics like Leroi Jones and the Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s. In their writing, this group of thinkers had closed ranks around certain forms of expression (specifically music) and performance. In the process they excluded performers like Belafonte and

readings of Belafonte are not only inflected by attempts to integrate black bodies and black culture into the "mainstream" devoid of any specificity, but are also refracted through the construction of a strong and independent African American cultural identity which looked on such performances with suspicion.

Implicit within the elaboration of black identity by the Black Aesthetic movement is the strict regulation of sexual behaviour. The privileged musical genres of Soul and Jazz developed very particular codes for male behaviour with regard to performances both on and off-stage. Belafonte, whose roots lay in other genres, operated in contradiction to these codes. This dynamic was articulated primarily around the idea of 'entertainment' and its problematic connections to the legacy of minstrelsy. Belafonte, praised for his "bone-deep showmanship" ("Wild About Harry" 1957), performed in contradiction to what became the acceptable models for male behaviour. By policing the sexuality of black men, linking it to a certain kind of emotional control and libidinal excess, these critics do as much to delimit the significance of affluent black men as Gould in his *Times* review.

The tension between Belafonte's mainstream orientation and the generic positioning he adopts in these songs result in the self-criticising approach that the songs cited take. The radical politic that each song seems to espouse is diffused before they conclude and a

ghetto life, but cannot avoid wishing it away by the song's conclusion; "Walk a Mile in my Shoes" can defend the middle class, but it also laments the lack of community that comfort has brought. Both songs approach the same questions and both leave these questions unresolved.

The tension felt by this group, between the need to transcend the limits of liberal reform in order to fundamentally change the racialised class hierarchy of the United States and a desire to achieve and prosper within this self-same social structure, has been called the "paradox of African American rebellion" by Cornel West (1993). The opposing ends of this ideological continuum are constructed around the ideas of being a true member of the African American community and choosing the path of economic achievement and middle class living. The two cannot meet and be combined in harmony.

The fact remains that Belafonte and Horne's performances here effectively span the generic and ideological worlds of both Gould and Jones. It is a part of the middle class world which attempts to diffuse the importance of race through the absolute logic of capital. However, it must also be considered a part of the long history of black music in the United States. Today, Belafonte's music does not signify a strong racial politics, due to the synchronised, yet opposing ideological trajectories of both black nationalist and

called the 'pincer movement of exclusion' (Clarke Personal Conversation). This does not mean that it says nothing of importance about race in America.

The more general purpose of this project might be to offer a more equitable assessment of the black middle class. The effects of overlooking the music and films of Belafonte and others like him are more serious than the simple neglect of a few singers, icons, and curious knickknacks. The ultimate result is the partial erasure from the historical record of an entire social group and their cultural milieu. When not directly oppressed or exploited, the black middle class has been disparaged or ignored since its arrival on the historical stage soon after emancipation. By studying Belafonte's career and the milieu in which he flourished, it is possible to examine another facet of the history of race relations in the United States.

The discussion here will take shape through the elaboration of a cultural trope which disrupts representations of affluent African Americans along an axis heavily inflected by codes of sexual behaviour. Belafonte's career shows the terrain upon which acceptance into the American mainstream could be won in the middle part of the century.[5] In the ambiguities of Belafonte's initial celebrity, and the evolution of his

[5] I would argue that this is a cultural dynamic that continues to play a role in representations of African Americans, from Michael Jackson to Carlton Banks on *Fresh Prince of Belair* to Darius Rucker from Hootie and the Blowfish. It is, moreover, a dynamic that has played a role in Ricky Martin's North American celebrity and recent articulations of Latin American identity.

this cultural dynamic come into its own as means through which images of African American men were brokered to the public.

This brings us to the subject of Belafonte's neglect. Aside from a biography in 1961, and some recent articles and awards, very little serious attention has been given to Harry Belafonte. This oversight is linked to a particular, historicized, process of reading and containing racial politics in the United States. The goal of this thesis is to work against the accepted reading of Belafonte and to show the ways in which his performing career and its reception were deeply implicated in the social and political landscape of the period. This requires both an expansion of more conservative conceptions of African American culture and an exploration of ideological foundations which support the tacit identification of the middle classes with mainstream American popular culture.

The purpose of the next chapter will be to situate Belafonte at a particular juncture in the history of American popular culture. It will be my aim to understand the way in which a marginalised social group, the black middle class, could find a symbol of liberation in a celebrity, Belafonte, and his relationship with big-business. This is a complex phenomenon, connected with changes in the commercial production of popular culture that permitted this cultural sensibility to latch onto particular

celebrities as heroes. There will also be an attempt to explain the relationship between Belafonte and the discourses which laid the foundation for the deracination of the American mainstream. This will involve a brief consideration of the cultural and economic consequences of Calypso and Folk music in the 1950s and its precarious relationship with racial politics.

The third chapter will examine the conflict between conservative ideas of African American identity and expansionist/integrationist tendencies of middle class America. Using the scandal that surrounded Belafonte's marriage to Julie Robinson, it will be shown that Belafonte's success, taken as a symbol of racial integration, was strictly delimited by various discourses which underwrote both racial conflict and cooperation. This scandal, which seemed to be about the politics of interracial marriage, ultimately exposed the precarious social position of the black middle class. The effect that the American cultural mainstream's 'thin' response to race in popular culture had on American politics will also be discussed. Ultimately, the limited kinds of success that were allowed African Americans will be thrown into relief.

In the final chapter, an attempt will be made to pull together some of the scattered theoretical themes that have been developed over the course of the project. It will also be a space in which some of the more

general themes of the period are connected up with the specifics of Belafonte's career. Together, they will provide an opportunity to consider the implications of the production and diffusion of cultural history.

Chapter Two: Belafonte

In the years between 1954 and 1962, Harry Belafonte released sixteen full-length albums, appeared in five feature films and made innumerable personal appearances and concert performances in the United States and around the world. Most of these events were accompanied by considerable coverage in the press and the ancillary production of an inestimable amount of cultural effluvia dedicated to the singer and his career (concert programs, comic books in which he fought with Elvis, privately published homages, buttons, etc..) All of these contributed to "Harry Belafonte" as he was perceived in North American culture.

In this chapter, two aspects of Belafonte's public career will be examined in conjunction with the cultural milieu most properly identified with the burgeoning middle class. The first of these will look at the way in which Belafonte's celebrity was articulated through his involvement with the folk music revival and the Calypso craze of late-fifties. It will be shown that Calypso music, more than simply a novelty, was intimately linked to the possibilities for travel and leisure available to this newly affluent group. It will also be shown that the Calypso craze and folk musics, at least with regard to Belafonte, were a means through which images of black men could be circulated within the white-identified media, in a manner that did not force a direct engagement with the politics of race in America.

convergence of Belafonte's mass celebrity between the mid-fifties to the early-sixties and the ideology of the newly christened black middle class.[1] In the period after World War II, creative artists came to be treated in manner that differed from earlier eras. Whereas, previously, 'talent' had typically been given little control beyond their particular area of expertise, creative personnel in the post-war period began to work in new and complex ways within 'show business' as broadly defined. This was the result of both cultural and industrial changes in the production of film and popular music. Ultimately, the new liberty given popular performers was taken to represent the ideal of independence, both culturally and economically, held by the middle classes. With regard to Belafonte, this identification was particularly important among the black middle class due to the restrictions racist legislation and cultural practice had placed on the avenues for advancement open to African Americans.

The conjunction of these two aspects make Belafonte

[1] Russell Sanjek describes the historical situation in the following manner:

> In the years after 1942, the income of the average black family had tripled, while that of a white family had doubled. In New York, the city with the sixth-largest black population, one third of the residents of its leading black ghetto --Harlem-- left to settle in other parts of the city, and high-priced staples and luxury items were purchased by blacks in greater quantities than by any comparable population group in the city....(Sanjek 1988: 248)

Other authors who discuss the rapid growth of this group in the post-war period are Frazier (1956), Kronus (1971), Landry (1987), and Banner-Harley (1994).

disjunctures between economic achievement and African American cultural identity were negotiated in this period. It also reveals the extent to which this disjunction operated in connection with the construction of a particular image of black masculinity. Belafonte's stardom invoked his race in a manner that was ambiguously connected to the community with which he was most commonly identified, Black America. Popular representations of him in the white-identified media diffused or contained any discomfort felt by the public surrounding successful black men behind a screen of idealised representation which disregarded or discounted his intelligence and economic agency. At the same time, the ambiguity of this image was kept in abeyance by certain quarters of the black press in order to highlight Belafonte's image as a successful black entrepreneur. For a time, he seemed a new black man for the new social and economic world that was dawning.

Harry Belafonte: Integrated Celebrity

As the list of productions bearing his mark makes evident, Belafonte was what could be called today an 'integrated celebrity.' Over the course of his career he appeared in films, made records and appeared on television and in concert and there was often cross-marketing involved. Similarly, Belafonte operated in numerous capacities in the entertainment industry from

is Belafonte's album *Belafonte Sings of the Caribbean* (1957). On that record appeared two songs from *Island in the Sun* (1957), a film in which Belafonte starred. These songs were later transformed into the third act of his 1957-1958 tour which was called "Songs of the Caribbean" (Shaw 1961: 277). Although Belafonte did not produce *Island in the Sun*, the record was developed under the banner of "Harry Belafonte Presents Inc.", as was the stage show. The songs were all published by Belafonte's Shari Music ("Belafonte Becomes 'Big Business'" 1958).

