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Leadbelly
Leadbelly's Legacy, Vol. 3



LEADBELLY'S

EARLY RECORDINGS

LEGACY VOLUME 3

PIGMEAT • BLACK SNAKE MOAN •
ROBERTA PARTS 1 and 2 •
FORT WORTH AND DALLAS BLUES •
SEE SEE RIDER • DADDY I'M COMING BACK TO YOU •

Edited by FREDERIC RAMSEY JR. FOLKWAYS RECORDS N. Y. FA 2024

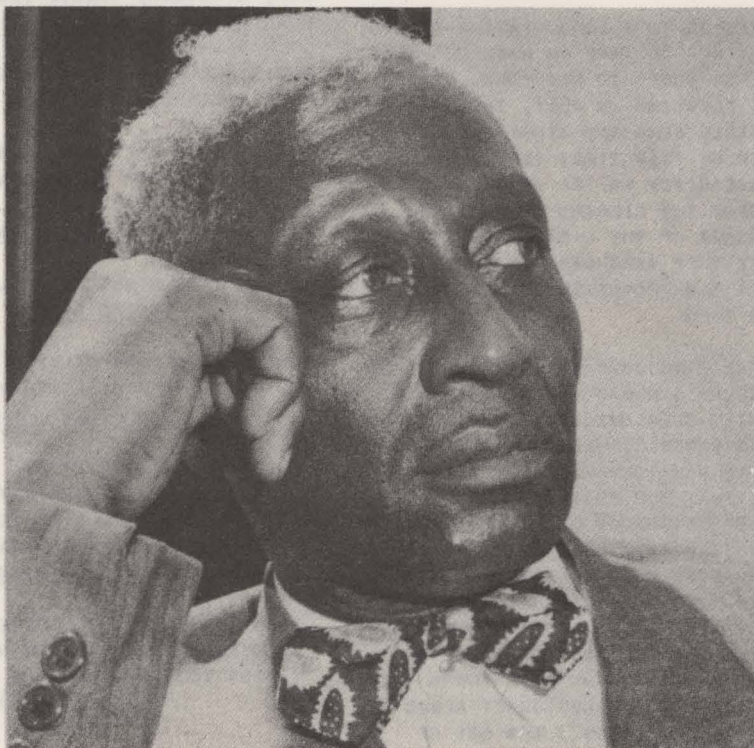
Leadbelly's
Legacy

RETURN TO ARCHIVE
CENTER FOR FOLK LIFE PROGRAMS
AND CULTURAL STUDIES
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

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INTRODUCTION AND NOTES ON THE RECORDINGS
BY FREDERIC RAMSEY, JR.

THE EIGHT SELECTIONS OF THIS LONG PLAYING RECORD, "LEADBELLY'S LEGACY NO. 3" TAKE US BACK TO 1935, THE DATE OF HIS FIRST VISIT TO NEW YORK. EXCEPT FOR A FEW SPORADIC SESSIONS IN 1937, THE BULK OF LEADBELLY'S REMARKABLE SONG AND STORY HAD ALREADY BEEN RECORDED BY THIS TIME; YET IT WAS STORED RATHER INACCESSIBLY IN THE ARCHIVE OF AMERICAN FOLK SONG OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. A FURTHER DISADVANTAGE OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS RECORDINGS WAS THAT THEY WERE MADE ON INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT, AND WERE DISAPPOINTING EVEN TO THOSE PRIVILEGED TO HEAR THEM.

THE FIRST COMMERCIAL DISK COMPANY THAT UNDERTOOK TO BRING OUT LEADBELLY'S MUSIC FOR GENERAL DISTRIBUTION WAS APPARENTLY OVERCOME BY ITS TRIAL EFFORT; OF SOME THIRTY-FIVE SIDES CUT EARLY IN 1935, ONLY SIX EVER FOUND THEIR WAY TO MARKET. IT IS ONLY NOW, LATE IN 1951, THAT DUE TO THE EFFORTS OF A PRIVATE COLLECTOR OF LEADBELLY MATERIAL, COPIES OF THE ORIGINAL MASTERS HAVE BEEN MADE AVAILABLE. TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE, ONLY TWO OF THE SELECTIONS INCLUDED HAVE EVER BEEN AVAILABLE IN ANY FORM, AND THESE TWO, PIGMEAT AND BLACK SNAKE MOAN, ARE POSSIBLY ALTERNATE MASTERS. ALL THE RECORDINGS OF THIS DATE PRECEDE BY FOUR YEARS ANY OTHER COMMERCIAL ATTEMPT (THE MUSICRAFT ALBUM OF 1939 TITLED "NEGRO SINFUL SONGS", NOW OUT OF PRINT) TO RECORD LEADBELLY.

