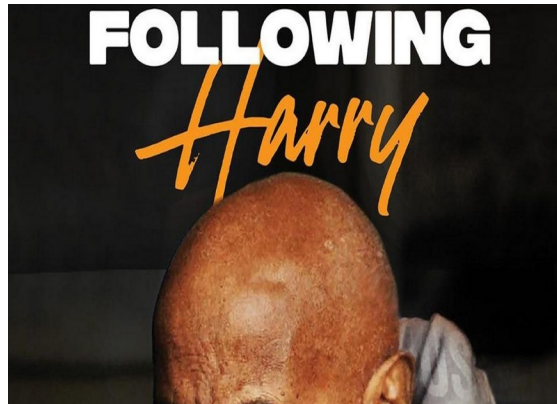


Don't Hold History Hostage

Susanne Rostock and Carmen Perez on Following Harry's Call to Keep the Work Moving

In the last twelve years of Harry Belafonte's life, the legendary artist and activist kept asking whether he had done enough. Emmy-nominated filmmaker Susanne Rostock and award-winning activist Carmen Perez sat down with Paul Salfen to talk about the film that captures that urgency—and what it demands of the rest of us.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



Following Harry, directed by Susanne Rostock. Now available on major VOD platforms.

Harry Belafonte spent nearly a century smashing barriers, mentoring movements, and leaving a trail of crumbs so the next generation could pick them up—or bring something better. In *Following Harry*, Emmy-nominated director Susanne Rostock returns to the story she began in *Sing Your Song*, this time sitting with Belafonte through the last twelve years of his life. The film, which premiered at Tribeca in 2024 and arrived on Amazon, Apple TV, and other platforms on October 13, 2026, captures both the public frontlines—Trayvon Martin's aftermath, Ferguson, the Women's March that began in his office—and the private rooms where he still wondered if any of it had been enough.

Salfen opened the conversation with that ache. “The most surprising thing is when it starts out, of the almost 100 years that he got here, you know, he did so much and he’s sitting there wondering if he had done enough,” he said. Rostock, who shared an office with Belafonte on the top floor of the Martin Luther King Building, answered without hedging. “It was heartbreaking to hear, because you think he’d understand that he did so much and that it meant so much. But for Harry, it was never enough. He just wanted to reach and keep on working to the very end.”

THE WORK IS NEVER DONE

Carmen Perez, the award-winning civil and human rights leader who spent more than two decades as President and CEO of The Gathering for Justice (the organization Belafonte founded), recognized the same restlessness. She had stepped away from the title only months earlier, yet the responsibility had not loosened its grip. “I thought I was going to retire,” she told Salfen. “I just left from being president, CEO of the Gathering for Justice a couple of months ago, and I’ve taken more jobs now that I have the time. I wanted to do something different, but again, it doesn’t leave you. It doesn’t matter. The title can change, but your heart will never change.”

Someone had asked her whether she ever rests. “The responsibility carries you,” Perez said. “And it’s something that you really can’t turn off, not even in family functions when you’re supposed to really let your hair down.” She understood Belafonte’s late-in-life doubt precisely because she had lived inside the same current. “It sharpens you to see a person of his caliber who contributed so much, gave so much, mentored so many young people... To think that he didn’t contribute enough.”

The title can change, but your heart will never change.

— Carmen Perez

A KNOCK ON THE DOOR

Salfen asked both women for the Harry memory that still lived closest to the surface. Rostock went back before *Following Harry*, before *Sing Your Song* was even finished. She had turned the project down; she was already in the middle of another film and had only spoken to Belafonte by phone. Then one afternoon there was a knock. His office, she later learned, was across the street from hers. She opened the door to find him standing there with a cane—he had just broken his foot—tapping his way forward. He pushed her gently back into the room. “We have to talk.”

They talked for a long time. She explained why she couldn’t take the film. Then he took her hand and started to cry. “I’m running out of time,” he told her. “I’m running out of time.” It was the early 2000s. He was not performing for the camera; he was frustrated and genuine. “So many of us are dying, and these stories have to be told and people have to understand what we lived through so they can build on the history so they can learn from what we lived through.” Rostock still feels the moment in her body. “And I said, I’m in. That’s like I said, but I have to set up a second cutting room. So I worked on two films at the same time.”

Years later, when she opened *Following Harry* with Belafonte again speaking of running out of time, the echo was deliberate. “You think you’re running out of time and then you’re really running out of time. He was just watching everything move so fast, and he just really wanted to be sure that people understood. He wanted to be sure he left everything. It’s like a total brain dump. He just wanted to leave everything on the table that he could.”



*...out the rest of my life almost
lection but there is too much of the*

Director Susanne Rostock, who shared an office with Harry Belafonte for years. Photo courtesy of Belafonte-Nasso-Zeng Productions.

