

DID YOU KNOW? HARRY BELAFONTE HAS JEWISH BLOOD

Researched by George Plohn

Harry Belafonte, the ever popular singer of the 'Matilda' song fame was born **Harold George Bellanfanti, Jr.** on March 1, 1927, in Harlem, New York, the son of Melvine (née Love), a dressmaker and a house cleaner of Jamaican descent, and Harold George Bellanfanti, Sr., a Martiniquan who worked as a cook in the British Royal Navy. His mother was born in Jamaica, the child of a Scottish white mother and a black father. His father also was born in Jamaica, the child of a black mother and a **Dutch Jewish father of Sephardi origin**. This is what Harry said about his Jewish grandfather, whom he never met: *"a white Dutch Jew who drifted over to the islands after chasing gold and diamonds, with no luck at all"*.

From 1932 to 1940, Harry was sent to live with one of his grandmothers in her native country of Jamaica. When he returned to New York City, he attended George Washington High School after which he enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1944. He served in the Pacific during the end of World War II. After being discharged from the service, Belafonte returned to New York City. He seemed directionless for a time, working a series of odd jobs, such as a janitor's assistant, when a tenant gave him, as a gratuity, two tickets to see the American Negro Theater. He fell in love with the art form and also met there Sidney Poitier. The financially struggling pair regularly used to purchase a single seat to local plays, trading places in between acts, after informing the other about the progression of the play. At the end of the 1940s, he took classes in acting at the Dramatic Workshop of The New School in New York with the influential and renowned German director **Erwin Piscator** alongside students such as **Marlon Brando, Tony Curtis, Walter Matthau, Rod Steiger**, Ben Gazzara, **Bea Arthur and Sidney Poitier**, Tony Curtis, Ben Gazzara, Eli Wallach, and Tennessee Williams.

Belafonte started his career in music as a club singer in New York to pay for his acting classes. The first time he appeared in front of an audience, he was backed by the **Charlie Parker band**. Belafonte soon made his debut at the legendary jazz club The Village Vanguard. In 1952 he received a contract with RCA Victor. His first

widely released single, which went on to become his "signature" song with audience participation in virtually all his live performances, was "**Matilda**", recorded in April 27, 1953. His breakthrough album "**Calypso**" (1956) became the first LP in the world "to sell over 1 million copies within a year". And he continued to enchant us all until his permanent retirement after what was his last benefit concert for the Atlanta Opera on October 25, 2003. In a 2007 interview he stated that he had indeed retired from performing.



The young Harry Belafonte



Belafonte at the 2011
Berlin Film Festival