SINCE THE TITLES GROUPED IN THIS RELEASE WERE FOR THE MOST PART RECORDED AT THE TIME OF PREPARATION OF THE JOHN A. AND ALAN LOMAX BOOK, "NEGRO FOLK SONGS AS SUNG BY LEADBELLY" (MACMILLAN, 1936; A REVISED EDITION IS PLANNED FOR 1952 OR 1953), THE CONTEMPORANEOUS NOTES OF THE LOMAX BOOK ARE QUITE COMPLETE, AND ARE HERE LIBERALLY QUOTED.

THERE IS ONE QUALITY OF LEADBELLY'S SONG THAT IS ONLY PARTIALLY TOUCHED ON IN THE LOMAX BOOK, HOW EVER. BUT IF WE PIECE TOGETHER BITS OF THE LOMAX STORY AND COMBINE THEM WITH THE TEXT AND MOOD OF LEADBELLY'S SONGS, IT CAN BE SENSED. THERE IS IN CERTAIN OF THE SONGS A MOOD OF SLEEPLESSNESS; IN OTHERS, OF DREAM, AND TRANCE. REFERENCES TO SLEEP AND DREAM ARE BROADCAST THROUGH ALL LEADBELLY'S SONG; WHERE NO ESCAPE IS PROVIDED THROUGH SLEEP OR DREAM, IT IS THROUGH ALCOHOL, AS IN ROBERTA.

THE SLEEPLESSNESS COMPLEMENTS THE DREAM, FOR IT IS A WAKING DREAM. IT IS A STATE WHERE REAL AND UNREAL ARE MIXED, SEEN AND UNSEEN COME TOGETHER. IN THE OX DRIVING SONG, LEADBELLY TELLS US OF THE DRIVER WHO "BEGIN TO THINK ABOUT HIS WIFE, EIGHTEEN, NINETEEN, TWENTY YEARS AGO. HE LOOK WAY DOWN DE ROAD, SEEMS LIKE HE COULD SEE HER . . ."

FOR WHEREVER WE LOOK IN LEADBELLY'S SONG, WE FIND LINES LIKE THESE:

"CAIN' KEEP MY WOMAN, LAWD, F'UM WORRYIN' ME
CAIN' LAY DOWN FOR DREAMIN', AN' I JUS CAN'
SLEEP FOR CRYIN' . . ."
(FORT WORTH AND DALLAS BLUES, FP 24)

"DREAM LAST NIGHT AN' ALL NIGHT BEFO' . . ."
(KNIFE BLUES)

"AN' I FEEL LIKE WALKIN' MAMA,
GO, -- AN' I FEEL LIKE LYIN' DOWN. . ."
(LEAVING BLUES, FP 4)

"I LAID DOWN LAST NIGHT, TURNIN' FROM SIDE TO
SIDE (WHAT'S THE MATTER?)
AW, TURNIN' FROM SIDE TO SIDE,
I WAS NOT SICK, BUT I WAS JUST DISSATISFIED."
(GOOD MORNING BLUES, FP 4)

"IRENE, GOOD NIGHT, IRENE GOOD NIGHT,
GOOD NIGHT IRENE, GOOD NIGHT IRENE,
I KISS YOU IN MY DREAMS . . ."
(IRENE, FP 4)

LEADBELLY ALSO STATES (FOR COMPLETE STATEMENT AND SONG, SEE GOOD MORNING BLUES, RECORD SIDE 2, LEADBELLY'S LEGACY NO. 1, FP 4, "TAKE THIS HAMMER".):

"BUT WHEN YOU LAY DOWN AT NIGHT, TURN FROM ONE
SIDE OF THE BED TO THE OTHER AND YOU CAN'T SLEEP,
WHAT'S THE MATTER? BLUES GOT YOU. OR WHEN YOU
GET UP IN THE MORNIN', SIT ON SIDE OF THE BED
. . . WHAT'S THE MATTER? BLUES GOT YOU."
(INTRODUCTORY, GOOD MORNING BLUES)

"WHEN I GOT UP SOON IN DE MORNIN', I COULDN'
LAY BACK DOWN. IT'S DE CUSTOM OF DE CAMP TO GET
UP AT THREE-THIRTY AN' THREE O'CLOCK EV'RY
MORNIN'. WHEN I WALK OUT I COULDN' SEE NOTHIN'
BUT DE STARS AN' DE MOON. I 'GIN TO THINK ABOUT
SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA.

"I WOULD BE THINKIN' 'BOUT MY HONEY IN SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA, BETTER KNOWN AS THE SUN GONNA SHINE IN MY DO' SOME DAY. I KNOWED SOME DAY, WHEN I LEAVE HERE, IT WOULDN'T BE HAPPEN NO MO' . . ."

