

# 'Speaking Freely'

*Artists and entertainers talk about their role in the civil rights movement.*

"Speaking Freely" is a weekly program about free expression and the arts that is shown on public television stations throughout the country. Over the past several seasons, host Ken Paulson has talked with dozens of well-known artists, writers, actors and musicians about how they've used their celebrity to make a difference in the world — and about how the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment have enabled them to do so.

Perhaps at no other time have artists and entertainers been more instrumental in social change in America than during the civil rights movement, when many successful performers publicly committed themselves to the cause despite the risk it meant to their own careers and, possibly, to their lives.

"Speaking Freely" has talked with some of these influential artists. This video combines excerpts from several conversations to reveal what compelled performers such as Ossie Davis and Harry Belafonte to take part in the movement and how they felt artists could contribute. As Belafonte says, "Those of us who had witnessed this oppression had a responsibility to do all that we could to change it and to make a difference ... and I saw in art the opportunity to instruct, and to use that platform to influence."

The video and the accompanying teacher's guide and discussion questions give a thought-provoking view of the civil rights movement through the eloquent words of actors, singers and writers who were there, lending their talent and fame to the cause. If an artist's job is to communicate ideas and emotions to a larger audience, the ones interviewed here believed it was their duty to communicate to as wide an audience as possible the injustices faced by African-Americans.

The discussion questions lead students through an exploration of the role of artists in civil rights history, and — because the main tool that artists and other activists used to win

civil rights was the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution — they also explore the rights guaranteed in its 45 words:

***Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.***

Those who appear on “Speaking Freely” describe how the First Amendment enabled the movement:

- It gave artists, and anyone else, the right to speak out for civil rights, even when most Americans didn’t want to hear it.
- It gave them the right to organize and assemble peaceably and to demonstrate against the denial of those rights, from the freedom rides to the sit-ins to protests on the streets of Southern cities to the March on Washington.
- It gave them the right to petition the government through legal means to attain and enforce those rights, as blacks took their grievances to their elected representatives and to the courts.
- And it gave the press the right to cover the movement fully and truthfully, allowing the world to see the oppression blacks were fighting to overcome in the South.

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## **Introduction**

This section introduces the speakers and provides context and background to be discussed before viewing the video.

The video explores the roles artists and entertainers played in the civil rights movement, and why they felt compelled to become activists. It features Harry Belafonte and Ossie Davis, both of whom returned from World War II and entered the New York theater scene via Harlem theater companies, and both of whom used their ensuing success and visibility in the arts to champion the rights of all African-Americans. Each went on to have a long, distinguished career, and each is a recipient of the National Medal of Arts, America's highest arts honor.

Before viewing the video, give a short introduction to the early careers of Belafonte and Davis and put them in the context of black life in America in the 1940s and '50s, a time when African-Americans could become star entertainers but weren't allowed to stay in the hotels or socialize in many of the restaurants and clubs in which they performed. When Belafonte and Davis began their careers, it was almost a decade before the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* led to desegregation of public schools. It was almost two decades before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation in all public places (including restaurants, hotels, stores and workplaces) and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made it easier for Southern blacks to vote.

## **Harry Belafonte**

Singer, actor and producer Harry Belafonte was born to Caribbean immigrant parents in New York City's Harlem neighborhood in 1927. In 1953, he won a Tony Award for his first Broadway acting role; in 1955, he recorded "Calypso," which became the first-

ever album to sell a million copies; and, as the first African-American TV producer, he won an Emmy Award in 1960 for his own musical-variety show and received nominations for other programs featuring black casts. He became close friends with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and a tireless worker for civil rights, speaking and performing concerts for the cause as well as recruiting other cultural figures to join the movement. He was on the board of directors of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the major force in organizing the civil rights movement.