While Belafonte was undoubtedly possessing of talent, as well as the popular support and adulation which fuelled the production of so many projects, this phenomenon also speaks to a particular configuration in the business of entertainment during the period. In the cultural industries there were dramatic changes in the proprietary structure and production processes of popular culture (Sanjek 1988, Balio 1990, Bordwell 1985). The very possibility that Belafonte could operate in more than one medium at a time was underwritten by certain economies and agreements which allowed for film studios, music companies and television networks to walk in step with one another. In order to understand Belafonte's celebrity, it is necessary to take such changes into account.

In popular music, shifts in the public's taste and economic considerations led to the end of the big band sound which had held sway in American Popular music

record companies "discovered an almost overnight switch by record buyers from dance music to a veritable mania for singers" (Sanjek 1988: 223). In place of the big bands arose a vogue for smaller combos and the arrival on the scene of several singers who began to develop careers as solo artists such as Frank Sinatra, Doris Day (Sanjek 1988: 225). These performers were considerably cheaper for touring than large dance bands and satisfied the demand created for lovelorn ballads nurtured while many American men were serving overseas during the war (George 1988:24).

This trend toward solo performers was echoed in Hollywood as the studios switched to fewer, more lavish projects but the motivations differed significantly. With the advent of television, the continued popularity of radio and shifts in demographics, picture-going was no longer a regular habit for most American families (Bordwell 1985: 332). One of the primary strategies to get people back into theatres was the deployment of stars and name directors. As Tino Balio has pointed out

> During the fifties, styles, genres and even screen size changed, but a constant in the motion picture business was the insurance value of proven stars. Stars, in fact, became more important than ever; in this era of retrenchment, financing a picture of any consequence without a name of proven box office worth would have been unthinkable. (Balio 1990: 10)

These changes in both music and film production speak to the prominence of the solo performer in the period.

of as a decade of icons (Foreman 1990).

It is, therefore, at the moment when solo performers come into vogue and the economic and industrial circumstances both allow for and demand greater exposure for the star that Belafonte reaches the height of his celebrity. In conjunction with both the productive and aesthetic context, a very particular kind of image was developed and promoted over the course of Belafonte's early career. Of particular importance with regard to these shifts is the extent to which they were connected with the white middle classes. Although this was an unspoken identification, this connection was very important in Belafonte's career.

Harry Belafonte and Long Player

Concurrent with the changing tastes of audiences towards solo performers, music companies were undergoing technological changes that played a significant role in propagating this 'culture of celebrity.' Foremost among these was the introduction of the long-play vinyl disc and the 45 rpm seven inch disc (Millard 1995: 193-206; Sanjek 1988: 231-234). These two formats, which dominated the music market for more than thirty years, were introduced in 1948 by Columbia and RCA respectively. While the details of the format war that initially followed their market debut need not be rehearsed here (see Sanjek 1988: 338-346), it is

consumed. They would play a pivotal role in Belafonte's career.

After an initial period in which the two new formats competed with the old 78rpm discs, the older format was phased out of production.[2] The market had settled by the mid-1950s when it was tacitly agreed that the 12" long-play format would be used for more stable genres of music (Classical, Jazz and adult-oriented pop), and the 7" would dominate the rapidly changing world of the hit parade and the youth-oriented rock n' roll market (Keightley 1996: 58-60). This was a division that would be maintained until the late-sixties, when the LP would develop into a significant format for rock and pop as well. For the discussion at hand, it is the 12" vinyl disc that is of greatest interest. This is for two reasons in particular: the photo cover and longer playing time.

Both of these attributes, which had been heralded by the older "album" of 78s, created a space in which celebrity personae could be developed with greater focus and subtlety than previous media allowed. While records have had covers or protective sheaths since the 1920s, it was only the development of cheap three colour printing and the loosening of war time restrictions that allowed for the explosion of what most closely resembles the modern record cover (Jones 1999). Over the years, the simple two colour covers that had been dominant in

[2] They remained only in specialty markets like country & western and 'race' music (George 1988).

history with albums of 78s, were replaced by covers that displayed full-colour photographs of the performers or other images related to the record's content.[3] Such images represented the recording's content with a verisimilitude never previously possible. Musicians came to be *seen* as well as heard by the public.

The image of the performer on the recording's packaging was complemented by the new longer playing time which, in the hands of performers like Frank Sinatra, developed into a medium which could express moods and themes in a more subtle and sustained manner than was allowed for in a single song (Keightley 1996). While it is true that the Broadway musical recording had developed narrative themes over the course of several songs, the LP came to be utilised in a broader fashion than allowed for by the traditional theatrical libretto.[4] What made the LP different from earlier collections of songs was a movement to express more abstract ideas and concepts with emotions and places becoming the preferred themes (Keightley 1996: 66-68). The narrative became fragmented, giving birth to the precursor of the modern 'concept' album.

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[3] Russel Sanjek notes that the record companies discovered the importance of packaging only by accident. Sanjek writes:

> The earliest LP and 45 packages had standard passe-partoute designs or modest and inexpensively decorated covers with the most economical of liner notes. The imagination of artists and designers was first recruited to attract adults looking for recordings suitable for their young offspring (Sanjek 1988: 338).

[4] There were, however, very strong links between the new format and the Broadway musical (Sanjek 1988: 239).

performers whose recording career is completely circumscribed by the LP. While he released singles throughout his career, the primary medium in which his music appeared was the the Long-Play disc. The association between Belafonte and this medium locates his career at certain social coordinates. Given that the medium was used sparingly in the early days for the recording of popular music, especially those forms directed at youth markets, it is possible to infer from this his connection to adult-oriented pop from the outset. It is also possible to assume, from the lack of 78s, that he was not marketed in any specific way towards African Americans. His music was directed at the undefined, yet clearly limited, market of the predominantly white middle class.

While this may provide the general background for his recording career, the image that was presented of Belafonte speaks more broadly to the cultural milieu this group inhabited. Furthermore, the LP became an important tool for communicating a very specific idea of "Harry Belafonte" to the public.

Belafonte and Calypso

Looking at the record covers beginning with 1955's *Belafonte*, it is possible to discern the development of a distinct iconography for the figure of Belafonte. The development of 'brand-equity,' to borrow a term from

chiselled features and slim body, the cover photographs sculpted his image as a statuesque figure, typically portrayed alone without definite background. His gaze was often slightly lifted giving the impression, whether he was staring pensively or smiling sportively, that he was deeply interested in something off into the distance. The pose and its presentation became synonymous with the name "Belafonte".

During these years, it was also typical for Belafonte to appear on the cover of his recordings wearing the costume which he made famous through his energetic stage show. A 1959 article in *Time* magazine made note of the entire ensemble and its intended audience.

> For his female fans, the famed Belafonte costume --a tailored ($27) Indian cotton shirt partially open, snug black slacks, a seaman's belt buckled by two large interlocking curtain rings-- combines the dashing elegance of a Valentino cape with the muscled fascination of a Brando T-shirt. The handsomely chiselled head is tipped slightly back, the eyes nearly closed. ("Lead Man Holler" 1959)

It was an image originally cultivated by his manager to be gleefully enjoyed by both the bourgeois audiences at Downtown New York supper cabarets and their bohemian counterparts in Greenwich Village (Shaw 1961: 92; Gavin 1992:98-99), but it translated equally well to the national media.

The control with which his image was constructed both on stage and through his record sleeves was

matinee idol' (Shaw 1961: 252-264). The interpretations of his image were, however, more specific than simple sexual excitement and Hollywood glamour. One unidentified fan is reported to have remarked

> He's as handsome as sin and blessed with sufficient West Indian charm to remind women of romance under the sun. When he's on stage, he makes us feel like doing crazy things. (Hamilton 1957)

In this passage, Belafonte is exoticised as a means through which this woman, presumably white, might move beyond the constraints of her daily life. This transcendence is dependent on his blackness, but not his being an African American. His image is one of controlled ferocity linked to the Caribbean islands.

This interpretation arose as much from Belafonte's recordings as from his physical presentation on record jackets. It can ultimately be traced to his involvement with particular forms of folk and calypso music. Unlike most modern performers working within a single genre, Belafonte seemed to switch the style of music he made from project to project. However, there are certain general patterns which he traced. Belafonte's career unfolded within the bounds of what was commonly designated then as folk music, but today might equally be described as world music (Taylor 1997: 225-230).

The roots of the folk music revival in North America can be traced to the unions and social protest movements of the thirties (Cantwell 1996; Denisoff 1971,

forms of propaganda. Many histories have followed the resurgence of folk back to the American Communist Party's Popular Front, but the phenomenon quickly expanded beyond Workingmen's singing groups and labour-inspired hootenannies (Denning 1998). By the Fifties, the leftist impetus behind the music had been thoroughly mixed with the mainstream music business and the pursuit of profit. The older generation of folk performers, such as Pete Seeger and Burl Ives, had been forced to tone down their political rhetoric or pressured to the margins by the rightward political swing (Denisoff 1971; Navsky 1980:193).