(INTRODUCTORY, FOR SO DOG-GONE SOON, LOMAX BOOK)

FOR OTHER RECURRENCES OF THIS HIGHLY POETIC FIGURE, ANNOTATED BY THE LOMAXES AS "SEEING HIS HONEY IN SHREVEPORT SOME DAY IS LIKE THE SUN SHINING INTO ONE'S BACK DOOR AFTER A LONG, HARD WINTER," SEE JAZZ, VOLUME IV, FP 59, SIDE 2, BAND 5; AND JAZZ, VOLUME V, FP 63, SIDE 1, BAND 7. "IT WOULDN'T BE HAPPEN NO MO'" IS CITED AS "ANTIQUE NEGRO DIALECT" BY THE LOMAXES.

IN 1935, LEADBELL'S WHOLE SPIRIT WAS SUFFUSED WITH HAUNTING MEMORIES OF HIS RECENT PAST; THE INCREDIBLY HARD, LONG DAYS IN THE SEARING SUN, THE INTERMINABLE NIGHTS IN THE CELL, WHERE LIGHTS WERE BRIGHT AND GLARING. WHEN HE LEFT THAT LIFE, HE COULD NOT SLEEP IN A DARKENED ROOM; FOR WEEKS LATER, MARTHA HAS RELATED, HE HAD ALWAYS TO GET UP AND TURN ON THE LIGHT, AFTER TRYING TO SLEEP IN THE DARK.

IN THE SUN, THE WEAKER MEN DIED. IN THE NOTES FOR GO DOWN, OLE HANNAH, THE LOMAXES TELL US OF "THE TRAGEDY OF 1910, WHEN CONVICTS WERE DYING OF SUNSTROKE OR FROM BUCKSHOT WOUNDS AS THEY MADE DESPERATE BREAKS AWAY FROM MISERY TOO GREAT FOR THEM TO BEAR." (RECORD GO DOWN, OLE HANNAH, FP 53, JAZZ. VOL. 1, THE SOUTH).

"WE HAVE BEEN TOLD BY VARIOUS NEGRO CONVICTS OF TEXAS PRISON FARMS," THE LOMAXES RELATE ELSEWHERE, "THAT THEY COULD OUTFRAN ANY DOG OR HORSE ON THE PLAGE, THAT THEY COULD LEAVE THE FARM ANY DAY THEY TOOK THE NOTION. A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF TRUTH IS THERE. THE CONVICTS, WHO WORK ALL DAY EVERY DAY UNDER THE BROILING SUN, DRIVEN BY THE GUARDS, ARE IN WONDERFUL PHYSICAL CONDITION. THE DOGS, A BREED OF ENGLISH FOXHOUNDS, LIE UP IN THEIR PENS MOST OF THE TIME; WHILE THE HORSES, BIG-BONED AND CLUMBY, WALK ALL DAY BEHIND THE MEN IN THE FIELD AND HAVE NO OTHER EXERCISE IN THE TERRIFYING WET HEAT OF THE RIVER LOWLANDS, THE DOGS AND HORSES WILL WEARY BEFORE THE CONVICT DOES."

COMBINED WITH THE TAUT PHYSICAL STRENGTH THAT ENABLED LEADBELL TO SURVIVE THIS EXPERIENCE, THERE WAS HIS ABILITY TO MAKE MUSIC.

FORT WORTH AND DALLAS BLUES

"THE PROTOTYPE OF A THOUSAND BLUES TUNES," THE LOMAXES STATE, "LEADBELL SANG IT WHILE HE LIVED IN DALLAS AND FORT WORTH. HE REMEMBERS THAT IT WAS ESPECIALLY POPULAR AT THE 'BIG FOUR' NEGRO RESORT DOWN NEAR THE TERMINAL IN DALLAS. 'ME AN' BLIND LEMON WOULD PLAY THAT SONG, AN' DE WOMENS WOULD COME RUNNIN' LAWD HAVE MERCY! THEY'D HUG AND KISS US SO WE COULD HARDLY PLAY.'"

BLACK SNAKE BLUES

BLACK SNAKE BLUES, OR BLACK SNAKE MOAN, HAS BEEN RECORDED BY LEADBELL'S COMPANION, BLIND LEMON JEFFERSON. A RECORD RELEASED SOMETIME EARLY IN 1927 AND INCLUDED IN JAZZ, VOLUME 2, BLUES, (SIDE 1 BAND 3 RECORD FP 55), MAKES IT POSSIBLE TO COMPARE THE BLIND MINSTREL'S ORIGINAL VERSION OF THE SONG WITH LEADBELL'S LATER RENDITION. THIS LEAVES LITTLE DOUBT THAT BLIND LEMON WAS A VERY IMPORTANT INFLUENCE IN SHAPING LEADBELL'S STYLE, AT LEAST WITH SONGS OF HIS OWN REPERTOIRE THAT HE PASSED ON TO HIS YOUNG PUPIL.