## **Ossie Davis**

Ossie Davis was born in Cogdell, Georgia, in 1917. By 1946, he had made his way to Broadway, where he met and soon married actress Ruby Dee. In 1961, he wrote, directed and starred with Dee in the Broadway hit “Purlie Victorious,” a satire about racism and segregation in the old South, which later became a film and a Broadway musical. Most of his film projects, as both a director and actor, were devoted to advancing the knowledge of black history. He and Dee spoke out for racial equality, helped raise money for the freedom riders and sued in federal court for black voting rights. As friends of King’s, they served as masters of ceremonies at the 1963 March on Washington. Davis gave the eulogy at the funeral of Malcolm X.

The video also highlights the experiences of artist Elizabeth Catlett and journalist/author David Halberstam, both of whose careers were heavily influenced by segregation and racism as they pursued equal rights for African-Americans.

## **Elizabeth Catlett**

Sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett was born in 1915 in Washington D.C., the granddaughter of slaves. As a talented young artist, she applied to a prestigious art school in hopes of becoming the first black student there. Though her work was praised, she was denied admission; she once overheard an instructor say, “It’s too bad she’s colored.” She went to Howard University instead, and is now considered one of the preeminent black artists of her generation. Her boldly graphic prints and pointed subject matter reflected the reality of African-American life and particularly that of black women. Though she spent

most of her life in Mexico, she supported civil rights and the “Black Power” movement with authoritative, political lithographs.

## David Halberstam

Born in New York City in 1934, David Halberstam is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and best-selling nonfiction author of books about American culture and politics. He started his career by moving to the South to work for a small-town Mississippi newspaper and then the Nashville *Tennessean*. There he covered the civil rights movement by reporting on a group of black college students who led the sit-ins at segregated lunch counters in Nashville. He then followed them as they joined the freedom riders in their quest to desegregate buses. He told their full story in his 1999 book *The Children*.

## Excerpt from Harry Belafonte interview

**Host Ken Paulson:** Welcome to “Speaking Freely,” a weekly conversation about the First Amendment, arts and America. I’m Ken Paulson, executive director of the First Amendment Center, joining you today from Nashville. We’re pleased to be joined today by a man who has had a remarkable career as a singer, actor and producer and has used his talents and fame to help build a better world: Harry Belafonte. Delighted to have you here.

**Harry Belafonte:** It’s nice to be here.

**Paulson:** This show is all about people who have used free expression to make a difference, and of course, that’s really been your entire career. Did you decide early on, as an artist, that you weren’t going to separate your art from your activism?

**Belafonte:** No, as a matter of fact, my earliest thoughts on activism had nothing to do with art. I had no idea I was going to become an artist. I became an activist because of poverty. Born in America, born in Harlem, born in a confined and oppressed circumstance, and watching all of those who are trapped in this abyss struggle against it, it became quite evident to me that the struggle would be going on from generation to generation, and that

those of us who had witnessed this oppression had a responsibility to do all that we could to change it and to make a difference, and I was instructed in these thoughts and in these ways by my mother and people who made up my community. When I became an artist, it became quite clear to me that art — and I quote my mentor, Paul Robeson — that “art is not just to show life as it is, but to show life as it should be,” and I saw in the world of art the opportunity to speak to issues that might help society grow and develop and become more understanding of itself.

**Paulson:** Do you think an artist has an obligation to do that?

**Belafonte:** Yes, I do. I think artists have a moral and a social and a personal responsibility, and they certainly have the right to do what they want or say what they want, but I do believe that height — the height of art — art in its highest form is art that serves and instructs society and human development.

**Paulson:** If the impulse to become an activist came earlier — early in your life — you didn't have the impulse to become an artist, I understand, until after you'd left the military.

**Belafonte:** After I left the military and discovered theater, I, quite accidentally, went to a small theater in the Harlem community, and I saw in that performance, and in the people gathered around, that — that center, a sense of purpose. I was quite taken with the brightness, the energy, the creativity that went on, and I saw in art the opportunity to instruct and to use that platform to influence, and the better your art, the better your capacity to influence, so I seized on it.