Belafonte's involvement with folk music stretched back to the late forties (Shaw 1961: 77), but his popularity was centred around a kind of folk performance which was equal parts Mississippi River Valley, John Reed Society, and Manhattan supper club. Although Belafonte himself articulated his commitment to folk music in terms of an authenticity that he was unable to find in the material produced by the popular songwriters of 'Tin Pan Alley'[5], the staging of his show suggested that there was more at stake than a search for identity.

Authenticity and entertainment are explicitly linked together in the liner notes to his early albums. His dynamic stage presence is repeatedly connected with pilgrimages to the Library of Congress in order to study

[5] On the subject, Belafonte commented: "Going into folk music was originally a study of tradition, of my own people's tradition, an attempt to find a culture in which I could learn and the structure in which I could function successfully" (Shaw 1961: 87).

the sanctity of the material, his physical prowess revealing part of what made Belafonte "the most attractive package in the folk music field" (Shaw 1961: 93). If his photographic image suggested a singular performer, his recordings traced a generic blueprint which positioned him in relation to certain kinds of authenticity and straight-forward enjoyment.

While the photographic image, and the name "Belafonte" itself, created a package which faciltated public recognition, it was the music that coloured its interpretation. As was already noted, Belafonte's recording career tackled a multitude of genres which were bound together by the super-genre of "Folk". However, his recording were not a mixed bag of recordings which alternated song-style with unpredictable frequency. While there were several albums in his career that did consist of songs taken from various genres (*Belafonte* (1955), *An Evening With Belafonte* (1957)), there were an equal number that occupied themselves with a single genre alone (*Calypso* (1956), *My Lord What A' Mornin'* (1960), *Swing Dat Hammer* (1960), *Belafonte Sings the Blues* (1960).)

The LP came to be used in Belafonte's career as a means to signify a depth of engagement with the genre. Typically these recordings were accompanied by liner notes that explained the context of the project's genesis and execution, as well as pictures of the performers (most importantly Harry himself.) The

implicitly possessed by the folk music genre. The image of Belafonte that was constructed through the LP was one in which a single performer sang from his heart. Moreover, he sang of what he knew and of his interests.

Belafonte's recordings were the primary means through which the public experienced his music and image. Tracing the relationship between his celebrity and the Long-Play disc allow us to make sense not only of the image, but also of the context in which it evolved. The degree to which this image has remained in circulation testifies to both the extent to which he was identified with it and the power of image-making tools which produced it. It is, however, necessary to consider the broader cultural implications of such a public persona.

Representing the 'folk'

An excerpt from the liner notes for *An Evening With Belafonte* (1957) reads:

> Belafonte began his folk singing career not, as usually happens, by singing a few songs and finding that he could draw an audience, but by reading up on folklore, poring over the folk archives in the Library of Congress, studying recordings made by other folk singers...Approaching the field in this way, he came to it with a background which could be matched in depth only by a dedicated folklorist. But the dedicated folklorist --and there are many of them-- had never before had the personal resources that were at

> sufficiently flexible for the purpose at hand with a dramatic intensity... (*An Evening With Belafonte* 1957).[6]

In the play between physical movement and study, an opposition that is clearly evident is this passage and is often repeated, the discourses produced by and around Belafonte effectively obscured the cultural politics and economic consequences of folk music in United States. It is, however, this effaced aspect of his career which must be evoked in order to fully understand the function of his image in mainstream middle class culture. His engagement with Calypso, in particular, makes these broader implication quite apparent.

By the 1950s, Calypso music had been a presence in the United States for several decades. In the first half of the century it was probably best known for the two songs it contributed to the canon of American popular standards: "Stone Cold Dead in the Market" and "Rum and Coca-cola" (Hebdige 1994:38-42). These two songs had been imported to the States in the thirties and had been recorded by such well-known performers as Louis Jordan and Ella Fitzgerald. Unlike Mambo or other Latin musics, Calypso was never well established in the music industry or the public's musical palette.[7] It was not until the

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[6] An earlier recording echoes this dichotomony contrasting the "sacred trust" of folk music with Belafonte's physical attributes which include "the expressive face of the actor, the mobile body of the dancer" (*Belafonte* 1955).

[7] This situation is most probably the result of political as much as aesthetic considerations. Immigration from the British West Indies in the early part of this century was never as large as the considerable Latin presence in the continental United States (Owens 1996).

music.

In the late 1950s, Calypso became so popular that it was considered as one possible successor to Rock n' Roll. In March, 1957 *Time* magazine described what it called "Calypsomania" and announced "all told, calypso records account for roughly a quarter of current pop sales" ("Calypsomania" 1957:56). An article in *Life* noted that what these "new tunes with their bright beats will do best is lift U.S. popular music out of its leaden rock n' roll rut" ("Taking Calypso Home" 1957: 32). Loew's theatres in New York siezed upon the craze and pitted the two genres against each other one weekend in March ("Rock n' Roll vs. Calypso" 1957). Belafonte himself reports of having been described as "the man who nearly knocked Elvis Presley off at the jukebox" (Shaw 1961:247).

In this period, Calypso was involved in the broad-based commodification of Caribbean culture. The *Time* article cited above also makes reference to "Do-it-yourself Calypso kits" which included "bongo drums, a gourd and a pair of maracas" ("Calypsomania" 1957:54). The same article described an upper Manhattan saloon that, after appropriate redecoration, reopened as the "Ekim Calypso Dock" ("Calypsomania" 1957:55). The craze was about more than music. The common reason for the music's sudden popularity was the explosion of Caribbean vacations among the American middle classes. Many articles suggested that the craze was an attempt of

explosion of Caribbean vacations in the United States involved some Americans more than others. "This year, with a sudden rush," the article noted

> American winter tourists began a record descent on the Caribbean, their numbers a full %25 greater than last year. Before the year is out 1.2 million of them will sail or fly to the Indies in a free-spending splurge of bongo drums, calypso, wild straw hats, rum and roulette. In varying degrees of luxury on the 32 islands of the archipelago, Americans were recklessly exposing their winter-whitened skin to the West Indies sun. ("The Caribbean, Ho!" 1957)

From the reference to "winter-whitened skins" as well as the photographs which accompanied the spread, it was clear that this was not a truly popular phenomenon. Rather, it was very much linked to the white middle classes upon whom the mainstream media focused.

The contrast between the business and the pleasure of Calypso music reveals the way in which folk musics were involved in an industry which processed and manufactured certain kinds of authenticity. It is, however, of limited value to criticise the untruth of a cultural phenomenon that occurred almost fifty years ago. For this reason critiques of Belafonte which attack him for not following C.L.R. James' understanding of the calypsonian as "a man of the people, using a people's medium" (James 1961) miss the significance of Belafonte in the period. It is more important to understand how Belafonte's image worked than to expose its shortcomings since, in spite of these, it played an important role in

What is most remarkable about Belafonte's career is that, in spite of the fact that he is always presented as an African American and speaks about the "Negro situation" in almost every major interview, the prevailing interpretation of his career continued to link him to the image of the smooth West Indian gentleman. This included the rearticulation of his biography to accentuate the importance of the time he spent while young in Jamaica ("Storm Over Belafonte" 1957; Shaw 1961:19-53). Although several articles attempted to correct this idea ("Lead Man Holler" 1959: 42; "I Wonder why nobody don't like me" 1957), the position from which he spoke seemed to make sincere political protest about the American situation an impossibility. This is not simply the product of Calypso's faddishness in the late-fifties. It speaks to the precarious relationship that was developed within folk music and popular representation of folk culture generally between black musicians and white consumers.

Although it unfolded in a very different way from Belafonte's, the career of Huddie Ledbetter, Leadbelly, is an excellent example of the way in which blackness was represented in the folk music revival. Discovered by Smithsonian folklorist Alan Lomax in a Louisiana prison where he was serving time for attempted murder, he was kept in prison-style gear for much of his career. Hazel Carby notes that

> Leadbelly, who actually liked to present

> a costume of overalls and bandana created by the Lomaxes as an authentic folk image for his public performances. (Carby 1998: 106)

Carby suggests that this costume was one technique used to manage "anxieties arising from the struggle of white men to control their own fear of black male bodies" (Carby 1996: 106). The effect of dressing Leadbelly as a country bumpkin was to dislocate his corporeal and musical presence from the social and political context which he embodied through his singing. The materiality of his performances was diffused through a costume which displaced these references onto another time and place which was, for the most part, imagined.

The similarities between Belafonte and Leadbelly are not exact, but they do suggest an analogous cultural process at work. In opposition to Leadbelly's folk criminal, Belafonte was constructed as an elastic and erudite West Indian. This was evident from the pensive poses on the covers of his records, the continual reiteration of his extensive study and the accompanying repetition of his skills as an actor. It was supplemented by biographical and contextual facts which filled in the details.