ROBERTA NO. 1 AND NO. 2

"WE ONCE ASKED LEADBELL TO SING US A LOW-DOWN BARRELHOUSE BLUES," THE LOMAXES HAVE RELATED. "WHEN I USED TO PLAY DOWN ON FANNIN STREET," LEADBELL BEGAN IN REPLY TO THEIR REQUEST, "IN SHREVEPORT AN' ALL DE WOMENS WOULD GET ABOUT HALF-DRUNK, THEY'D 'GIN TO HOLLER AN' TELL ME, SAY, 'BABY, PLAY US ROBERTA! I'D SING 'EM 'BOUT ROBERTA AN' THEY'D ALL 'GIN TO CRY."

"THEN LEADBELL," THE LOMAXES CONTINUE, "AFTER A SERIES OF MAGNIFICENT RUNS ON HIS TWELVE-STRING GUITAR, SANG HIGH AND SHRILL, 'RUN HERE, ROBERTA!' THIS CALL OF A MAN AFTER HIS 'RIDER' RINGS CLEAR, LIKE A ROOSTER'S CROWING JUST BEFORE DAY. IT HAS THE SOUND IN IT OF MILES OF BOTTOM LAND. IT COULD LEAP OVER A WIDE STRETCH OF THE QUIET, LONELY MISSISSIPPI LIKE THE WHISTLE OF A STEAMBOAT."

"THE MAN IS DRUNK. DISTANCE MEANS NOTHING TO HIM. HE HAS SOMETHING ON HIS MIND HE'S GOT TO TELL ROBERTA, AND IT'S IMPORTANT EVEN IF HE'S NOT QUITE SURE OF WHAT IT IS. SO ROBERTA 'MIGHT AS WELL TO COME ON DOWN AN' LISTEN,' BECAUSE HE CAN OUTFRAN THE TRAIN AND HE CAN OUTFRAN THE STEAMBOAT. IF SHE STILL WON'T LISTEN TO HIM, HE'LL HAVE HER ARRESTED AND MAKE HER LISTEN. HE DOESN'T EVEN KNOW WHY HE WANTS ROBERTA SO MUCH. SHE LOOKS LIKE ALL THE OTHER 'BROWNSKINS WITH COAL-BLACK, WAVY HAIR,' BUT 'IT'S HER I WANT AND IT'S HER I'LL HAVE."

THE FOLLOWING IS THE SPOKEN TEXT OR RECITATIVE, FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS RECORDING, WHICH DIFFERS SLIGHTLY FROM THE ONE RECORDED LATER, AND HEARD ON THIS LONG PLAYING RECORD:

RECITATIVE 1: THIS MAN, HE WAS LIKIN' ROBERTA. AN' ROBERTA WAS A LI'L BROWNSKIN WOMAN WITH COAL-BLACK, WAVY HAIR. THIS MAN WAS ALL TIME HANGIN' 'ROUND ROBERTA, WOULDN' GIVE HER NO PEACE AN' NO RES'. SHE TRIED TO GET AWAY FROM HIM. SHE GOT TIRED O' SEEIN' HIM, AN' SHE WENT TO RUNNIN' ON A STEAMBOAT DOWN THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER. THE MAN WENT OFF AN' SAT ON THE BANKS O' DE RIVER WHERE HE KNEW ROBERTA HAD TO PASS BY. AN' HE LOOK WAY UP DE RIVER AN' HERE WHAT HE SAID: 'I'M DOWN ON DE RIVER, SETTIN' DOWN ON DE GROUND'.

RECITATIVE 2: HE LOOKED WAY UP DE RIVER, AN' HE THOUGHT HE SPIED ROBERTA. BUT HE DIDN' SEE NOBODY -- NOTHIN' BUT A CYPRESS TREE (THE LOMAXES SAY: "A HUGE CYPRESS LOG, FLOATING DOWN-RIVER BUTT-END ON, ITS ROOTS SPREADING FANWISE OVER THE WATER, MIGHT BE MISTAKEN IN THE MISTY DISTANCE FOR A SMALL RIVER STEAMER.")

RECITATIVE 3: HE LOOKED, AN' HE THOUGHT HE SPIED DE STEAMBOAT COMIN'. BUT IT WASN'T NOTHIN' BUT A CYPRESS TREE

RECITATIVE 4: BY AN' BY THE STEAMBOAT COME AROUND THE CURVE. AN' IT WAS COMIN' CLOSE BY HIM. HE LOOKED, AN' HE CALLED ROBERTA BY HER NACHUL NAME

.....

RECITATIVE 5: WHEN ROBERTA WOULDN' COME, HE KEP' ON DOWNSTREAM. HE HAD TO DRIVE ABOUT FIFTY MILES. I DON' KNOW HOW HE DONE IT -- THAT MAN MADE IT ALL AROUND DE BEN' BY LAURA'S HOUSE -- AN' ANYWAY HE RIGHT THERE AT DE LANDIN' WHEN DE BOAT COME IN. HE RUNNED UP AN' CALLED TO ROBERTA:

"YOU'S A BROWN-SKINNED WOMAN, CHOC' LATE TO DE BONE,
AN' YOU KNOW GOOD AN' WELL I CAIN' LEAVE YOU ALONE."