**Paulson:** And you walked into a remarkable acting class early on. Can you tell about that a bit?

**Belafonte:** Well, actually, there were two such happenstances. The first was in the American Negro Theater itself in Harlem, and when I walked into that organization, there were people like Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis and Sidney Poitier and others. However, the institution itself was not framed for higher instruction, and I had to go off to study theater in a deeper context. That took me to a school called the New School of Social Research and

Drama Workshop, under the tutelage of a man from the Max Reinhardt Theater in Germany, who had fled fascism and became a sought-after instructor here in America. And when I signed up to participate in that institution, I — on my first day of attendance, my classmates were Marlon Brando, Walter Matthau, Bea Arthur, Rod Steiger, Tony Curtis, just to name a few.

**Paulson:** Now, for a man who did not become an entertainer, or didn’t even have an interest in the arts, becoming a performer, until 1945, your career rise was pretty quick. By 1953, you’d won a Tony. A lot of people associate you, of course, with your recording career. In 1955, your calypso album, the first million-selling album, and that had to be an interesting time, because it was also the height of the Red Scare, people concerned about communists, and you were a man who felt the need to speak out. Was there a backlash against you?

**Belafonte:** Yes, there was a backlash against almost anyone who took up the cause of free speech, anyone who took up the cause of human rights, civil rights. America was in a — was not in a very generous mood at the end of the second World War. The generosity that this country showed towards Europe in the Marshall Plan and rebuilding Europe, rebuilding the land of the enemy, was far more on display than any willingness to treat its citizens of color with a sense of fair play. Many of us who served in the second World War had felt that the whole issue of democracy, the ending of totalitarianism, was, indeed, a lofty objective, and in the success of that — the execution of that war, we came back to America with expectations that the segregated laws would be turned on their — turned upside down, that America would be more embracing of the black soldiers who served in that war and served this country honorably. And America, as a matter of fact, was not in that mood. As a matter of fact, there was a strong resurgence of institutions, of segregation, and oppression, and to put us back in our place, to rid us of any lofty ideas we may have had about democracy in America as opposed to democracy elsewhere in the world. And those of us who had come from the war just felt that the deal was unacceptable, that we would continue to organize and to protest and to do what we could to change the way America was doing business with its citizens of color.

## Excerpt from Ossie Davis interview

**Paulson:** Joining us today is a distinguished actor, playwright, director and activist whose remarkable work spans more than half a century, Mr. Ossie Davis. Welcome. It's great to have you here.

**Davis:** Great to be here.

**Paulson:** I went back, and I read any number of press clips about your career over the years, and it seems like every reference to you mentions you as both an actor and an activist. Have the two always been inseparable?

**Davis:** For me, yes. The arts, for the black community, were always a form of our politics, our protests. I really imagine — and I tell people this sometimes — that when we were slaves, you know, huddled in the work camps and all, there must have been times when the old master sent down to the slave quarters and said, “That gal who was singin’ as I crossed the field — the senator’s coming tonight; get her up to the house.” And that girl would be taken and bathed and put on her best clothes. She’d come to the house, she’d sing, and the master would be absolutely ecstatic. The senator would be smiling. So out of the fullness of his heart, he would say to her, “Ah, you done good, gal. What can I do for you? What do you want to show my appreciation?” And then she would say, in addition to a few things for herself, “Well, if we could have some corn that didn’t have bugs in it or if we had a place where the water didn’t come in the roof, we sure would feel better.” So our arts were always, from the very beginning, a means of protest. It was the one way we had where we were free to truly declare that we were human beings and not cattle. So art was always very political for us. And when I came into the theater, the people who were most important to me were the heroes of the theater at that time — Paul Robeson and Canada Lee and Lena Horne. And they were all a part of the struggle. So I came in at that level and sort of joined the theater and joined in the struggle. And they were always, and still are in my mind, intertwined in my experience.



