

THE 12-STRING GUITAR AS PLAYED BY LEADBELLY

An Instruction Record by Peter Seeger

Folkways Records CRB 8

PHOTOGRAPH OF PETER SEEGER BY DAVID GAHR

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE



MT
588
S453
1962

A companion score is located in
the Music Resources Centre at
call number:

MT 588 S4532 1972 MUSIC

MUSIC LP

THE 12-STRING GUITAR AS PLAYED BY LEADBELLY

An Instruction Record

by Peter Seeger

INTRODUCTION:

We Shall Walk Through the Valley

WALKING BASS, D POSITION, THUMB AND INDEX FINGER,

PLAYING THE MELODY

ILLUSTRATIVE SONGS BY LEADBELLY:

Good Morning Blues,

Hitler Song, Green Corn, Bourgeois Town, Red Cross Store,

Noted Rider, John Henry, He Never Said a Mumbling Word, Old Riley

KEY OF A (A7), RUNS, PLAYING THE BASS STRINGS

ILLUSTRATIVE SONGS BY LEADBELLY:

Old Riley, Skip To My Lou,

Cow Cow Yicky, Black Girl, Keep Your Hands Off Her, etc.

USE OF THE FINGERS; SYNCOPATED BASS, OPENING PATTERNS,
BEAT ON THE 5th STRING

ILLUSTRATIVE SONGS BY LEADBELLY:

Leavin' Blues, Fannin Street,

Gallows Pole, Bottle Up and Go

C POSITION, WALKING BASS, 1st AND 2nd STRING IN UNISON,
OPEN TUNING, D TUNING, USE OF CAPO

ILLUSTRATIVE SONGS BY LEADBELLY:

Salty Dog, Looking for that New Deal Now, Roberta, Poor Howard,

Alabama Bound, National Defense Blues

ILLUSTRATIVE SONGS BY PETE SEEGER:

Bells of Rhymney, The Water Is Wide, Freight Train

DEMONSTRATION AND EXPLANATION OF TABLATURE
RHYTHM AND TIME VALUES

4/4 TIME

UNDERSTANDING LETTERS

THUMB AND INDEX FINGER

ADDING THE MIDDLE FINGER, SLIDES

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF TABLATURE,
TRIPLETS, RESTS,

Library of Congress Card Catalogue No. R 62-1315

© 1962 FOLKWAYS RECORDS & SERVICE Corp., 701 Seventh Ave., New York City

Distributed by Folkways/Scholastic Records, 906 Sylvan Ave., Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 07632

THE 12-STRING GUITAR AS PLAYED BY LEADBELLY

An Instruction Record by PETE SEEGER

INTRODUCTION

Huddie Ledbetter, nicknamed Leadbelly, died in December, 1949 at aged 64. I knew him the last eleven years of his life in New York City. He had come out of the deep south, settled down in a little apartment on the lower East Side, and was determined to build a successful career as a musician. Alas! There was not such interest in folk music then, as there is now in the 1960's. He got occasional jobs singing for schools and colleges, or at little parties where they were raising money for some cause like helping Loyalist Spain. Until the last three years of his life, he had barely recorded more than a few dozen songs, never made any Hollywood movie appearances, and only occasional radio appearances.

Today, through his recordings, he is world famous as one of the greatest singers of folksongs of this century. Songs he composed, or helped put together out of the fragments of older tunes, or adapted into the form in which we all know them now, have sold in the tens of millions: Good Night Irene, Bring Me A Little Water, Silvy, Midnight Special, Rock Island Line, Kisses Sweeter Than Wine (the tune), Old Cotton Fields At Home, and many others.

The driving rhythms he developed on his unusual guitar, with its double strings, are unforgettable to anyone who ever heard them. Today, many young people wishing to learn his songs as he sung them, are trying to learn his style of guitar playing. This record is designed to help them.

On each band of this record you can hear a passage of guitar playing by Huddie Ledbetter, immediately followed by a slow step-by-step explanation of how he played the passage, what strings were used, and what the thumb or fingers of the right hand did. The passage is also written out note for note in the accompanying brochure. Included also is a listing of books and records where his songs can be found.