RECITATIVE 6: WHEN ROBERTA WOULDN' COME AND TALK TO HIM, HE BROKE OFF UP TO DE POLICE STATION:

"I'M GOIN' TO DE POLICE STATION, TELL DE CHIEF POLICE

ROBERTA DONE QUIT ME, I CAIN' SEE NO PEACE."

RECITATIVE 7: WHEN HE GOT TO DE POLICE STATION, DE POLICE ASK HIM HOW THEY GONNA KNOW ROBERTA FROM ANY OTHER BROWNSKIN. ALL OF 'EM IS BROWNSKIN NOW, AN' ALL GOT BLACK, WAVY HAIR. YOU TAKE A BLACK WOMAN, SHE BROWN JUS' LIKE A TEASIN' BROWN. SHE GOT SO MUCH POWDER ON HER FACE -- HIGH-BROWN POWDER -- YOU CAIN' TELL WHETHER SHE BROWN OR BLACK. DE MAN LOOK AT DE CHIEF POLICE AN' HERE WHAT HE SAID:

"SHE'S A BROWNSKINNED WOMAN, GOT BLACK, WAVY HAIR,
I CAN SUBSCRIBE HER, PODNER, MOS' ANYWHERE."

APPARENTLY LEADBELLY KNEW ABOUT THE WHITE MAN'S CLICHE, MOST BRUTALLY STATED IN THE OLD MINSTREL SONG, "ALL COONS LOOK ALIKE TO ME." THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT THE CHIEF OF POLICE WOULD HAVE TOLD ANY EXCITED NEGRO WHO CAME UP TO HIS DESK, PRESUMING TO ASK THE LAW FOR HELP WITH A DOMESTIC OR EMOTIONAL PROBLEM. THE POLICE CHIEF'S RETORT WAS IN EFFECT A DISMISSAL. LEADBELLY'S REPLY, THOUGH, IS MAGNIFICENT IN UNDERSTATEMENT. IT GOES AS FAR TOWARD ASSERTING A HUMAN RIGHT, THE RIGHT OF A NEGRO TO BE CONSIDERED AN INDIVIDUAL WITH DISTINCTIVE TRAITS OF APPEARANCE AND PERSONALITY, AS ANY NEGRO WOULD BE PERMITTED IN THE SOMEWHAT DUBIOUS TRIBUNAL OF A LOUISIANA OR MISSISSIPPI POLICE STATION.

SIDE 2, BAND 1

LEADBELLY HAS SAID THAT HE HAD AN UNCLE, WHO DROVE A TEAM OF OXEN, AND THAT THE UNCLE USED TO DROP BY AT HIS FATHER'S PLACE FROM TIME TO TIME TO SPEND A NIGHT. BUT THE UNCLE WAS SO WOUND UP IN HIS WORK THAT ALL NIGHT LONG, HE CURSED AND SANG TO HIS OXEN, AND GAVE LITTLE HUDDIE A PRETTY BAD TIME. IT WAS A POOR HOUSE, AND HUDDIE WAS EXPECTED TO SHARE HIS BED. BUT RATHER THAN BE ROUTED OUT OF BED BY THE UNCLE'S SHOUTING, SINGING, AND WRITHING, HE TOOK TO THE FLOOR. THERE, HE SEEMS TO HAVE SLEPT ALL RIGHT -- BUT ONE THING HE NEVER COULD GET OUT OF HIS HEAD WAS THE OX DRIVING SONG. IN LATER VERSIONS, HE CENSORED SOME OF HIS OX DRIVING UNCLE'S SALTY LANGUAGE -- BUT FOR THIS ONE, HE GOT IT DOWN ON RECORD. THE "TI-YOW!" THAT CRACKS THROUGH THE EARTHY MONOLOGUE IS HUDDIE'S CHARACTERIZATION OF THE WHIP-STING AS IT FALLS ACROSS THE HORNS OF THE LEAD OXEN. "AN OX-WHIP WITH A STOUT SIX TO EIGHT FOOT STOCK OF PECAN OR HICKORY AND TWENTY FEET OF PLAITED LEATHER OR SINGLE STRIPS OF RAWHIDE PIECED TOGETHER."

BAND 2 DADDY I'M COMING BACK TO YOU

"DURING THE WORLD WAR (I) AND FOR A GENERATION BEFORE IT," THE LOMAXES WROTE, "THE BUSINESS OF 'BALLIT' OR BROADSIDE SELLING AMONG NEGROES HAD ITS HEYDAY. WANDERING SINGERS, MANY OF THEM ITINERANT MINISTERS, MADE A GOOD THING OF HAWKING, FOR A PRICE THAT RANGED FROM A NICKEL TO TWENTY-FIVE CENTS, COPIES OF THE SONGS THEY SANG, PRINTED ON ONE SIDE OF SHEETS OF VARI-COLORED PAPER."