**Paulson:** When you entered the business of theater, were there African-American performers who didn't want any part of the politics?

**Davis:** Oh, yes, there were African-American performers who didn't want to be politically active, because they knew — and they were correct — that they were exposing themselves. In other words, they struggled so hard to get what little was there in the way of the crumbs, and now here we came along saying, "Never mind the crumbs. Go out and take a stand and march and, you know, show yourself." Said, "Don't be a fool. We just got in here. They gave us the opportunity. Let's just be quiet and make the best of it."

**Paulson:** At the very dawning of your career as an actor, I understand you saw Marian Anderson on that historic date in which she sang in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Can you talk about the controversy and your feeling about her and what that performance felt like?

**Davis:** Yes, well, I was a student at Howard University. Now, I had heard Marian Anderson sing on records and various other things and was very impressed with who she was. She was supposed to come to Washington to sing for the students at a church. The church caught fire, burned down. So where can we hold this concert? Somebody says, "Why not Constitution Hall?" We tried Constitution Hall. Daughters of the American Revolution, who were white, said, "Oh, no, we can't have a black woman singing at the Constitutional Hall. No." Mrs. Roosevelt, who was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, heard about it and became incensed. I think she resigned. And then she, on her own initiative, decided to find Marian Anderson a place to sing worthy of this artist. So she and Harold Ickes and several others made available to Marian Anderson the front steps of the Lincoln Memorial. And I think it was April 16th – Easter — a cold and dreary day. And Marian Anderson was on the front steps in her mink coat, as it were. But standing there — there were 75,000 people, of course, and the student body was included, standing there listening to her.

All of a sudden, I had a transformation that was almost of a religious nature. Something in her singing, something in her voice, something in her demeanor entered me and opened me up and made me a free man. And in a sense, I never became — I never lost

that. So she became the kind of angel of my redemption through her art, and also her example taught me, in a very concise fashion, exactly what I wanted to be about. I wanted to be able to do with writing what she was able to do with music and song. And there was, in addition, Paul Robeson, whose music, you know, moved people, (and) Lena Horne — people at that time. But Marian Anderson on that particular day, you know, opened the doors of my prison, and I walked out a free man.

**Paulson:** You and Ruby Dee have had a remarkable partnership, a remarkable marriage. And it’s detailed in the book. Did both of you come to the relationship with a similar passion for the movement?

**Davis:** Yes, we did. And it was sort of the normal thing to do. My commitment to the struggle began when I was a boy in Waycross, Georgia. And my parents, you know, were involved in trying to get schooling for us, trying to get votes, and you know, trying to do things that would better the lot of black people. So even as — and the high school that I went to, our teachers, you know, felt strongly about the question of freedom. And they used to instill in us that everything we did — the way we spelled a word, the way we walked down the street — you know, had some resonance in the outer community, and they spoke to the condition of black people. So you mustn’t do anything to cast aspersion on black people. On the other hand, one of the things that the white community would listen to was us as we sang. Or they would watch us as we danced. So our arts, even in those days, were ways of making a statement to the community about who we were. So I grew up in that surrounding, and it was a natural part of my training as a human being. Ruby grew up in Harlem, but her mother here was roughly involved in the same kind of thing. I remember the NAACP trying to get better schools, concerned about what was happening in the outer world.

When I came back from World War II — this was before I met Ruby — already the response to the return of the black soldier was of grave concern to the black community. Black soldiers were being lynched. And there was a soldier in North Carolina who had his eyes gouged out — Isaac Woodard. And two soldiers in Georgia walking with their wives were killed by the Ku Klux Klan. Another young man in Georgia trying to vote was killed. The NAACP in New York was active and agitational and concerned with these things. And we, as members of the theater, were approached by the NAACP and by the Urban League to

make ourselves involved, to help them raise funds, to help them spread the word, to take part in the pageants that they put on. So it was sort of a natural progression. And to take a part in those pageants was not just to be able to do something in the cause of liberation freedom for black folks. You’d be on the stage with the Paul Robeson or Lena Horne or Canada Lee or some of the others. And of course that alone was sufficient to get us involved.