The effect was to situate Belafonte's image for the white middle classes in the space between eroticised other and harmless diversion. Like Leadbelly, the discursive formation in which his career unfolded was constructed so as to inhibit any political action from the outset. This is to say that, while folk musics were

cultural production, the images it produced effaced this fact and often relied upon the image of the black performer as simple, ahistorical and, most importantly apolitical.

Broadly considered, this situation may be linked to the contemporary crisis in masculinity. Steve Cohan describes the phenomenon as follows

> Brought to the public attention by Kinsey, male sexual inadequacy became increasingly visible through the decade, referred to in both scholarly journals and the popular press as the primary problem of the contemporary American male's psychology; a related symptom that American masculinity was in deep trouble was the mounting evidence that middle-class men were susceptible to employment stress and heart disease, since this fact further underscored the fragility and vulnerability of the male body in comparison to the female. (Cohan 1991: 64)

It is possible to view Belafonte as tracing an ambiguous line in relation to these cultural currents between aggressivity and passivity. On the one hand he provides a model of cultured, yet powerful masculinity, but at the same time his presentation allays the fears and anxieties felt by white men about the body of the African American male.

Belafonte Incorporated

At the same time as these themes were being articulated in the popular press, the film industry was

beginning to realise that the golden age of popular film was over (Bordwell 1985: 332). In conjunction with government intervention, the film industry was undertaking to dismantle the studio system and the Fordist approach to film production. Although the landmark *United States v. Paramount Pictures* case had found the eight major motion picture studios in violation of anti-trust legislation in 1940, it was not until 1949 that Paramount and RKO signed the first consent decrees which divested them of their theatre chains and put an end to the closed-shop film industry.[8]

The most important result of divestiture for this discussion was the turn away from in-house production which had characterised the studio system towards methods which favoured the use of independent producers. These producers came to be known as packagers because they developed 'packages' of artists, writers and directors for particular projects. The promotion of independent film producers had been one of the main motivations behind the anti-trust charges brought against the studios. It was claimed that, since they owned the theatres and the distribution channels, the major studios could effectively block films which were produced by their competitors from appearing in their cinemas. The new consent decrees forced the studios to sell their theatres and put an end to protectionist distribution policies.

[8] This process would take another ten years before the final studio would relinquish control of its theatres and alter its production policies.

The government-instigated reorganization attempted to create a place for the little guy in the American movie business. However, the changes in production strategy were only partly the result of government intervention. As already noted, the studios realized that, with the introduction of television, the continued popularity of radio and the demographic shifts in the audience, it would never be able to flood the market with films in the way it had in the golden age of Hollywood. The major studios seemed less and less able to predict and control the demands of the market. In spite of the fact that the studios ultimately retained control of the means of production (by becoming the primary source of financial backing) and the system of distribution (which were not included in the divestiture,) the power relations in the industry did shift in several important ways.

There were important shifts in working relationships within the industry, most meaningfully in the middle and upper levels of production. Due to the structure of their contracts, stars had previously been more or less monopolised by a single studio or treated as an internal resource like props. The turn to independent production had resulted in releasing the stars from their contracts and thus placing them on the open market. At the intersection between the turn to independent producers who developed 'unit' packages and the new bargaining power granted actors and other

creative personnel, was the development of the star/producer. The star/producer was in many ways a logical development since, in the new economic situation, stars were often a film's main selling point and its primary capital expenditure.

Numerous stars developed their own production companies and began to develop projects for the screen. While many of these production companies were little more than exercises in egoism, the mechanisms were put in place which allowed for the institutionalization of stars as corporate entities. The same trend towards star/producers occurred in the music industry, perhaps in order to accommodate the rapidly expanding egos of successful artists.[9]

After the tremendous success of his *Calypso* record (1956), Belafonte developed "Harry Belafonte Enterprises" with its subsidiary film unit (HarBel Productions) and theatrical division (Harry Belafonte Presents). Other notable companies in the period were Frank Sinatra's Essex music which produced and retained the rights to all the albums recorded while the singer was under contract to Capitol. Belafonte is much more intimately linked to his production company since more than half of the films he performed in, and all of his recordings, were managed by his production company. His

[9] While the charges brought against EMI and American and British Decca regarding the operations of a illicit disk cartel is in some ways the counterpart of the *Paramount* case, the music industry did not experience the same degree of government pressure to move away from monopolistic practices. This was probably because the major labels were much less dominant in the market as a whole.

production company also took on a considerable significance in the public's estimation of his career.

Belafonte came to represent the dreams of achievement held dear by the black middle class. While his appeal to the white middle classes might have been based in the appetite for both actual and armchair cultural tourism, his appeal to the middle class black audience did not follow the same path. Beyond his music, and at times in spite of his creative output, the black middle class held him up as an ideal of the entrepreneurial black man. On the pages of *Ebony*, Harry Belafonte, was portrayed as the embodiment of the emergent post-war black middle class' success.

In the same issue where two short articles discussed the release of his film *Island in the Sun*, there appeared another profile piece entitled "Belafonte's Best Year: Singer's popularity, income soars" (1956:56-60). This article was just one example of what the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier had characterised as a typical *Ebony* article which celebrates "the romance that surrounds the Negro's acquisition of wealth" (Frazier 1962: 182). It focused on the rapid expansion of Belafonte's fan base and the fact that his income surpassed $300 000 the previous year. It concludes in a tone which suggests the infinite scope of Belafonte's celebrity and wealth. These themes were reprised again later in an article more brazenly entitled "Belafonte Becomes 'Big Business'" (1958).

This article not only discussed Belafonte's achievements on stage, but also spoke about the development of HarBel productions, his film company, and his plans to move into theatrical production as well. Belafonte's final words in the article, which display a suitably entrepreneurial spirit, are "I am my own boss"("Belafonte Becomes Big Business" 1958:20).

Writing in 1903, W.E.B. DuBois in his classic essay "The Talented Tenth" offered a view of African American society which positioned the middle class as economic and cultural leaders for the black masses. The middle class would function as a buffer between white society and lead the path to a more egalitarian society. He concluded his essay by declaring

> Men of America, the problem is plain before you. Here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of your fathers. Whether you like it or not the millions are here, and here they will remain. If you do not lift them up, they will pull you down...The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people...The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by it exceptional men. (DuBois 1986: 982).

The situation was not in reality as straight forward as DuBois would have it. In the introduction to *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), E. Franklin Frazier relates that "some working class Negroes got the impression that I had written a book attacking 'upper-class, light-skinned' Negroes. As a consequence I was even stopped on

the street by working-class Negroes who shook my hand for having performed this long overdue service." This story is one proof among many of the class tensions that, as Frazier shows in the introduction to his study, had been felt within the "black community" for several decades, if not hundreds of years (See also West 1993).

As was noted in the introduction, however, Belafonte was not part of this older middle class, but part of a new group that had ascended the economic ladder in the period since the beginning of the Second World War. Frazier's comments on this group, in his 1962 Preface to the *Black Bourgeoisie*, were considerably more positive than his view of their forebears.

> They do not have the same social background as the black bourgeoisie in my study who represent a fusion of the peasant and the gentle man. Although they have been influenced by the genteel tradition, on the whole their social background is essentially that of the Negro folk. (Frazier 1962: 6)

It is as part of this attempt to wed the gentility of the traditional black middle class with the sensitivity to the historical realities and problems that the *Ebony* articles entered in the public consciousness.

The image of Belafonte as entrepreneur focused upon his monetary success rather than his cultural identity. It showed that it was possible to be both black and successful without compromise. It was also a new way looking at black men who achieved success in the white world of business. Mark Anthony Neal describes this new

social type as follows

> The New Negroes of the late '50s and '60s, personified in figures like Sammy Davis Jr., and boxer Floyd Patterson, simply did not aim to be accepted as part of the liberal bourgeois establishment but firmly believed that on the basis of their talent, hardwork, and work ethics, they were already part of such an establishment, as witness by their presence in mainstream culture. (Neal 1999: 43)

Belafonte was undoubtedly a part of this social cohort and, moreover, though to be among it leaders. However, the stridency with which this discourse was articulated in the press was linked to deep-seated tensions regarding success and racial solidarity.

Belafonte's image was fraught with powerful ambiguities and contradictions. One side of this narrative is his broad acceptance and extreme popularity seen here, the flip side is the accusation of 'selling out.' In its oversights Belafonte's celebrity makes apparent that race relations changed very little in period immediately following the war. In its failure, to which we now turn, it was clear how radical the changes to come would have to be.

Chapter Three: Why I Married Julie...

By 1957, Harry Belafonte had become one of the most recognisable faces in American popular culture. The tremendous success of his *Calypso* album had made him a household name ("Lead Man Holler" 1957), his concert tours continued to fill stadium-sized venues for longer runs with even greater rapidity ("Belafonte at Stadium" 1956; "Wild About Harry" 1957), and his career as a Hollywood star began to take shape ("Island in the Sun" 1957). On top of this, his popularity as a performer was buttressed by his image as a business saavy executive and cultural impresario in charge of his own company ("Belafonte's Best Year" 1956; "Belafonte Becomes 'Big Business'" 1958). However, it was also in 1957, with the public announcement of his marriage to Julie Robinson (a white woman), that concerns about his success burst out into the popular press. If the previous chapter has broadly traced how Belafonte's celebrity was involved in the complex relationship between economic achievement and African American cultural identity, it was in conjunction with Belafonte's wedding and the film *Island in the Sun* (1957) that these developments found their most strident, disturbing and yet influential expression.

