

**The following interview with  
HARRY BELAFONTE  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on October 7, 2019**



**Library of Congress:** I noticed that if you type the name “Harry Belafonte” into the internet, it quickly describes you—labels you—as a “folk” artist. Is this fair? Is that accurate? Do you consider yourself a folk artist?

Harry Belafonte: I think all artists are folk artists. Anyone who sings is a folk artist. It is the culture and the history that they come from. It is the influence of their heritage, of my heritage.

**LOC:** Why do you think that folk music was gaining such traction at that time in the mid-1950s, eventually to bloom so big in the 1960s?

HB: It was because of three men, three artists: Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly. It was the richness of their story-telling, the richness of their thinking and the richness of their art. And it had not existed like that before. They were the inventors of “folk.”

**LOC:** Can you tell me a bit about the basic “mechanics” of the album. For example, where was it recorded?

HB: We recorded in New York. At RCA, in their studios. It took the typical time for an album—about a week....

I used my own musicians—yeah, I always use my musicians. That way I get my musicians my way. *[Laughs.]*

I had worked with all of them before, they were my regular guys—except for one: Bob Dylan. He played the harmonica.

I had not met [Dylan] before. I was looking for someone like Brownie McGhee but he wasn’t available or he couldn’t make it that day. So I turned to my accompanist, Millard Thomas, and

he suggested this guy down in the Village who could do it appropriately, and that was Bob. So he came in.

**LOC: Was he a good harmonica player?**

HB: Good enough for me! [*Laughs.*]

**LOC: Did you receive any pushback from the record company for wanting to record a collection of calypso songs and release it at that time?**

HB: Yes! From everybody. They thought me doing it was an affront to the many great calypso artists. That I was invading somehow. But I had this history in my back pocket. I had grown up in the Caribbean and in Jamaica and I thought it was good idea. Well, the *authorities* at RCA, didn't. They said it would have no audience. It was just not a recognized genre in that day.

But then, George Marek, head of RCA, said, "Let the artist do what was is in heart to do."

And it was the very first album to ever sell a million copies.

**LOC: Of course, one of the songs on the album is the immortal "Day-O." It is so enduring. Do you have any theory why it had endured so?**

HB: I think, first of all, its melody is contagious. Then I always invited participation when I performed it and the audience always happily jumped in. It became a regular part of my routine....

Even on the street, I would see people and they'd yell, "Hey, 'Day-O'!" I took it as a badge of honor.