But the theaters from which we came were dedicated in their own way to try and improve the lot of the actors. And that was — that has a civil rights aspect to it. So coming into the theater was the result, we thought, of struggle. And when we got in, we had to do something about all those lynchings that were taking place, particularly in the South. There was no federal anti-lynching law, and Robeson was active in trying to get one. And whenever there was a crime in the South — if a Willy McGee, you know, was in trouble or a Rosa Lee Ingram and her sons in Florida or the Martinsville Seven being accused of raping somebody or a Harry T. Moore — somebody put a bomb in his room at Christmastime. We were a part of that reservoir of workers and actors who would spring into action. So it was just a part of being in the theatrical community, as far as I was concerned, you know. It took no persuading. It took no deciding, “I must do this.” It was being done, and I just participated in it.

### **Excerpt from Elizabeth Catlett interview**

**Paulson:** Today we’re joined by Elizabeth Catlett, a talented sculptor, painter, and printmaker who many have described as one of the most prominent African-American artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thank you for joining us, it’s an honor to have you here.

**Catlett:** Well, I’m glad to be here.

**Paulson:** To what extent has racism affected your career?

**Catlett:** Oh, please. It’s affected my career from the beginning. I’ve had difficulty exhibiting, except in black institutions. And my work hasn’t been accepted when I knew it should have been. Many times.

**Paulson:** Well, there's always ... I'm sure there were times when you had to wonder, is this exhibit not being accepted because of my race? But then there were also issues of ... of politics. You've been politically active much of your life.

**Catlett:** Well, it's the kind of work I was doing, I guess.

**Paulson:** Can you talk about that?

**Catlett:** Well, there was ... a gallery on 57<sup>th</sup> Street that a director invited me in to talk about having a one-woman exhibition. She had seen my woodcarvings. And I said I was having a show in New Orleans. The show in New Orleans developed because there were two black women there who worked with a board. And she said, "Well, I'll come to the show," but she didn't. And when I came back ... the studio museum had ... a banquet in one of the big hotels, and she was there. And she said, "We can't talk about your exhibition here but we'll talk about it tomorrow." It was Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden and me. And we had about 10 minutes to speak about what ... our art consisted of, or what was our purpose as artists. And when I finished with mine, I was no longer a candidate ... for her gallery. I went the next day and she had me sitting for a long time. And then she came over ... very embarrassed, to tell me that she had associates and that she didn't think she could take me on.

**Paulson:** What was your message that so bothered them?

**Catlett:** Well, I said, I'm a black artist. I'm first a woman and then a black woman and then an artist. And my work is principally for black people to show them ... the dignity and beauty that they have, that we have. And I went on from there. And it didn't sound at all commercial.

## Excerpt from David Halberstam interview

**Paulson:** My co-host today is John Seigenthaler, a highly respected journalist who also served as special assistant to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy during the civil rights movement. After retiring from newspapers, John went on to found the First Amendment Center. John and I are delighted to welcome a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and journalist whose recent book called *The Children* focuses on the work of courageous young people in the civil rights movement, and whose earlier book, *The Best and the Brightest*, was the definitive study of American policy in Vietnam. David Halberstam.

**Halberstam:** And then I was lucky enough to work on what I think, and John would agree, was ... probably the best newspaper in the South, the Nashville *Tennessean* for four years. We had a great tradition on that paper, and we had made that state different from other states.