Immediately after the marriage announcement, questions about the sincerity of Belafonte's relationship with the black community began to be asked in prominent venues such as *Ebony* and *The Amsterdam*

articulated in the black press around two contradictory aspects. Some felt that he had done well enough and should be left alone to lead his private life as he saw fit. Others thought that his marriage to Julie Robinson was indicative of a lack of commitment to the cause of civil rights and racial equality. Letters pages in the black press showed this divide whenever Belafonte was discussed ("Letter Page-*Ebony*" 1957; "Letter Page-*Amsterdam News*" 1957). As will be seen, these letters were echoed by articles which made the same points in a much more forceful manner on the subject of Belafonte's interracial marriage.

It is important to note that the scandal around Belafonte's new bride was for the most part contained within the black press and hardly discussed in publications that did not cater to this market. *The New York Times*, for example, barely mentioned the wedding, giving it less than a full column the day after Belafonte's public announcement. More typical was an article in *Look* that expressed incredulity as to why anyone would be interested in Belafonte's marriage to Julie Robinson at all (Hamilton 1957). For the author of the *Look* profile, the "storm over Belafonte" was unfolding in relation to his soon-to-be-released film *Island in the Sun*.[1]

It would be more appropriate, therefore, to speak of two 'scandals' confronting Harry Belafonte in 1957.

[1] The author of the piece noted: "Although the marriage raised only a minor stir, Belafonte is bound to become more of a storm center with the release of his new movie" (Hamilton 1957: 140).

image as a crusading African American, staking out new territory for all people of colour. This discourse operated according to the terms specified last chapter. The other, centred around his marriage to Julie Robinson, severely challenged the grounds upon which Belafonte could even be considered a member of the African American community. It will be the aim of this chapter to show in the relationship between these two scandals the limitations of Belafonte's celebrity. These were also the limits of African American celebrity in the period. Between *Island in the Sun* and the scandal surrounding Belafonte's wedding, it is possible to gleam the origins of the strange social and political outlook discussed in the introduction with regard to Belafonte's appearance with Lena Horne.

Why I Married Julie...

Harry Belafonte wed Julie Robinson, a white dancer, on March 8, 1957 in Tecate, Mexico. They had first met while taking acting classes at the New School in the forties and had renewed their acquaintance six years later while filming *Carmen Jones* (1954). This was Belafonte's second marriage. The first had been to Marguerite Byrd, whom he had married in July 1948 after a tumultuous courtship. Marguerite was a teacher from a comfortable black middle-class family, and would later

As the years passed, it became apparent that Marguerite wasn't well suited to the high profile life that Belafonte's rapidly expanding celebrity forced on them. She grew increasingly frustrated with a marriage in which her partner was rarely home ("I was Lonely" 1957). The marriage was in rough shape by 1955, when Belafonte began corresponding regularly with Julie, and the couple finally divorced one month before his second wedding ("Mrs. Belafonte Wins Divorce" 1957; "Belafonte Settlement" 1957). However the marriage was only the first event in a story that would continue to develop over the course of years.

The headline in *The Amsterdam News* the day after the ceremony had been publicly acknowledged by Belafonte read: "BELAFONTE WEDS WHITE DANCER" (1957). The two following issues of the paper published several articles which focused on the interracial make-up of the couple ("Talk of the Town" 1957; "Back Door Stuff" 1957). The coverage of the event grew very quickly beyond simply detailing the wedding and took on much broader subjects, primarily the nature and role of Belafonte's celebrity. Betty Granger intimated the scope of the issue when she wrote: "Many Negroes are wondering why a man who has waved the flag of justice for his race should turn from a Negro wife to a white wife" (Granger April 20, 1957: 35). The same author took this approach again in an article about "The Harry Belafontes at Home." There she ended her discussion of the couple with an ominous note

hanging in the balance at the moment"(Granger April 27, 1957: 1).

A few months later, *Ebony* commissioned an article from Belafonte entitled "Why I married Julie?" The story was accompanied by a large feature dedicated to interracial marriage and whether it helped or hindered the cause of African Americans (Belafonte 1957). A little more than a year later, Marguerite took the spotlight with an equally extended piece called "The Tragedy of Divorce" (Belafonte 1958).[3]

In Belafonte's article, he explained his relationship with Julie and noted how their courtship had developed out of a mutual interest in the struggles of African Americans. He also relates a story about how, while travelling with the Dunham Company, Julie had stuck by the rest of the dancers when they ran into Jim Crow segregation in Las Vegas. The moral of the story, as he tells it, is that she "has learned from bitter first-hand experience just what it means to be a Negro" (Belafonte 1957: 92).

Interestingly, while Marguerite chose to eschew the personal politics of the relationship, instead speaking on behalf of the "some six million American women who have died the special death of divorce," she nonetheless felt the need to remark: "The Harry Belafonte I knew is dead. Although the one that exists now is the same one and I know it. I do not identify myself with him. The

[3] Although it must be added that Marguerite responded immediately to Harry's article in the September 1957 issue of *Ebony* in the form of a letter to the editor.

article, some two years later, she made the biting comment: "I remember when he used to speak about not being hired because he was a Negro. Now his secretary in New York is white" ("Lead Man Holler" 1959: 42). The attacks against Belafonte, and the defence he mounted against them, clearly centred around the authenticity of his 'blackness' and his commitment to the community.

The story that initially developed around Belafonte is a good example of a genre that dominated the African American press during the period. Sammy Davis Jr. has come to be the most well known media personality to experience these problems, but innumerable black stars were put under similar scrutiny.[4] The relationship between popular acceptance and black identity was cause for serious debate throughout the period. However Belafonte's marriage and the outraged response were more than a momentary flash in his career or a ploy to increase magazine and newspaper sales. As was (and continues to be) the case with Davis, it was a story that would reverberate in the public memory long after the initial storm had settled down.

In 1962, almost six years after the wedding, Malcolm X, in a debate with James Farmer entitled "Segregation or Integration," made the following comment about Belafonte and other performers who married whites.

> I think you will find if you were to have gone into Harlem a few

[4]Davis' troubled relationship with the black press is, in fact, one of the dominating theme of his autobiography *Yes, I Can* (Davis 1965).

> Belafonte, Eartha Kitt, Pearl Bailey, all of these persons were very popular singers in the so-called Negro community a few years back. But since Belafonte divorced Marguerite and married a white woman it doesn't mean that Harlem is antiwhite, but you can't find Belafonte's records there...All of these entertainers who have become involved in intermarriage, and I mean Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, Sammy Davis, Belafonte, they have a large white following, but you can't go into any Negro community across the nation and find records by these artist that are hits in the so-called Negro community. Because, subconsciously, today the so-called Negro withdraws himself from the entertainers who have crossed the line. And if the masses of black people won't let a Negro who is involved in intermarriage play music for him, he can't speak for him. (Aptheker 1994: 146)

Although X's comments articulate the same criticisms of Belafonte's 'blackness', it is difficult to read them without also noting the subtle delineation of the line which divides black cultural industries from the 'mainstream' business of entertainment.

Belafonte's and the various other performers' interracial marriages provide the means through which X approaches the topic, but the issue as explicitly articulated is one in which cultural authenticity is directly related to the status of individuals as celebrities. Authenticity in this instance is constructed as both an economic and symbolic attribute; wedding a white woman, therefore, is seen as a continuation of Belafonte's co-optation by the

entertainment industry. A process that had started long ago.

Eartha Kitt, when asked by Belafonte's unofficial biographer, more clearly expresses the relationship between Belafonte's marriage and the politics of his performing career. The conclusion she reaches is strikingly similar to X's. In a long comment about the political difficulties confronting performers such as herself and Belafonte, she begins by noting

> I believe that Harry's marriage was good for him and good for Julie Robinson, whom I love and admire from the days when we were in the Dunham dance group together. But I cannot help saying that I had a great fear that the Negro people would misunderstand Harry's action in divorcing a Negress and marrying a white girl. It had to look as if he were deserting them - and after they had come to look upon him as one of their most militant spokesmen. (Shaw 1961: 99)

Kitt goes on to note that the distance between Belafonte and the black community is not simply about his marriage, but about the kind of performer he had become. "There are still many Negroes," she commented

> who won't go to a downtown theatre in New York, even if they can afford the price. They have not yet overcome -strange as it may seem- fears that go back centuries. These people can't see Harry Belafonte unless he comes to them. And I don't mean just the Apollo Theatre in New York. There are theatres in Negro communities all over the United States. (Shaw 1961: 99)

Kitt's comments tightly yoke together Belafonte's marriage, the cultural milieu in which his career unfolded and its distance from the black musical universe.