HOW CLOSELY SHOULD ONE TRY AND IMITATE LEADBELLY?

Imitation is surely a first principle of learning. A child first imitates his parents, then others. In any art school you can see the novice painters imitating their teachers. But as the learners progress, they start imitating a variety of others. This simply bears out the old college saying: "Take from one person, and it's plagiarism. Take from ten, and it's scholarship. Take from a hundred, and it's original research."

The style is the man, it was said. Thus, if you set out to describe the style of Hemingway, the writer, you end up by having described Hemingway, the man. Your style should be you. So in the beginning you may start out by imitating Huddie Ledbetter's singing and guitar playing closely, even occasionally note for note. As you play more, you'll find you imperceptibly put more of yourself

into it. You'll be more selective in what you want to imitate, and what you want to change.

Note the endings of his songs: straightforward, abrupt. Note that he usually kept to steady, even tempos, avoiding cute accelerandos and ritards, as also pianissimos and crescendoes. While he sang some songs louder, others softer, he never crooned a song, lingering over "pear-shaped tones". Note that he usually placed songs in as high a key as conveniently possible for him. I don't need to describe his vocal tone; you can hear it on his records. I, for one, admire it tremendously; I used to say that if there was ever a voice teacher who could teach one how to sing like Leadbelly, that would be one worth studying with.

Now a teen-age girl imitates her favorite movie actress by copying her hairdo. A would-be-singer imitates the very accents of his idol. But if you would learn from Leadbelly, you should look deeper to find his greatest qualities. In other words, don't just try to imitate his southern accent: Learn his straightforward honesty, vigor, and strength.

HISTORY OF THE 12 STRING GUITAR

This instrument has been rarely played in the US. Leadbelly is one of three or four old time folk musicians I have ever heard play it. My guess is that it came to this country from Mexico, where it is played much more commonly. The regular 6-string guitar, and a lot of other cultural items, such as wide brimmed hats, high heeled boots, and cowboy lingo also filtered up here during the 19th Century. *

The 12-stringer simply has double strings, which give it its unique tone. The top two (or three or four) pairs are in unison and the other pairs of strings each have one low string, and another an octave higher. When the two are plucked simultaneously, they give out one new tone. It is similar to the tone got from an organ or accordion, when several stops are pulled out. Or similar to the tone from a piano, when a tune is played in octaves.

The 12-stringer is tuned like a six string guitar. Each finger of the left hand frets two strings at once so the chord patterns are about the same

*If anyone knows any authoritative history of the 12-stringed instrument prior to the 19th Century, this writer would like to hear from them. It is well known that lutes usually had double strings, and the "Portugese guitar" has five sets of double strings. Mandolins, and probably dozens or hundred of other plucked stringed instruments of Europe also use double strings. The guitar itself, it is generally believed, was brought to Europe in the 12th Century by Gypsies. Its ancestor is the Persian Tar, and one of its most illustrious cousins is the East Indian Sitar.

as for a six string guitar. But it is customary to tune all twelve strings slightly lower in pitch, so when one fingers an "E" chord, it may come out sounding like C or D. The D chord may sound Bb or C. The reason for tuning the strings slack once may have been to keep from buckling the fragile guitar frame, since bringing the strings up to proper tension might put half a ton of stress on the bridge. I think, also, the presence of so many high pitched strings makes it possible to play a chord without giving as much of a rumbling, boomy tone as a six-stringer would give, if tuned so low.

If you tune your strings too slack, however, you'll find them exceedingly hard to keep in pitch. Leadbelly had a slightly longer necked guitar, however, and used heavy strings, so he could tune his instrument a full third or fourth lower than normal.

Thus when he chorded a song in D, he was actually sounding in the key of A, or perhaps A#.

Now note this: Leadbelly, as you will see, sang his songs in a tenor's range. If you want to sing his songs using the same guitar accompaniment which he did, you will also have to sing very high, or else make up your own new accompaniments. I myself do a little of both. Bourgeois Blues, which Leadbelly played in "D" (actually about B^b) I try to sing in his key. Goodnight Irene, which he also played in "D" I usually play in "A" (actually F). In addition, I gain flexibility by using a capo, a gadget which Leadbelly never used on the 12-stringer (though he did if he played on a 6-string guitar).