And that sense that we would stand apart from conventional racist attitudes, that we would be willing to be unpopular and fight off social ostracism, which was a very powerful thing in the South and most editors in Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia and the deep South gave into it. You have to understand that places like Mississippi and Alabama in those days were soft police states. They really were. So if you were a politician or an editor or a minister who went against the regular attitude on race, if you said the Supreme Court decision on *Brown* was right, they would drive you out of the state either by fear, by cutting you off from all your friends, by cutting your wife off ... in effect, they snuffed out freedom of speech. So freedom of speech was a very real issue, whether an editor had the right, the willingness, the courage to say the things that in his heart ... and I should say “her” because Hazel Brannon Smith in Mississippi in Holmes County was just so ferocious and so courageous.

**Seigenthaler:** And so punished.

**Halberstam:** Punished. They just stripped her and set out to crush her economically as they did so many other people. So these were very nice, genteel, soft police states.

**Seigenthaler:** And Ken, I would just say that it was an accident, I think, that David Halberstam came to work for *The Tennessean* at the moment a very bright and courageous group of young African-American students had enrolled themselves in four local institutions of higher education: Fisk, Meharry, Tennessee State and American Baptist College. And those young students really began there, and then went on to the Freedom Rides in Montgomery. ... then to Selma and to Edmund Pettus Bridge for that crucial showdown there. David found them and they found him, and the dynamic on this paper gave voice and coverage to the movement. ... It was an electric moment when David Halberstam began to report on that sit-in movement that had its genesis in that city.

**Halberstam:** You’re talking about the importance of First Amendment on this, and it’s extraordinarily important to the young people who are doing this. They are maybe going to die and they’re taking this risk. But one of the things they said was, “Black people have been taking risks for forever and being killed and lynched, and nobody had paid any attention.” The newspapers had bottled it up, not covered it or put it back on page 38 with two paragraphs. And people complain about political correctness today. Well, the old political correctness was the ability of the mayor of the town and the police chief talking to each other and to the head of the Chamber of Commerce and to the district attorney so that anything blacks did to protest their particular plight got sanitized and not in the paper.

The role of the media in a free society is so critical. If they were going to take these enormous risks to challenge the existing authority, the most important thing was that the rest of the world knows, the rest of the country, the rest of Alabama. Now there was a lot of control of the press in the deep South. What changed it was the coming of national television and local television. Television wanted the story. It was good film, it was not video then. And they were going to run with it. The civil rights movement and the coming of national television — ’57 through ’61, the nation is being wired — those two things come together and the capacity of local Southern papers to suppress and censor local indigenous news ends. But they understood, the kids did, the importance of the media. They would take this risk finally because they were finally getting covered as those who had gone ahead of them for 200 years had not been covered.

## ***Discussion questions***

1. Discuss the conditions African-Americans lived in prior to and during the civil rights movement. *What were the situations blacks faced that made Belafonte and Davis feel they had to use their talents and fame to work for change?*

- Blacks living in poverty, in confined and oppressed circumstances.
- Black soldiers fighting for democracy and the rights of those overseas, then returning home to an undemocratic country where their rights were restricted because of their color.
- Segregation in public schools and transportation as well as in restaurants, hotels, theaters and stores, and discrimination in employment and housing.
- Lynchings still taking place in the South.
- Limited voting rights in the South.
- Black soldiers being killed by the Ku Klux Klan.
- Blacks falsely accused of crimes in the South.

2. *Who were the early influences on Belafonte and Davis?*

- Their activist parents.
- Teachers and people in their communities.

### **Marian Anderson**

Davis describes how seeing Marian Anderson sing “opened the doors of his prison” and transformed his life. Marian Anderson was one of the most gifted contralto singers of her era, who became world-renowned despite the racism she faced. In 1939, she gave great momentum to the civil rights movement when she was banned by the Daughters of the American Revolution from singing in Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the DAR in protest and arranged for Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial instead. A record crowd attended, and from then on Anderson refused to sing at any place that was segregated. She made her long-overdue debut at the Metropolitan

Opera Company in 1955 at the age of 57 — becoming the first African-American to perform there.

