

# And the Oscar Goes to Harry Belafonte: Cooperative Housing Organizer, Lifetime Cooperative Activist

By David J. Thompson

This February with over 40 million people watching, Harry Belafonte was awarded an honorary Oscar at the Academy Awards in Hollywood. The world saw the 87-year-old singer, actor and civil rights activist honored for his lifetime contribution to humanitarian causes and social change. Some of us will also know him for being a cooperative organizer and lifetime cooperative supporter.

Harry Belafonte's first home ownership was a cooperative.

By 1958, Harry Belafonte had become a famous name all over the world. In 1953 he recorded "Matilda" his life-long signature song and best selling single. He also had eight albums to his name, and his 1956 Calypso Album featuring "Jamaica Farewell" and the "Banana Boat Song (Day O)" topped the charts for 31 weeks. Calypso was the first album to sell over one million copies. Belafonte had also become a screen symbol in the 1954 movie "Carmen Jones" followed by his impactful inter-racial 1957 movie "Island in the Sun" with Joan Fontaine.

Belafonte was at the height of his popularity and could pack concert halls all around the world. However, for all of his fame and fortune, the one thing he could not do was to rent or own an apartment in midtown Manhattan.

Belafonte writes in his book, "My Song," "Yet by now, I was having almost daily talks with Martin (Martin Luther King Jr.). The more he and I spoke, the more I realized that the movement was more important than anything else. I was feeling my way with all this, in the fall of 1958, when I ran into a color barrier so blatant and infuriating – in Manhattan, of all places--that I put my existential balancing act aside."

Belafonte and his wife had started searching for a larger apartment. "Our first thought was to rent on the Upper East Side, but every broker we contacted seemed to blanch when we walked in. The message conveyed, either implicitly or overtly, was that we'd be happier in some other neighborhood. I heard the message loud and clear, and I sent back one of my own, by calling a press conference to announce I'd filed a formal complaint with the city. One of those who read the news was Eleanor Roosevelt."



Harry Belafonte (left) speaks at the Alabama center of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. He is flanked by its Executive Director Ralph Paige.

In her nationally syndicated column, My Day, published on October 20 of that year, former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, "I am sure that every New Yorker was shocked the other day to read that Harry Belafonte and his charming wife and baby were finding it practically impossible to get an apartment in New York City except in what might be considered segregated areas or in a hotel."

In that same column, Eleanor Roosevelt highlighted housing cooperatives as one of the solutions for de-segregation, "There are beginnings to encourage us. The Committee on Civil Rights in Manhattan, for example, has issued a pamphlet on housing cooperatives which may be the answer for a number of people. Some private builders who are planning and constructing cooperative apartments are particularly interested in seeing that there is no discrimination in any project where they have invested their money."

However, a few months later, Belafonte and his wife did find a four-bedroom apartment they really liked at 300 West End Avenue. They loved the place,

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but when they tried to rent it the apartment was “suddenly unavailable.”

Belafonte recounts, “Furious, I sent a white friend – Mike Merrick, my publicist- in as my stalking horse. Now the lease was readily conferred. Mike passed it on to me, I signed it with my own name, and the one year lease was countersigned. Apparently, the building manager did not know who I was. Julie and I moved our furniture in first, then showed up to take occupancy. Within hours, the building manager became aware that he had a Negro as a tenant.” The building owner responded by telling Belafonte to pack up and leave, but Belafonte refused.

As Belafonte tells it in his book, the apartment building was owned by Ramfis Trujillo, the illegitimate son of the dictator of the Dominican Republic. Belafonte and others set up anonymous companies that sent in separate bids to buy the building.

Belafonte recounts, “The whole concept of cooperatives was just beginning to take hold. What we were proposing would soon become a trend. We would buy the building outright from its owner, then try to sell as many of the apartments as possible to the tenants who lived in them. Any tenant who preferred to keep renting could do that.”

“It all worked like a charm. Just as my one year lease was about to lapse, our absentee billionaire owner accepted the highest bid.”

The building was bought by Belafonte and his partners. Belafonte put up most of the funds. The other tenants purchased shares, and the housing cooperative was created. As the remaining rental units turned over, Belafonte encouraged his friends to join the cooperative. Lena Horne (Belafonte’s singing partner on the album *Porgy and Bess*) was one of the first to join the cooperative. “We didn’t just invite black friends though, our goal was integration not “reverse segregation” But I was glad to have a home that was mine.” Belafonte’s first home ownership was a cooperative.

In March of 1959, that cooperative apartment, Belafonte’s first home would welcome as one of its earliest guests, Martin and Coretta King. “Martin would come to think of it as his home away from home, staying with us on many of his New York trips, he brought with him two or three of his closest advisors, and by the mid sixties, the apartment was one of the movement’s New York headquarters.”

For the next almost 50 years that cooperative was Belafonte’s home. Numerous civil rights leaders, celebrities and public figures would come there for meetings or for fundraising receptions. Among those who came were Eleanor Roosevelt and later Senator John Kennedy to seek Belafonte’s support

for his 1960 presidential candidacy. He sold his cooperative apartment in 2006.

Belafonte played an important role during the key years of the Civil Rights Movement. During that time he became a confidante of Martin Luther King and his family. At a fundraiser in his cooperative apartment in March of 1963, he raised \$50,000 which was sent to bail out as many people as possible from the Birmingham jail. That was at the time that Martin Luther King was writing his now famous, “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

One cooperative that Belafonte cared a great deal for was the Freedom Farm Cooperative started in Ruleville, Sunflower County, Miss. led by the civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer. Hamer knew there would be no safety unless the land was owned by the cooperative and not leased from a landlord. Only 71 blacks owned land in Sunflower County which had a black population of 31,000.

In 1969, Belafonte wrote a fundraising letter urging people to donate toward the purchase of land for the Freedom Farm Cooperative. In his letter Belafonte wrote that Freedom Farm was an, “example of initiative, racial cooperation, and political militancy worthy of the support of all decent Americans.” Enough money was raised to eventually buy over 700 acres.

During this time Belafonte also became a fervent supporter of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and its many programs throughout the South. In 2003, the Federation marked Belafonte’s contributions by awarding him its highest honor, the Estelle Witherspoon Award at its annual awards banquet in Birmingham.

Ralph Paige, executive director of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, has known Belafonte since the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. Paige recently recounted; “We could not buy the support that Harry has given the Federation over the years. Without his (Belafonte’s) backing there are so many things that the Federation could not have achieved. I still call him a lot, and in all those years he has never turned us down. Belafonte has stuck with the Federation through thick and thin.”

Belafonte’s award was pre-filmed on November 9, 2014. At that ceremony, Belafonte spoke eloquently about his desire for social change. Belafonte also was honored at the 2015 Oscars’ Ceremony. We are to be grateful to him that for his life of social activism he has continuously supported cooperatives as a solution. [CHB](#)

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