SO THAT ALTHOUGH LEADBELLY NEVER BECAME A MEMBER OF THE MUSIC PUBLISHERS CONTACT EMPLOYEES UNION, HE WAS A REAL SONG-PLUGGER. "FOR HIS PROGRAMS," THE LOMAXES SAY, "LEADBELLY ALWAYS WISHED TO INCLUDE THAT SILVER-HAIRED DADDY OF MINE, OR JAZZ TUNES SUCH AS I'M IN LOVE WITH YOU, BABY." OTHER TUNES LEADBELLY COULD AND DID SING WERE THE SENTIMENTAL SPRINGTIME IN THE ROCKIES, DANCING WITH TEARS IN MY EYES, AND A "HAWAIIAN SONG". (THESE HE HAS RECORDED FOR THE WRITER).

BAND 3 SEE SEE RIDER

BLIND LEMON JEFFERSON PLAYED THE HAWAIIAN GUITAR, AND IT IS PROBABLY FROM BLIND LEMON THAT LEADBELLY PICKED UP THE UNUSUAL TECHNIQUE THAT EXPLOITS, NOT THE SIRUPY, SUSTAINED TONES OF ITS STEEL STRINGS, BUT A STACCATO, STINGING QUALITY. FOR THE REST, SEE SEE RIDER IS ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL OF ALL BLUES MELODIES, AND IT IS ENHANCED BY LEADBELLY'S TRULY LYRIC UNDERSTANDING OF BOTH WORDS AND MUSIC.

Leadbelly's Legacy

FREDERIC RAMSEY, JR.

An authority on jazz memorializes one of the greatest of Negro folk singers.

THE NEGRO singer who died at sixty years in Bellevue Hospital in New York on December 6, 1949, of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis represented a perplexing medical problem to doctors who are trying to probe secrets of an uncommon but fatal disease. To a handful of internes at Bellevue who knew this patient was Leadbelly, a musician whose records they had heard and whose concerts they had attended, Huddie Ledbetter's passing meant more than just another entry in a census of fatalities that already included the name of Lou Gehrig.

Like Gehrig, Leadbelly was a man of iron. In his prime, he stood close to six feet, and every inch of them that was muscle was solid and taut. In the cotton fields he had worked up to picking 1,000 pounds a day. And in a Texas penitentiary he was, as Alan Lomax has written, "number-one man in the number-one gang on the number-one farm in the state—the man who could carry the lead row in the field for twelve or fourteen hours a day under the broiling July and August sun and then cut the fool for the guards all evening."

"The active ones usually get it," was the Bellevue doctor's comment. Leadbelly would have had his own comment, direct from the opening lines of a ballad he knew well, "John Henry": "Steel is gonna be the death o' me, Lord Lord—Steel is gonna be the death o' me." For it was hardness in Leadbelly's muscles that made him most susceptible to the disease described medically as "relentless, progressive, and destructive." He died as he lived—hard.

The toughest part was made up of the early years, covering the period from circa 1882, when he was born in Mooringsport, Louisiana, to the day in 1934 when his second pen sentence was reprieved by Governor Neff of Texas. When he was still a boy, his father taught young Huddie to plow, and his uncle Bob taught him to play the guitar.

He has told how he first went down to Fannin Street in Shreveport while still in knee pants, and how his father had to explain about fashions when he first saw clothes models in a store window. On Fannin Street Leadbelly learned new songs, and had his first taste of beer—it was so bitter he loaded it up with sugar.

At fifteen he was old enough to go to the sukey-jumps

BAND 4 PIGMEAT (A LATER VERSION IS IN FP 14)

"I WAS BORN AN' RAISED IN THE COUNTRY, MAMA, BUT I'M STAYIN' IN TOWN -- IN NEW YORK CITY, WHAT I'M TALKIN' 'BOUT." THIS WAS LEADBELLY'S PROPHECY THAT THE REST OF HIS LIFE WOULD BE DIFFERENT. AT THE TIME HE WORKED IT INTO THE LYRICS OF PIGMEAT, IT WAS LITTLE MORE THAN A DEFY -- THERE WERE VERY FEW PERSONS, INCLUDING JOHN A. LOMAX, WHO BELIEVED THEN THAT LEADBELLY COULD GET ALONG IN A NORTHERN CITY. IN A SENSE, LEADBELLY WAS VOICING AN EXTRAORDINARY CONFIDENCE IN HIMSELF AND HIS BENEFACTORS, AND SAYING THAT IT COULD ACTUALLY BE DONE -- A MAN WITH A LONG, HARD PRISON RECORD COULD BE RELEASED, EXPOSED TO THE JANGLE, WOMEN, AND LIQUOR OF A BIG TOWN, THEN SETTLE DOWN WITHOUT GETTING INTO TROUBLE AGAIN. LEADBELLY'S CONFIDENCE WAS "PIGMEAT" -- IT WAS REAL, KOSHER, (EVEN THOUGH PIGMEAT IS NOT KOSHER) IT WAS THE MCCOY -- FOR HE MADE GOOD ON HIS PROMISE.