### **American Negro Theatre**

ANT was established in Harlem in 1940 with a mission “to break down the barriers of black participation in the theater; to portray Negro life as they honestly saw it; and to fill the gap of a black theater which did not exist.” For nine years, it succeeded not only in producing plays for the black community (one of which moved to Broadway) but also in giving starts to numerous black actors — including Belafonte, Davis, Ruby Dee and Sidney Poitier — who went on to substantial careers.

### **Paul Robeson**

Belafonte quotes his mentor, Paul Robeson, as saying, “Art is not just to show life as it is, but to show life as it should be.” A true renaissance man, Paul Robeson was a star athlete, lawyer, singer, actor, author, political activist and speaker of 15 languages. From the 1920s-1940s, he broke one racial barrier after another as an actor (his “Othello” was the longest-running Shakespeare play in Broadway history) and a concert singer beloved around the world. Robeson put his career on the line time and time again to protest the Jim Crow segregation laws and to campaign for a federal anti-lynching law as well as to support international anti-fascist movements. Aligning himself with socialism, by the late 1940s he was being persecuted by the government and an angry American public, both white and black, as a communist, which ruined his career as well as threatened his life. Nevertheless, he was the role model for the next generation of black entertainers who used their fame to further civil rights.

3. Make a list of people in your life, people you know or don’t know, people in your community or celebrated artists, who have inspired you to think and feel passionately about something going on in the world. *What is it that you admire about them? What kind of difference have they made, and how?*



4. *What kinds of actions and activities did Belafonte and Davis undertake to support the movement?*

- Exercised their freedom of speech, speaking publicly about inequality.
- Exercised their freedom of assembly and joined marches and demonstrations around the country.
- Exercised their freedom of petition by filing lawsuits to lift restrictions that made it difficult for blacks to vote in the South.
- Participated in plays and pageants for the NAACP and Urban League to raise money and awareness.
- Performed benefit concerts at home and abroad to raise money and political support.
- Recruited other cultural figures to the movement.
- Addressed black history and black issues in their art, educating the public through their plays, TV shows and music.

5. Imagine that you, like Belafonte and Davis, are among the very small minority who have triumphed despite racism and become a successful artist. *Would you risk your career by speaking out for others less fortunate — knowing that you might be thought of as a “troublemaker” and refused future acting roles and singing engagements?*

6. Discuss what happened to Paul Robeson for his outspoken views and how that must have affected both Belafonte and Davis as they looked to him as a guide for their own activism early in their careers.

7. Davis mentioned that many African-American artists didn’t speak out, feeling that it was better not to risk their careers, and even their lives. Perhaps they felt they could do more for the advancement of their race by being visible performers, opening doors for others simply by doing their jobs well. Discuss the pros and cons of these two approaches.

8. *Why do social and political causes often enlist entertainers as spokespeople? What makes artists effective communicators with the public?*

- Singing and acting are powerful art forms that are very effective at evoking emotion and thought.
- Audiences already know and trust them as public figures.
- Their celebrity gives them access that ordinary people don’t have to the media and public officials.

9. On the other hand, some people feel that actors and singers should stick to acting and singing and leave politics to the politicians. *Do performers have the knowledge and credentials to be taken seriously as spokespeople for social-justice causes?*

10. *Did African-American artists and entertainers during the civil rights era have a duty and obligation not only to speak out but to use their art to promote civil rights?*

- Belafonte said: “I think artists have a moral and a social and a personal responsibility, and they certainly have the right to do what they want or say what they want, but I do believe that the height of art — art in its highest form — is art that serves and instructs society and human development.”

11. Some argue that art should be about art — “art for art’s sake” — and that it should not be politicized. If art forms bow to political issues and views, they narrow their audience and risk being taken less seriously as art. Discuss both viewpoints on activist art.

12. Discuss how actors and singers broke down racial barriers through popular entertainment — films, TV programs, songs — and how they used their First Amendment right to freedom of speech to say what people didn’t want to hear.

