



# The “Stars for Freedom” Rally

**March 24, 1965**

The “March to Montgomery” held the promise of fulfilling the hopes of many Americans who desired to witness the reality of freedom and liberty for all citizens. It was a movement which drew many luminaries of American society, including internationally-known performers and artists. In a drenching rain, on the fourth day, March 24th, carloads and busloads of participants joined the march as U.S. Highway 80 widened to four lanes, thus allowing a greater volume of participants than the court-imposed 300-person limitation when the roadway was narrower. There were many well-known celebrities among the more than 25,000 persons camped on the 36-acre grounds of the City of St. Jude, a Catholic social services complex which included a school, hospital, and other service facilities, located within the Washington Park neighborhood. This fourth campsite, situated on a rain-soaked playing field, held a flatbed trailer that served as a stage and a host of famous participants that provided the scene for an inspirational performance enjoyed by thousands on the dampened grounds. The event was organized and coordinated by the internationally acclaimed activist and screen star Harry Belafonte, on the evening of March 24, 1965.

## **The night “the Stars” came out in Alabama**

Mr. Belafonte had been an acquaintance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. since 1956. He later raised thousands of dollars in funding support for the Freedom Riders and to bailout many protesters incarcerated during the era, including Dr. King while in jail in Birmingham in 1963. Mr. Belafonte had also organized a similar “stars” performance for the 1963 “March on Washington” and

now an impromptu event was held featuring many stars of stage, screen and artistic achievement. A partial list of celebrities included: Joan Baez, James Baldwin, Ina Balin, Harry Belafonte, Tony Bennett, Leonard Bernstein, Sammy Davis, Jr., Billy Eckstein, Dick Gregory, Lena Horne, Mahalia Jackson, Alan King, William Marshall, Johnny Mathis, Frankie Laine, Gary Merrill, **Julius "Nipsey" Russell**, Pete Seeger, Nina Simone, Shelley Winters, Odetta, Purnell Roberts, and Peter, Paul and Mary.

### **Concert gives voice to movement**

Many of the widely heralded stars that appeared at St. Jude had also been present at the performance held at the Washington Monument in support of the "Freedom March on Washington" in 1963. Many of the well-known "freedom songs," such as "Oh, Freedom," were led by these artists and "A Change is Gonna' Come" by a group known as the "The SNCC Freedom Singers," which originally began as a quartet in Albany, Georgia in 1962. Speeches of inspiration were also delivered which, along with the musical participation, was to encourage the marchers to complete the final leg of their journey to the Alabama State Capitol. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressing the multitude of participants said, "We are about to engage in the greatest march that has ever been made on a state capitol in the South." The "Stars for Freedom Rally" became an unforgettable interlude on the historic march to Montgomery.



**Harry Belafonte, actor and activist.**