Each player will have to determine how slack he or she would like to tune the strings. And it may take a year or two of experimenting before you settle down and make a decision on what type of strings you would like to use.

THE 12-STRINGER COMPARED WITH A 6-STRING GUITAR. RELATIVE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES.

If you already know a bit about playing a 6-string guitar, you can probably switch over to the 12-stringer without too much trouble. But it takes some muscles, to push down those 12 strings to the keyboard. The difference is roughly the same as that between driving a truck and driving an ordinary car.

The bass strings of the 12-stringer can give impressive authority to a simple run which might sound almost inconsequential on a 6-string. It is the difference between one violin playing a piece of music and a whole violin section playing the same passage. But if the run is exceedingly complicated it will sound messy, mushy, and foolish, compared to the clarity the same run can be given by the more flexible and agile 6-string. It will be like an elephant trying to do a tap-dance.

The top strings of the 12-stringer, while they can have a warm, singing, quality, also lack the crystal clarity of the single strings of the regular guitar. For this reason, some players would remove one of the top two strings, making it a 11-string guitar.

Chords on the 12-stringer can sound exceedingly rich. Some chord positions which on the 6-stringer are undistinguished, become a brand new discovery on the 12. But beware of being too infatuated with them: sometimes they are too lush. Note that Leadbelly often just played single bass notes, and used only the top three pairs of strings for chords. And some songs he accompanied with hardly any full chords at all: just single bass notes, and occasional

single top strings.

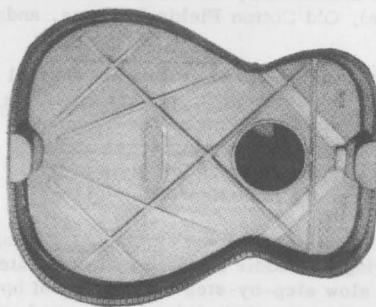
In sum, the 12-stringer lacks the clarity and precision of the regular guitar, but gives a rich, powerful body of tone which exactly suits some music. If you are switching over from a regular guitar what you will have to learn is to leave out some notes, to decide what not to play, in order to approach the magnificent simple strength of Huddie Ledbetter's guitar playing.

WHERE TO BUY A TWELVE STRING GUITAR

Few music stores carry them in stock at this time, but most of them can order you one from one of the major guitar firms,* if you are willing to wait a while for delivery.

Sing Out magazine (121 W. 47 St. NYC) usually contains advertisements for imported 12-stringers as well. 12-stringers are liable to be almost twice as expensive as 6 string guitars, however, simply because at the moment there is no mass market for them. A cheap one would be \$60. An expensive one, \$150 to \$400 or more. In all cases, when you buy one, get some sort of guarantee against the neck warping, or the bridge giving way. Check each string on each fret, to make sure the strings are neither so low that they buzz, or so high that they sound out of pitch when playing higher up the neck. Check that the pegs turn freely; too-tight-pegs will make the instrument exasperatingly difficult to tune.

It is not uncommon to see a 6-stringer converted into a 12-stringer. A little extra bracing inside the body, as well as extra tuning pegs, and new grooves in the bridge and the nut. If the guitar is built strongly enough, and has a wide neck, it can be done.



Twelve String Guitar Made By Stanley Francis, Liverpool, England

TAKING CARE OF THE GUITAR

When you get your guitar, guard it from sudden changes in temperature, and excess humidity or dryness. A strong padded case is a worthwhile investment. Don't leave the guitar sitting in bright summer sunlight, or on top of a radiator. Oil the tuning pegs occasionally. Keep the strings free of rust if you're near the seashore, and change them when they lose good tone quality or the winding becomes frayed. Fred Gerlach once insisted to me that all strings should be changed every week! Since then he's got married though, and I wonder if he still feels the same way. Aside from the cost it takes a good hour at least to change all twelve strings, even with the help of a tuning crank. I change strings perhaps every six months or so. It all depends on how much and how hard one plays on them, I suppose. One thing: as a rule, it is

*Such as Vega, Gibson, Gretch, Harmony, Stella, etc.

best to replace all 12 strings at once. (Except in replacing an occasional broken string). The tone seems to match better.