LEADBELLY'S LEGACY: NO. 1 TAKE THIS HAMMER, FP 4
NO. 2 ROCK ISLAND LINE, FP 14
NO. 3 LEADBELLY'S LEGACY FP 24

(parties) and breakdowns. Setting out after dark and riding alone through the bottomlands in delta country, he would arrive an hour or so later at some lone shanty set down in the wilderness: "There'd be no white man for twenty miles." For playing all night, he got all he could drink, all he could handle in the way of girls, and fifty cents in hard cash. At sixteen he was married and father of a child.

But rambling was strong in Leadbelly's blood. Soon he "banished away and went out in West Texas, pickin' cotton." At different times, he was lead man for Blind Lemon Jefferson, who taught him many songs; he drove mules, and he broke in horses. In Dallas in 1910 he heard a jazz band playing for the first time. He had trouble with women: "the truculent Dallas prostitutes had nearly chopped his head off," according to John A. and Alan Lomax in their book about this period, "Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly." Then came the first stretch on a state farm.

The prison chronology is long and brutal; Leadbelly lived and played in an atmosphere of violence and lawlessness. He was sent up three different times; once on a charge of attacking a woman, twice on convictions of murder and assault to kill. He broke clean away the first time with slugs from a guard's Winchester ripping out dirt beneath his feet as he dashed across a fresh-plowed field.

Once this mold had been set, Leadbelly had to live outside society, and his outlawed person was fair game to every bully, gambler, and dance-hall tout. His life was in danger on at least three separate known occasions between 1925, the date of his release from the Shaw State Prison Farm in Texas, and 1930, date of his second conviction and confinement to the Louisiana State Farm at Angola.

Leadbelly never mentioned the first of these three fracasces until a skull fracture showed up on X-rays taken years later in New York. He said then that he had felt numbness in his fingers for a whole year following the nigh: a bottle had cracked his head open, but had never gone to a doctor. On the second occasion, he was playing "Mr. Tom Hughes's Town" on his guitar in a dancehall across the lake from Oil City when a man got a knife in his neck and had drawn it half around to the other side before his girl, Era, beat off the attacker. That time, Huddie reported to the police, "bleeding like a hog," and was told to get on out of there fast. The

time, he was attacked as he was coming home from work by members of a gang who said he had whiskey in his dinner pail. He refused to surrender it, and a fight began. So on February 28, 1930, he was sent off to Angola with a second "assault with intent to murder" against his name.

Along this rough way Leadbelly was assimilating song and experience. In the canebrake and delta lands he learned songs and dances for the Brazos Bottom and Red River Valley. On Fannin Street he picked up topical and sentimental ballads that were popular with the prostitutes, and the slow beat of blues moaned out in the barrelhouses. At work he was lead man whenever a chant was set to the slow rhythms of pushing and pulling, chopping and straining.

When he heard wandering piano players who used the bass figurations of boogie woogie, he knew they were talking his language—he had been using that same sort of bass on his twelve-string guitar. At home his mother had taught him lullabies, spirituals, and children's play songs. And in the long years in prison he renewed his acquaintance with the treasury of Afro-American music that is kept almost intact by prisoners isolated from the rest of the world. It was here that he heard and learned "Go Down, Ole Hannah" for the first time; the holler that tells the hot midday sun to "go down—and don't you rise no more!" Here, too, he learned "Take This Hammer," the work song that is punctuated by the heavy, thudding "huh!" of the chain gang's hammer stroke.

Leadbelly was released from the Shaw State Farm because he sang for the Texas Governor who had sworn never to pardon any man so long as he held office. But Huddie won out; the twelve strings, the magnificent voice, and the amazing repertoire moved Neff to do that which he had sworn never to do. And it was through John Lomax, curator of the Archive of American Folk Song of the Library of Congress, that he had his chance to sing for a second Governor, O. K. Allen, of Louisiana, and win a second reprieve.

That was in 1934. It was a crucial year in Leadbelly's life, and a date that every folklorist stars on his calendar. "I was born and raised i' the country, mamma, but I'm stayin' in town . . . in New York City, what I'm talkin' 'bout," Leadbelly sang prophetically on March 25, 1935. With New York as base, Leadbelly and the Lomaxes toured a circuit of college towns, and Huddie held forth from lecture platforms to bemused and enchanted undergraduate audiences.

