



Jul 2

Grad Research: John Cline Reviews Harry Belafonte Memoir by American Studies

We've all heard the hits from singer Harry Belafonte, from "Banana Boat Song" to "Jump in the Line." But many fans of those songs and others are unaware that Belafonte – the King of Calypso – is also an active and vocal social activist. A new memoir by the singer hopes to shed light on those aspects of his political engagement, beyond the songs that became comedy centerpieces in Tim Burton's 1988 film *Beetlejuice*.

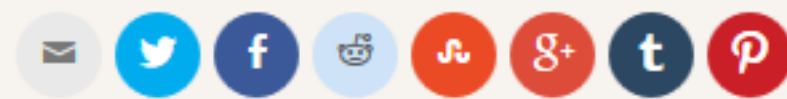


One of our department's recent graduates, **John Cline**, has recently published a review of the memoir in the Los Angeles Review of books, where he parses the difficult genre from which the book emerges – the black entertainer's autobiography – and considers the strange inattention to Belafonte's Jamaican heritage. Here's an excerpt:

Harry Belafonte's My Song: A Memoir, written in collaboration with Michael Shnayerson and published late last year, is a peculiar offering within the genre of the black entertainer's autobiography. Although totaling out at a doorstopper length of 450 pages, it isn't until exactly halfway through that Belafonte gives a direct assessment of his own, very long career: "I wasn't an artist who'd become an activist. I was an activist who'd become an artist." This priority, though, is implicit at the outset. Rather than leading with an anecdote about "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)," the tune for which he is perhaps best known, Belafonte chooses to recount the drama and danger of a trip with Sidney Poitier – a lifelong friend and fellow West Indian – when the two brought a bag full of cash to help fund Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee activists in Mississippi, a story replete with pursuit by Klansmen in pickup trucks and very real concerns about their accommodations being firebombed in the middle of the night.

Check the full piece out here.

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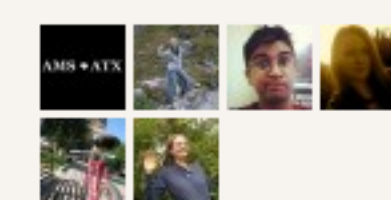
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