In his historical study of black music, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (1988), Nelson George develops the idea of the "r n' b world" to explain the context in which African American music has been traditionally created and received.[3] George sees music as something which is intricately related to various forms of extramusical socialisation and behaviour. Among the institutions that he explicitly cites as supporting this social milieu are "barbershops and beauty parlors, grocers and theatres, street corners and record shops, where blacks of all ages gathered and worked" (George 1988: xi). These material sites are complemented in George's discourse by an intangible counterpart made up the interminable conversation between blacks about the world around them and the difficulties in their lives. It is this amorphous "world" that both Kitt and X seem to refer to in their comments.

In essence, X inverts the celebratory rhetoric found on the pages of *Ebony* surrounding Belafonte's production company. His marriage was just another example of the internalised self-hate that X believed plagued the black man in America (West 1992). "Harry

[3] Mark Anthony Neal develops the idea of a "black public sphere" which seems to be equivalent with George's idea. Neal, writing in a more academic context, grounds his concept in the work of Habermas and the work of the Black Public Sphere Collective at the University of Chicago (Neal 1999: 1-25).

white world of capitalism, but a Trojan horse carrying the seeds of African America's demise. Kitt, who adopts a more sympathetic tone, similarly shows the way that Belafonte's public identity crisis is linked to much more profound tensions in his career and the culture in general. The implications that this complex of ideas has for African American identity and social behaviour are clear: certain kinds of success ("mainstream") and certain kinds of actions (interracial marriage) are in fundamental conflict with what it means to be a black in America.

It is not difficult to infer from this that the condemnation of Belafonte was implicated in a discourse about black masculinity and the cultural consequences of economic activity. Seizing upon the potent symbol of interracial marriage and its broader cultural connotations[6], Belafonte's marriage became a tangible symbol of a certain kind of politics. It became the means to organize anxieties about the cultural effects of success, but it did so by policing the marriage bed. There is a long and highly visible history of this trope in connection with black celebrities both within and without the black press. In the articles about Belafonte, for example, explicit reference is made to former Heavyweight champion Jack Johnson and his

[6] From Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemmings to Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, such relationships have often provided a trope through which larger issues about the state of race relations have been voiced.

fondness for white women[7], an earlier chapter in this same history.

Belafonte's Island in the Sun

While Belafonte was being chastised for marrying Julie, he was still being heralded as the 'first black matinee idol' (Shaw 1961: 252-264). If anything, his celebrity grew during the period. It was in 1957 that Belafonte appeared in the first major Hollywood film with interracial romantic leads, *Island in the Sun*. Produced by Darryl F. Zanuck and co-starring Joan Collins, Michael Dennie and Dorothy Dandridge, the film was a blockbuster drawing on the talent of extremely well known celebrities (Shaw 1961: 241-245). Although the film also centred around the subject of interracial marriage, it did not attract the same degree of outrage in the public; or, rather, what outrage it did provoke came from very different quarters. There is a complicated, but not contradictory, relationship between the "success" of *Island in the Sun* and the floundering of Belafonte's personal life.

From a modern perspective, *Island in the Sun* is an interesting film with regard to race relations in America. It has recently been recovered as an early document in the history of Hollywood's engagement with

[7] Betty Granger in "The Harry Belafontes at home" when, after referencing the celebrity of boxer Jack Johnson and his fondness for white women, she recalled the old saying: "Give a Negro man fame and fortune, and he's got to have a white woman, a Packard car, and a bulldog" (Granger April 27 1957).

novel of the same name (Waugh 1955), the film is typically treated as a tentative step in Hollywood's attempt to grapple with the social tumult that was developing in the American South. A brief analysis of the place of race in the film itself as well as the history of its production are integral elements for understanding Belafonte's changing status in the period.

Today, as in the fifties, it is difficult to watch *Island in the Sun* without recognizing its debt to extratextual sources surrounding the figure of Harry Belafonte. *Island in the Sun* draws extensively upon the image of Belafonte as a symbol of Caribbean virility. It does this by deploying the symbols which had developed around him in the wake of his involvement with the calypso-craze. In fact, the film is more or less centred around him even though the plot develops an ensemble of characters.[8] The way in which the film was cross-marketed with other Belafonte products (most importantly the album *Belafonte Sings of the Caribbean*) has already been noted and further cemented these links to his general celebrity.

It is, therefore, in the shadow of his off screen persona that Belafonte makes his way through *Island in the Sun* in the character of David Boyeur, trade unionist and leader of the island's black population. Due to the strength of these links with his career in general, a good case can be made for the importance of his performance, and the film itself, in shaping the public

[8] Belafonte is given special consideration in the opening credits.

certain crucial moments from the film need to be thought through more completely and their relationship to contextual circumstances elaborated. It is only through examining the 'thinness' of the film's engagement with race that it is possible to fully understand the broader effects of the scandal surrounding his marriage.

In one particularly striking moment, David Boyeur turns to find Mavis Norman, heiress and perhaps Boyeur's love interest, playfully holding a carnival mask of a grinning black woman to her face. Boyeur's reaction is not to show pleasure at Norman's openness to the culture of, as Boyeur had put it, "a side of the island she'd never seen," but to snatch the mask away in anger. Making sense of this scene, it is not difficult to see the racialised logic of exchange outlined by Eric Lott in his study of minstrelsy in American culture (Lott 1993). The twin aspects of love and theft which Lott locates at the centre of white America's continued infatuation with performers in blackface are almost perfectly replayed in this short sequence.

Norman, the white heiress, displays a curious pleasure for the joyful nature of the carnival preparations and the vicarious liberation that the mask represents. Boyeur's reaction clearly indicates that the ease with which she picks up and dons the mask is underwritten by hundreds of years of oppression and exploitation embodied by the institution of slavery and economic serfdom. Boyeur, by seizing the mask from Mavis

Belafonte-sung title theme explains, was willed to him "by his father's hand."[9]

It is important to note, however, that the problem of what Lott, borrowing from Marx, calls cultural "expropriation" (Lott 1993:8) is not contained by this scene, nor is the aggressive response of Boyeur to such incursions manifested with equal force elsewhere. The complexity of race relations and class tensions on Santa Marta are most vividly portrayed during the "Lead Man Holler" sequence. In this scene, Belafonte's Boyeur leads the island's fishermen in gathering their nets by singing. While one of the scene's purposes is to suggest an organic solidarity among the black working classes on the island, another is the turning of this situation into something like a labour-themed floor show. This second, more troubling interpretation is aided by the fact that Boyeur leads the holler partially as a display for a smiling Mavis Norman. That these scenes occur only moments apart from each other further complicate the film's already confused politics.

At the heart of the film is the fall of Maxwell Fleury, who is introduced as the eldest surviving son of one of Santa Marta's wealthiest plantation owners. While his failed bid for the island's legislature clearly indicates the changing political climate on the island, the murder plot in which he involves himself makes a point of showing that nobody, no matter how powerful, is

[9] The title song of *Island in the Sun* appears on Belafonte's *Songs of the Caribbean* (1956). "Lead Man Holler" (see below) also appears on the same album.

above the law. Fleury's role is mirrored in the figure of David Boyeur, Belafonte's character. The union leader successfully wins the seat in the legislature and ends the film with the suggestion that he will take control of the island's new government. Furthermore, much is made throughout the film of the fact that Boyeur built himself up from nothing to become the most powerful political figure on the island.

In the mirroring of these two characters it is not difficult to see that *Island in the Sun* is built around a classic reversal of fortune. This turnabout is articulated in terms which relate to social status, as represented by both political and economic power, even though it is taken to represent an essential shift in attitudes about race on Santa Marta. I stress the aspects of plot development related to social and economic class because, in spite of the fact that these scenes accrue a racialised meanings, they are countered in the film by a discourse on race that maintains its divisions which much greater tenacity.

The other organizing theme of the film focuses on the possibility for interracial marriage. The scene with which this discussion of the film began was one moment from the developing relationship between Boyeur and Mavis Norman. Similarly, the revelation that Maxwell Fleury's father is a quarter black causes much difficulty for Maxwell's sister Jocelyn (Joan Collins), who is engaged to marry the titled son of the island's

governor. This is complimented by the love story between Denis Archer (John Justin), the governor's aide-de-camp, and Margot Simmons (Dorothy Dandridge), a friend of Boyeur. Whereas the story involving political and economic success is resolved at a point when the initial situation has been all but inverted, thus suggesting that social hierarchy is anything but permanent, these interracial marriages are confronted by a very different reality.

The film constructs race as a category that cannot be transgressed. Boyeur and Norman do not in the end get married because of internal conflict surrounding his racial identity and class identification. Boyeur articulates his decision in terms, strikingly similar to X, that equate interracial marriage with compromising racial and cultural authenticity. The other two marriages do occur but only with mitigating circumstances. Jocelyn and the governor's son leave the island for England to be married, but only after it is revealed that, having been conceived illegitimately, she does not actually posses any African blood. Margot Seaton and Denis Archer are also married, but they too must leave the island for England. Race on Santa Marta, in spite of the radical changes that are unfolding, is the single attribute which maintains its place in the social structure.