- As successful actors, directors, writers and producers, they brought black life and history into popular entertainment, where before only white life, or a white interpretation of black life, had been seen.

- They showed blacks and whites performing together, interacting as equals, at a time when blacks and whites were kept separate in all spheres of life.
- They addressed taboo topics, particularly the idea that blacks and whites could love each other at a time when miscegenation — the marriage of people from different races — was forbidden by law in many Southern states and looked down on in most all of the country.
- Movies, TV and radio reached the masses, exposing them to new ideas, drawing on the power of universal human emotions. They humanized blacks, and showed them to be no different than whites as people.

13. Discuss the racist situations that Elizabeth Catlett and David Halberstam faced.

*In what ways did discrimination affect their careers?*

- As a successful artist in the black community, Catlett hoped to be shown by a top New York art gallery, but the gallery decided that her work, which was about black people and made principally for black people, was too controversial. She did not get the widespread support or acknowledgement for her work that major gallery representation would have brought.
- When David Halberstam began reporting on the civil rights movement in the South in the early 1960s, most white newspaper editors and reporters were too frightened to tell the truth about the plight of African-Americans, for fear of harassment and ruin by local authorities. He and his newspaper bravely attempted to report the truth and give voice to young black activists.

14. Think about Catlett’s trouble breaking into the art world due to the color of her skin and her political views about it. *What does that say about the number of African-Americans in American art history?*

- Unable to study at the most prominent art schools or have their work included at prestigious galleries and museums, it was hard for blacks to make a name as an artist, and therefore to be remembered and included in the history of art. One can imagine that many great black artists of the past were never noticed and are lost to us now.

15. Discuss the power of newspapers and TV news programs — the arts of reporting and writing—to speak and spread the truth about the civil rights movement. *What is lost when our First Amendment right to freedom of the press is restricted?*

- When local elected officials or police or businessmen can intimidate the local press from reporting on how they treat their people, the outside world may never know or demand change.
- When ordinary, everyday African-Americans began to actively fight for their rights, braving intimidation and threats and beatings from whites in authority, some journalists and photojournalists began to follow them, to witness and report on their oppression, making the wider world aware of their struggles in ways that the media had failed to do in the past.
- When TV spread across America in the late 1950s and early '60s, an even larger audience became direct witnesses to the brutality. The civil rights movement picked up momentum as more and more people woke up to the reality of the brutal treatment of their fellow Americans.
- The 1963 March on Washington was the largest demonstration in the United States up to that time; it was also one of the first events to be broadcast live around the world. America and the wider world responded to this image of strength and courage — as well as to the steady stream of images showing brutality toward blacks demonstrating peacefully in the South — with sympathy, financial support and political backing for the cause of African-American freedom.

16. Halberstam has said that he feared for his life more covering the civil rights movement than he did covering the Vietnam War a few years later. Imagine risking your own life to speak out for the rights of people of a different race or ethnicity or religious background or sexual preference than your own. *Is there any circumstance in which you would do that?*

17. Due to the civil rights movement, to the activism of normal folks and celebrities alike, by the end of the 1960s civil rights laws had been enacted that gave African-Americans the same rights and opportunities as citizens of European descent. The laws were being

enforced — if slowly — integrating schools, buses and restaurants for the first time. Since then change has been slow but real, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is no toleration of official discrimination in America's public life. And yet, inequality lingers: A far higher percentage of blacks than whites live below the poverty line. Subtle racism and discrimination is experienced by Hispanic, Asian and Arab Americans as well as African-Americans. *In this day and age, do you think artists still have a duty and obligation to speak out about political and social issues and to use their art to instruct and protest? Or are circumstances different now?*

18. *What current issues do you think artists can effectively address?* Discuss how actors, painters, hip-hop artists and comedians could address specific political and social problems.

19. *In what ways does the First Amendment guarantee them the right to do so? Name the four freedoms that they could enlist.*