



Born on March 1, 1927, in New York City, Harry Belafonte struggled with poverty and turbulent family life as a child. His professional career took off with the musical *Carmen Jones*, and soon he was burning up the charts with hits like "The Banana Boat Song (Day-O)" and "Jump in the Line." Belafonte has also championed many social and political causes and earned such prestigious accolades as the National Medal of Arts.

His mother worked as a dressmaker and a house cleaner, and his father served as a cook on merchant ships, before leaving the family when Belafonte was a young boy.

Belafonte also spent much of his early years in Jamaica, his mother's native country. There, he saw first-hand the oppression of blacks by the English authorities, which left a lasting impression on him.

Belafonte returned to New York City's Harlem neighbourhood in 1940 to live with his mother. They struggled in poverty, and Belafonte was often cared for by others while his mother worked. "The most difficult time in my life was when I was a kid," he later told. "My mother gave me affection, but, because I was left on my own, also with much anguish."

Dropping out of high school, Belafonte enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1944. He returned to New York City after his discharge and was working as a janitor's assistant when he first attended a production at the American Negro Theatre (AMT). Mesmerised by the performance, the young Navy vet volunteered to work for the AMT as a stagehand, eventually deciding to become an actor.

Belafonte studied drama at the Dramatic Workshop run by Erwin Piscator, where his classmates included Marlon Brando, Walter Matthau and Bea Arthur. Along with appearing in AMT productions, he caught the eye of music agent Monte Kay, who offered Belafonte the opportunity to perform at a jazz club called the Royal Roost. Backed by such talented musicians as Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, Belafonte became a popular act at the club. In 1949 he landed his first recording deal.

By the early 1950s, Belafonte had dropped popular music from his repertoire in favour of folk. He became an avid student of traditional folk songs from around the world and performed in such New York City clubs as the Village Vanguard.