Although the film's uneasy presentation of the black masses is reliant upon the inequalities of

privilege and population that are inherent in neo-feudal colonial economies, the film does not seem to have a strong sense of the subtilties implicit in the situation. The complex problem of social justice on the island is both simplified and confused by the stubborn ambiguities noted above. None of the positions which the film seems to stake out is articulated fully. From proto-nationalist statement to call for integration, the film does little to restrict the cultural politics to which it ascribes. Bosley Crowther, writing at the time of the film's release for *The New York Times*, made less than favourable observations on this very subject. "Actually, the picture is lacking a precise and confident theme. It pretends to be scanning racial conflict, but its viewpoint is vague, its observations are fuzzy and no conclusion is reached" (Shaw 1961:246).

"Island" in the States

The relationship between the film and the social foment taking shape in the period is, however, more complicated than a poor reflection of the world beyond the theatre. *Island in the Sun* did more than simply propagate the racial and social inequalities outlined in Lott's study. However, it did less than smash preconceptions about racial and social hierarchies. It seems a film that is unsure of what it wants to say and therefore attempts to say everything in every possible

manner. This apparent ambiguity metamorphoses into intentional ambivalence when more details are made available about the film's production.

The racial tensions which were played out on screen formed a striking counterpoint to other discourses that accompanied the film's release. These issues related not to Belafonte's successful public image as a 'west Indian gentleman', but to the racist shadow of Hollywood film-making. It was rumoured that there was much concern during production as to whether Belafonte and Fontaine would kiss (Hamilton 1957: 30; "To Kiss or Not to Kiss" 1957: 34). While it was eventually decided that their lips would not touch, the two actors were permitted to drink from the same coconut shell as a sign of their insinuated romance.

In the months before it was released, while the actors were doing promotional interviews for the film, Belafonte was requested not to refer to Joan Fontaine in any of the press he did (Hamilton 1957:30). Fontaine, for her part, received hate letters for the relationship that the film suggested. The culmination of negative reaction to the film came in the form of requests that the Defence Department not show the film to any American servicemen and the South Carolina legislature proposing a bill which would levy a $5,000 dollar fine against any theatre that showed it (Hamilton 1957:30). Tom Dowdy notes: "To the expected southern boycotts were added nothern phone campaigns and a mysterious chain letter

out of Minneapolis warning that the would promote a new teenage fad --"Negro-white dating and petting parties" (63).

In response to these attacks, Twentieth Century Fox and the film's producers maintained what initially appeared to be a staunch line against these racist complaints. In one case, they threatened to cancel the film's licensing agreement with those distributors and theatre owners that considered editing out racially sensitive material from the film ("Island in the Sun' will stay as it is" 1958). However, perhaps more curious than the reactionary response of Southern conservatives (or the studio's brave face in confronting them) was the tempered reaction of Darryl F. Zanuck, the film's producer.

Zanuck's public statements faced the film's problems with an interesting kind of subterfuge. Zanuck remarked that "the problems that arise in the British West Indies because of racial issues are not at all comparable to the colour problem in the United States today" ("To Kiss or Not to Kiss" 1957: 34). With regard to the aborted kiss between Belafonte and Fontaine, he similarly remarked: "There is no scene that calls for kissing. There was no conscious effort to avoid it" ("To Kiss or Not to Kiss" 1957:34). It seemed that Zanuck's crusade only stretched between the film's sprocket holes and made no attempt to reach beyond the theatre's marquee.

Island in the Sun was not simply an autonomous text which failed to properly articulate itself. The film and its production were oriented in relation to various social groups and ideological formations which played a considerable role in circumscribing the film's horizons. The fluctuating level of engagement in racial debates shown by Zanuck and the studios and echoed by the film itself is, in many ways, reflective of the strategies which had become a crucial tool for the management of political tensions among the middle classes (Ross 1989: 65-101). Although the film addresses the problem of race in America indirectly, it still does so on terms that are very clearly circumscribed by the limits of 'mainstream' public discourse in the 1950s.

Zanuck is able to both refer (on screen) and deny (off screen) any relevance for his film to racial conflict in the American context without contradiction. In many ways this returns to the ambivalence that was first glimpsed in connection with "Lena & Harry" in the introduction. It also traces the limits of the mainstream's celebration of African American culture. Unlike Southern conservatives, who condemned the film as "disgraceful" and out-of-hand, the white middle classes maintained a very 'thin' relationship with African American cultural products and individuals through tightly regulated channels of cultural exchange.

In their pursuit of the broadest possible market, the major film studios had attempted since the early

1950s to produce films which did not launch strong criticisms of social and political ills. While one motivation for this was undoubtedly the experience of the McCarthy hearings in the early part of the decade, there were other reasons as well. The studios had decided that since political films performed unpredictably at the box-office and granted limited prestige to their company name, they were too risky to produce regularly.[10] These financial concerns were undoubtedly an influence on the varying responses from the studio and the producers as well towards the film's relationship with racial strife in the United States.

Similar positions to this are observable beyond the film industry. In the mid-to-late 1950s, *The New Yorker*,[11] for example, astutely appropriated the surfacing of bebop as exciting, but tired of Swing music due to its lack of existential complexity. At the same time, the magazine made almost no reference to the emergent civil rights movements, the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* getting only scant mention during the second half of 1954 (Jan 1 1955: 12). Nonetheless the magazine's pages were filled with ads for Bermuda Shorts (Sept. 11 1954:50), Calypso Shirts (June 5, 1954: 70) and nightclubs which offered glimpses of real tropical life (that is to say tourism rather than activism.)

[10] See Tino Balio (ed.), *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (for a discussion of the film studios production policies in the post-war period.

[11] In my research I scanned *The New Yorker* from late 1953 until August 1958.

Furthermore, no African American, to my knowledge, was pictured in the magazine until Dorothy Dandridge's 1956 performances at the Waldorf-Astoria's Empire Room, in spite of the fact that black performers were regularly reviewed. A good example of this race-based oversight relates directly to Belafonte. In 1954, Belafonte was performing in *Three for Tonight*, a comedy-musical review which was receiving strong notice from most of the New York media. Even though Belafonte received special mention every week in *The New Yorker's* weekly listings, when the revue was featured in the theatre section with a caricature, all of Belafonte's co-stars were featured save him.

In the period being discussed, articles about *Island in the Sun* were usually separate from those which dealt with Belafonte's marriage. As already noted, this was a division which related to the different interests of the black and white press. The blanket silence of the white press, however, is indicative of sentiments which define the core of American race relations. The muffled approach to racial politics which permeates even the film itself says something about what was repressed, not what was simply ignored.

The most detailed coverage of his marriage and its fallout beyond the black media took place in *Confidential* and other star-scandal magazines. There, the couple was seized upon to bring forth a whole host of stereotypes about the sexual potency of the African

American male. Behind a studied silence and remote appreciation for African American culture, there remained the spectres of sexual jealousy and economic exclusion ("Why whites marry Negroes" 1966). However, these fears were present from the outset, as is evident from the concern that the film would lead to unregulated sexual contact between white and black teenagers. It became increasingly clear that the breakthrough of African American performers into the mainstream was a relationship that was not following a path towards an increasingly open attitude. It was, instead a trope which sought to regulate, organize and control difference.

Disintegrating Harry

In the same year that *Island in the Sun* was released and Belafonte married for a second time, E. Franklin Frazier's landmark study *Black Bourgeoisie* was released in English. This book, which traced the black middle class "in the process of becoming NOBODY" (Frazier 1962:26), polemically attacked the idea of economic success as a sign of racial integration. Frazier seized upon the ethic of 'conspicuous consumption' as being emblematic of the black bourgeoisie's desire to 'pass' in white culture and, in the process, abandoning (or forgetting) their cultural origins.

However, Frazier, as already noted, found some cause for hope among the new generation of the black middle class (Frazier 1962:6). This new generation was more aware of the limits which circumscribed their social and physical mobility in American society. They were acutely aware of the produced nature of popular culture and its discontinuities with the realities of everyday life. Most importantly they had a sense of their history, and this would ultimately save them from the cultural alienation that had consumed the older bourgeoisie.

It is, therefore, possible to read the scandal surrounding Belafonte as an attack on the blatant indifference shown by mainstream media outlets to the place of African Americans in the United States. The concern about his celebrity which broke out after the announcement of his marriage was a public response to Belafonte's celebrity as it was developing in mainstream venues like *Island in the Sun*. It was an attempt to protect the public sphere from representations of black men which were both sexually and economically exploitative.

According to this view, the audience that welcomed this indifference, the masses of the United States, were more interested in preserving the myth of effortless integration than openly confronting the realities of race in America. This included both the white middle classes and the traditional black bourgeoisie. This kind

of indirect, non-systematic popular protest follows a logic fleshed out in relation to innumerable examinations of subaltern social groups. It may even be seen as a manifestation of what DuBois had described as the black man's "double consciousness" in American society. Belafonte, by moving towards the spaces and economies of the mainstream media was seen to be liquidating his authenticity at cut-rate prices for dollars and cents.

There are, however, some very serious problems with this explanation of Belafonte's apotheosis and rejection. Most importantly it falls victim too easily to the traditionally held opposition between the street-wise black, with organic roots in the community, and the willingly duped white suburbanite isolated from the world. It totalises an ambiguous situation. It may be true that the rise of an generation of identity conscious critics led to the diffusion of a position which approached mainstream culture from a critical perspective. What is left out of this discussion is the fact that even in dissenting from the images presented by the mainstream, such a position was still supported by the same discursive and institutional structures as more affirmative readings.

