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# Belafonte rides 'Long Road' for black history

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STAFF REPORTER

Singer-actor: Harry Belafonte used the diverse sound of the African-American experience to put a face on the burgeoning civil rights movement. Belafonte spent nearly 20 years as principal producer of "The Long Road to Freedom: An Anthology of Black Music," an 80-song, five-CD and bonus DVD box set that covers 1961-71.

"The Long Road to Freedom" is up for three Grammy Awards Wednesday night: best historical album, best album notes and best boxed recording package. Not bad for a collection that was collecting cobwebs at BMG Entertainment from the time of its original recording until 2000.

Belafonte developed the idea for the anthology in 1954, when segregation was still legal in America. In an interview from his New York home, Belafonte called that year "the dominant silence of our struggle."

Belafonte said the definitive starting point for the anthology was the 1954 Supreme Court decision on Brown vs. Board of Education, which mandated desegregation of public schools. It was the litmus test for what became the civil rights movement. By 1956, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had recruited Belafonte for the movement, talking to the singer about the power of art and music in a meeting at Adam Clayton Powell's church in Harlem, N.Y.

"Many of us were looking for

"What role do we play in this new moment in American history?" said Belafonte, who turns 75 on Friday. "Through culture I felt we had a voice of power, and if we could articulate the nuances of the struggle it would help enhance the understanding of the struggle. I thought it was very critical to get back into the earliest days of slavery, where we came from as a people and what we were aspiring to."

"The Long Road to Freedom" features myriad expressive moments, including a rare take of jazz vocalist Joe Williams singing "Easy Rider Blues" (circa 1962); Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee covering the hoedown "Pick a Bale o' Cotton," and Belafonte singing a six-minute version of "Boll Weevil" and the spiritual "My God Is a Rock." There are rich river-sounding chants and hymns of slavery from the Georgia Sea Islands.

"Most black Americans have been one-dimensionalized," Belafonte continues. "We are faceless, voiceless, especially with those who don't want to deal with issues of our oppression. So how do you put a face upon us that says our humanity is far greater than you are prepared to recognize—and that we are prepared to recognize in ourselves? In order to know that, you must understand where we came from."

"Most ways in which black people are defined are from the moment of slavery. From that point on, nobody accepts that we have a pre-history. That we were a people of culture, came from



Harry Belafonte, shown working at a New York recording studio in November 2001, put in 20 years as executive producer of the compilation "Long Road to Freedom," which was nominated for three Grammys. AP

the beginning of time and went through dynasties and did all kinds of stuff."

Technological costs prohibited Belafonte from going out in the field, a la Alan Lomax. Instead, most of the artists came to Webster Hall in New York City for recording sessions. Belafonte maintained at least two criteria for the project:

1. He reviewed the music with African-American choral arranger Leonard de Paur (1914-1998). De Paur was also musical director of "John Henry," which starred Paul Robeson in 1940, and he is best known for his world-renowned Infantry Chorus, which boosted the morale of soldiers during World War II.

"Leonard brought intellectual power to the table," Belafonte says. "He knew how to take that raw ethnic quality and put it into the refinement of musical translation that gave a perma-

nence to the notation of the music. Any choir in the world can sing this music with any nuances. Now, this music can be referred to like any Mozart or Beethoven piece."

2. The other criterion is a result of the first criterion. If you rearrange and refine the music in a recording session, do you lose spontaneity you might find the field?

Belafonte answered, "Our challenge was to integrate both of these styles into one form. Bessie Jones (the late call-and-response gospel singer from the Georgia Sea Islands) and her singers have some studio singers to help bring her art to a level where it had a decent blend with the rest of what was being articulated in the album. The timbre of her voice and her group you hear very clearly was not what you found when you went to the Library of Congress and found

the early (Bessie Jones, 1961) recordings of Alan Lomax that had been done on wire. You certainly can hear the beauty of the energy of the material, but you had no idea how dimensional it was in harmonic structure and other things."

On the other hand, some things are purely timeless, such as the long-running bickering between Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. Their playful version of the country-blues sendup "Fox Chase," recorded in the summer of 1970, is a highlight of the box set.

"They had a tension, that if it did not exist, they wouldn't be who they were," Belafonte says. "There was such rivalry. It was like two brothers bitching at one another, because neither expected the other to do anything—yet they could not do a thing without each other. Everything they did together was magic."