It was in this period that another of Huddie's talents was nurtured. When he sang for university audiences, it was often hard for bookish students to understand his dialect, and the meaning of his songs. Always before this, he had been performing for his own people; when he sang blues he hardly had to stop and explain what it was about. But in response to questions from his new audience, Leadbelly began to weave together narrative and song, and intoned his expositions in a sort of free-wheeling recitative. Often the narrative was made up of so gentle a combination of the real and the imagined that it was impossible to separate one from the other. Nor was that ever necessary; they were always interesting.

Leadbelly's voice was not beautiful. It was rough and grainy, and some of its raw tones came up as if scraped out of his throat. It rang out with intensity because he often shouted with violence. It had a nasal twang. The excitement he engendered came from his understanding of each melody he sang and from a strong, precise sense of rhythm. He played his own twelve-string guitar, and its tempo fell in

with each type of song; for breakdowns, the strings zinged at breakneck time; but he held the slow blues to an even, carefully marked beat, usually in low register.

Leadbelly was set apart from other folk singers by his extraordinary ability to tell a story, and a repertoire that included blues, work songs, slave songs, shouts, hollers, reels, railroad and prison songs, ballads, spirituals, cowboy, popular, and play songs. And, above all, he was not afraid—not afraid to slur one vocal tone fiercely against another, not afraid to run up and down a scale that took in baritone and tenor registers along the way, but didn't stick to either. The hollers he yelled out were almost impossible of notation in our occidental music scale. He was not afraid to shift pitch, and he often accelerated tempo to suit mood and action.

Leadbelly went on the air for the Columbia Broadcasting System, singing for the "Back Where I Come From" programs; he went on the air for WNYC, first in the Annual American Music Festivals, then as a regular. His arrival in New York coincided with the inception of the March of Time films, and they did an inadequate job of covering it. He gave concerts in Times Hall and in Town Hall. Later, in 1944, he went to Hollywood. Then in the spring of 1949 he sang in Paris, at the Cité Universitaire. And all that time, he made records.

The records will tell the final story about Leadbelly, but not right away. A spot check of all the companies holding masters of material recorded by Leadbelly revealed only one company, the old reliable Ethnic Folkways of Moe Asch, as having immediate plans for a Leadbelly memorial album. An M-G-M spokesman, admitting that the Leadbelly masters in their vaults (these are ones from which the album of "Sinful Songs" was made up and issued by Musicraft in 1939) are "nice, substantial pieces of business," has plans to issue only one single.

When queried, an RCA Victor informant said he would have to consult somebody. That could mean anything. The Library of Congress, pending settlement of Leadbelly's estate (whatever that is) has "sealed" all of the 140-odd sides cut by Leadbelly for the Archives. There is hope here for eventual reissue.

A great many of Leadbelly's stories and almost all his repertoire have also been recorded on high-fidelity tape; this makes the third and last "complete" recording of Leadbelly. The first was during 1935-1936, when the Lomaxes, admittedly "with malice aforethought," recorded everything of Leadbelly's they could get him to do. Then about five years later Moe Asch took down about 300 to 400 acetates of Leadbelly's repertoire. And in the fall of 1948 I recorded sixteen half-hour reels of tape covering in their entirety three evenings of song and story by Leadbelly.

One company, Columbia, has records of Leadbelly that differ from all others. They even pre-date some of the Library of Congress recordings; they have caught Leadbelly in his first moments in New York. In them his voice is younger; he is more boastful, more fierce, and at the same time more afraid. And the stories he told before the Columbia microphone (it was the American Record Company then) are priceless. It would be cultural mayhem of the first degree if Columbia Records, Inc., were to lose track of those masters, which comprise altogether about thirty-five titles, only four of which have ever been issued. As it is, the Columbia word is that new pressings may have to wait "for quite a while."

FOLKWAYS Records
AND SERVICE CORP., 165 W. 46 ST., N.Y.C.
Long Playing Non-Breakable Micro Groove 33 1/3 RPM

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LEADBELLY LEGACY, vol. 3

SIDE I

FA2024 A
vocal & guitar

- Band 1: FORT WORTH AND DALLAS BLUES*
(Good Morning Blues)
- Band 2: BLACK SNAKE
- Band 3: ROBERTA, part 1*
- Band 4: ROBERTA, part 2*

All songs words & music by Huddie Ledbetter
*Collected & adapted by John A. & Alan Lomax
All songs © Folkways Music Publishers, Inc.

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LEADBELLY LEGACY, vol. 3

SIDE II

FA2024 B
vocal & guitar

- Band 1: DRIVING SONG
- Band 2: DADDY, I'M COMING BACK
TO YOU
- Band 3: SEE SEE RIDER*
- Band 4: PIGMEAT

All songs words & music by Huddie Ledbetter
*Collected & adapted by John A. & Alan Lomax
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