Even though the Black press as well as intellectual and political leaders proudly declared the difference of African American cultural in the period, these declarations were still centred around the same issues

as earlier constructions. Every aspect of Belafonte's celebrity developed in relation to a rather traditional notion of masculinity. Moreover, to oppose the critical and the dominant readings of Belafonte overlooks the extent to which they were mixed by consumers who read and viewed in a promiscuous fashion. The complexity of Belafonte is that his acceptance and rejection were simultaneous.

Conclusion:Success and Succession

Writing about the world of the white-collar worker in 1951, C. Wright Mills lamented the cultural vacuum which stifled the majority of America's new middle classes.

> There is no plan of life. Among white-collar people, the malaise is deep-rooted; for the absence of any order of belief has left them morally defenceless as individuals and politically impotent as a group. Newly created in a harsh time of creation, white-collar man has no culture to lean upon except the contents of a mass society that has shaped him and seeks to manipulate him to its alien ends...This isolated position makes him excellent material for synthetic moulding at the hands of popular culture- print, film, radio, and television. (Mills 1951: xvi)

This diagnosis of the plight of the modern middle class is very much in keeping with Mills' Weberian view of American society.

In his trilogy of studies, *The New Men of Power* (1948), *White Collar* (1951), and *The Power Elite* (1956) he traced the demise of the traditional bourgeoisie, the centralization of property and power and the ultimate rationalization of cultural and economic life in the United States. Mills warned that the isolation of the individual and the decline of free thought and action would be the final results of America's new found abundance. As the passage cited above clearly indicates, mass-produced cultural products played a crucial role in

this new way of life. They constituted what he described as the "cultural apparatus."

It is difficult to dispute the core of Wright's description of the new social and economic landscape. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a period in which property and wealth came to be held by an increasingly limited segment of the population (Mills 1951: 13-33). While the middle class expanded, the newly affluent did not derive their prosperity from traditional forms of husbandry or the production of goods; the majority were salaried workers dependent, albeit indirectly, on the most wealthy for their livelihood.

Moreover, by the 1950s the new middle classes, and indeed much of American society, conceived of itself in relation to mediated images produced by the same elites that, according to Mills, threatened the white-collar worker's sense of worth through mundane and repetitious labour (Mills 1956: 315-316). The period is often noted as the time in which 'mass culture', which is to say a society constituted and defined by goods produced and consumed on a large-scale, consolidated its position of dominance in the United States (Rosenberg and White 1957; Foreman 1994).

It is, however, a more difficult task to prove either the essentially manipulative quality of mass cultural products or the "impotency" that results from the ensuing emptiness of modern life. Writers such as

Theodor Adorno, are often put forward as having adopted a view which, in accord with Mills, asserts that popular culture is deeply implicated in processes of deception within which discontent with the contemporary social and economic systems is contained (Adorno 1972: 120-167). However, other critics, seizing upon the diversity of consumption practices, have more recently suggested that the individual retains a considerable degree of agency when it comes to the use and interpretation of mass-produced cultural artifacts (Hebdige 1979, Hall 1980).

In practice one finds various hybrid forms of relating to cultural products. While individual situations seem to favour either the independence of consumers or the intentions of producers, every encounter must strike a balance between interpretive autonomy and domineering manipulation. This is certainly the case here. In considering Belafonte, it is important to recognise the instrumental purposes to which such a celebrity-image was put, but not to be overwhelmed by them completely. Among possible reception strategies, Mills' skepticism must be expressed not only in relation to various fears and anxieties, but also pleasure and political engagement (Grossberg 1992, Grossberg 1990).

In his study *Stars* Richard Dyer elaborates the concept of 'star-text' (Dyer 1979), an idea which is particularly germane to the topic discussed. By this term Dyer refers to the collection of images, texts and other artifacts which facilitate the presentation of

individuals to groups by mediated means. In a 'star-text' the relationship between all of these objects is not unified or simplistic. The media do not simply amplify or distort. The social technics involved in stardom are much more subtly implicated in ideological processes.

"From the perspective of ideology," Dyer explains,

> analyses of stars, as images existing in films and other media texts, stress their polysemy, that is the finite multiplicity of meaning and affects they embody so to structure them that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced. (Dyer 1979: 3)

By stressing the "finite multiplicity of meaning and affects" in his own analysis Dyer strikes a reasonable, if overly general, balance between the processes of late capitalism and the variability of everyday life.

Unlike Dyer, who attempts to outline the hermeneutic limits of a star-text, my aim here was to take a reading from a particular period in history and understand more fully some aspects of the text (Belafonte), the context (the middle classes) and the relationship between the two. Implicit in Dyer's argument is the claim that stars serve a purpose. This purpose does not seem to be very dissimilar to that outlined by Foucault regarding the 'discursive apparatus'(Foucault 1980: 196). However, a star-text's "strategic function" (Foucault 1980: 196) does not in any way reduce the complex function of celebrity in

culture.

While Belafonte was implicated in exploitative discourses which could be considered a part of what Ellis Cashmore has called 'the black cultural industry',[1] his celebrity also provided a space in which some productive ideas about the changing status of African Americans were put into broad circulation. It is this ambiguity, and its resonance with other cultural debates, that was evoked here. Stardom and celebrity are complex phenomena. Intentions of performers, producers, record company personnel and fans do not always manifest themselves in clear and direct ways.

It is because of these complications that contemporary social movements and developments in the cultural industries are integral for understanding Harry Belafonte. Such an approach effectively counteracts one of the very real shortcomings from which debates about racial equality in American culture have long suffered. The failure to understand the complex ways in which cultural production is itself an evolving phenomenon *in*

[1] Cashmore sets out to describe the culture and institutional nature of what he calls the 'black cultural industry' in his study of the same name. He outlines the plan of his analysis in the following manner:

> In the course of this book, we will see how black culture has been converted into a commodity, usually in the interests of white-owned corporations; how blacks have been permitted to excel in entertainment only on the condition that they conform to the whites' images of blacks; and how blacks, themselves, when they rise to the top of the corporate entertainment ladder, have tended to act precisely as whites have in similar situations. (Cashmore 1997: 1)

culture leads to the reiteration of a well worn tale in which African American performers are taken up by the media industry and repackaged and sold. There is, however, more at play than a simple relation of exploiter to exploited.

Frameworks for discussing African American culture are often linked to a relatively stable and unquestioned notion of African American identity (Van Deburg 1997). It has been shown here that such a concept is the product of specific political and economic positionings. Moreover, in spite of promising work in the area, discussions of celebrities are often unsatisfactorily superficial in their treatment of race. There is a complex web of actors, agents and ideas that must be examined in reciprocal relation with one another.

In this case, it is the broad narrative of racial integration in the United States that bring together the aspects of Belafonte's career discussed here. Belafonte the calypso singer operated as a symbol of the height to which blacks could rise in the new America. It was, however, a representation which obscured the economic and social realities surrounding race. His image as businessman seemed to suggest an open access to the American economy without any serious form of compromise, a privilege never previously enjoyed by blacks. But it attacked the necessary links such access implied with mainstream economic and cultural activity. The different approaches to Belafonte's celebrity reveal that

integration, in spite of its essentially communal and cooperative meaning, was interpreted differently by different social groups.

Among the white middle classes, integration was praised as the righting of a historical wrong. The implementation of this correction was, however, limited by the fact that any changes could not challenge the economic and cultural stability of the white middle class itself. In the various relationships with Belafonte traced here, the way in which his image both supported, exploited and repressed the idea of the African American male is quickly apparent. Belafonte was involved in an ambiguous set of relations whose ultimate effect was to distance the progress of the mainstream from the concerns of African Americans.

Among the black middle class, an image of social revolution was presented, but it too was hamstrung by the constraints and limitations of a cultural position which openly worked against any serious change to the social and economic hierarchy. The limitations of this view became more apparent as the era of civil rights developed. The radical changes of the sixties show that such divisions can be broken down and real social change can occur. However, it is not unfair to say that the ambiguities that Belafonte represented are much more typical of popular images of African Americans in the media than those transgressive instances.

While Belafonte continues to be successful and has

toured around the country to sold out houses even quite recently, it is difficult not to acknowledge that the relevance of his performances to political issues has declined. This trend was clear even in the sixties. While he continued to be a valued confidant of Martin Luther King Jr. and remained a vocal supporter of the rights of oppressed minorities, the public whose dreams of success he represented in the previous decade began to desert him as the political and cultural landscape was rearticulated. He seemed like a man out of step with the times, trapped in the fifties.

Ultimately, Belafonte's celebrity, even in its earliest stages, navigates the complex political terrain upon which success could be achieved and represented in the United States. The placid facade of "Harry & Lena" hid numerous tensions, contradictions and denials. The road from Belafonte's explosive arrival on the American scene to that indifferent moment on national television reveal a history that instead of actively confronting questions about the relationship between race, representation and money failed in its attempt to provide an open space in which to confront these issues.

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