SPIT SHINE AND DANCE OFFS

Perez’s first encounter with Belafonte was less cinematic and more confounding. She was coordinating a prison visit at a facility in Tracy, California (now closed). She watched a man she did not yet recognize walk into one of the halls, spit on another man’s shoe, and polish it. “I just kind of was like, what is going on here?” Everyone

around him, however, knew exactly who he was and surged toward him. Later, when she came to work for him, the gesture made sense. Rostock, who has the footage, clarified for Salfen: it was a spit shine. “He felt very strongly that you had to have dignity, even in prison, and keep your shoes polished.”

Other memories arrived more tenderly. There was the table in the office that served as both work surface and dining table. Belafonte would spread peanut butter and jelly, then pour rum and invite whoever was present to sit. Perez still remembers the rum burning her chest so fiercely she could barely swallow. There were Friday nights when he played the sounds of Africa and she answered with 90s hip-hop; they held dance-offs that became, in her words, “our intergenerational intercultural exchange.” She learned music she had never been exposed to and, more importantly, sat across from one of the greatest strategic minds of any generation. “He got to sit with Nina Simone and James Baldwin and Dr. King... That knowledge was transferred.” Eleanor Roosevelt, he often told her, was one of his favorite people.

There’s a lane for everyone. Whatever gift you have, bring that to the cause.

— Carmen Perez

HOW SOMEONE STARTS

Salfen asked the practical question that sits underneath every conversation about Belafonte: the work is never done, so how does someone begin? Perez answered without requiring a platform. “Someone can watch *Following Harry* and ask themselves, what can I contribute? I don’t think you need to have a platform to begin. You can start with your community, your relationships, and the gifts that you already have. He often talked about there’s a lane for everyone. Whatever gift you have, bring that to the cause.”

Sharing the film is itself an act. “Invite others to watch it with them. Bring your family, bring your friends, and then take that inspiration back into your community. After you are inspired, join a local organization. Volunteer your time. Give back to the movement. You don’t need to do everything, but each of us has something to contribute.” She added the civic piece without softening it. “We can’t complain without participating. And there’s midterm elections coming. And it’s going to be a very important moment in our life. One of the things that Suzanne was able to capture... is because you are going to want to vote after watching this. That’s what this film was meant to do, is to inspire you to move towards action.”

For the storytellers, Rostock was direct. “Tell our stories, capture the stories, capture the stories of people who won’t be here to tell them. There’s so much lost history... Speak to your uncles and aunts and grandparents and the shopkeepers. Everyone has a story and everyone has had pain and joy. And it’s important to share all our stories. We learned so much from each other. It’s what Harry has always said, that we can’t really create change until we see our common humanity. And the best way to see that is to understand who we are.”

She has a phrase she used when people refused to let her film: “Don’t hold history hostage. You know, we were young and we didn’t know that. We didn’t know what it was for.” Film, she believes, carries a particular power. “If you talk about storytelling, you sit and you watch your film and you can change your whole worldview in 90 minutes. You live the experience by watching the film.”

LISTEN TO THE YOUNG

Before they had to go, Salfen asked what mindset they keep that stays in the spirit of Harry. Perez spoke of contribution and of elders. “He wanted us to consider how we could contribute, what our role is in the movement.

It doesn't matter if you have resources. It doesn't matter. There's always a part for you to play. Also, I think he wanted us to cultivate the younger generation... There is a role for elders to play. There's a lot of wisdom that is not being passed down, and there's an opportunity to really pass down and also have these relationships where the elders learn from the young people. It does not have to be one way."

Rostock completed the thought. "He felt it was so important to listen to the young. Listen to what people have to say. And don't write them off, because there is a lot of wisdom in a little kid. Children have a pure way of looking at you. Listen. Listen and learn. Always listen and learn. Always be open. Don't think that you have the absolute answer to anything. He really believed that. And it was amazing to see that in somebody who's famous, who's adored, who's admired so much how humble he was in his thinking and his openness."



Carmen Perez, longtime mentee of Harry Belafonte and former President & CEO of The Gathering for Justice.

Following Harry does not ask viewers to freeze Belafonte in amber. It asks them to pick up the trail he left—or to bring something better. The film is now available on major digital platforms. As both women made clear, watching it is not the end of the conversation. It is one more way to stop holding history hostage and to keep the work moving.

FIND FOLLOWING HARRY

Now available on Amazon, Apple TV, and major VOD platforms in the US and Canada.

Official site: followingharry.org

Community screenings & educational licenses: videoproject.org

Instagram: [@followingharryfilm](https://www.instagram.com/followingharryfilm)

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Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.