If a crack does develop in the guitar, loosen the tension on the strings, and take it to a good repairman. Don't try to mend it yourself with DuPont cement. But a professionally glued crack will make the guitar stronger than ever. If the neck starts to warp, take care of that also before it goes too far. Often it can be straightened by a little heat treatment. More extreme cases can have a new fingerboard put on. The guitar I use, made for me by Stanley Francis, a young engineer in Liverpool, England, includes a steel rod in the neck. By turning a nut at one end, the rod can straighten out the neck any time.

FINGERPICKS AND THUMB PICKS

No two people have the same size and shape of hands, so you may have to spend some time in several music stores till you find the exact right brand and kind of picks that you like. If you want to play very softly to yourself, picks may not be necessary, but for a strong clear tone, my guess is you'll find them indispensable. Leadbelly used a long steel finger pick and a thumb pick. You can use flat picks if you want. This is common in Mexico. Leadbelly never used them, so far as I know. Not enough oomph, I guess.

WHAT KIND OF STRINGS TO USE?

Here also, we have a wide range of opinion. Leadbelly used standard heavy steel strings.

I tested several types of jumbo strings with the E & O Mari string Company, 38-01 23rd Ave., Long Island City, N. Y. We found that an extremely heavy set still has good tone but makes it possible to tune the strings a full fourth lower, and still retain enough tension to keep in tune. If you write them for this kind, ask for the C-range 12 string guitar set. This is the kind I use now. The basses are silk and steel, the higher strings are steel.

Many people prefer different types of strings, though, so I'll reprint here a more extended discussion of the subject from an old issue of Sing Out!.

FURTHER NOTES ON THE 12-STRING GUITAR*

by Bruce Jackson

There are a number of mechanical problems with 12-string guitars that can make one's first meeting with them discouraging. Because of the extra unison and octave notes sounded on most chords, tuning must be extremely accurate and is more of a problem than six-string tuning. Here are a few suggestions to help avoid some of the difficulties.

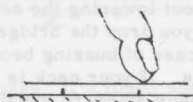
STRINGING: See Pete Seeger's article "Some Notes on the 12-String Guitar," *Sing Out* (Spring, 1959) for suggestions on how to arrange the sets. With a 12-fret neck as found on most 12-stringers, you'll find that jumbo strings are unplayable if tuned up to regular pitch but tend to buzz if tuned down a major third. Jumbo strings tuned up to regular pitch also have the annoying habit of sending the bridge zinging past your ear at the most unexpected moments.

The easiest alternative is to get silk and steel strings, which can be tuned rather low with buzzing, are easy to finger, and are easy to bar in the double sets. If you still have a problem, try the special 12-string strings made by the Village String Shop. The silk-steel strings have another advantage: unless you've a stentorian voice, you may find your 12-stringer leaving you behind when it comes to noise; silk-steel strings don't make as much noise as the jumbo strings do.

TUNING: Unless you have perfect pitch and don't have to fret to tune, you'll find your normal method of tuning doesn't work too well: the regular 5th-fret-match business, though fine on each adjoining set, tends to turn out some pretty sour chords when you're all tuned up.

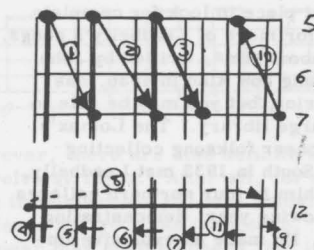
This does not necessarily mean the neck is warped, but may be a result of the fact that you've got thin strings and thick round ones side by side and the 6-string guitar's usual compensating device for variant elongation, the tilted or oblique bridge, doesn't work. You can use a slotted bridge, but that leads to buzzing and sort of commits you to one size string.

Try tuning by harmonics. It works like this: say you've got your lowest string where you want it (C), and are tuning the 5th set to the 6th. Place your left index finger just over the 5th fret of the lowest sixth string so it barely touches, then pluck with a



finger nail or pick; you'll hear a harmonic, a note quite a bit higher than what you usually get. Do the same thing at the 7th fret of the next set -- you should get the same harmonic (see fig. 1).

You can tune the octave strings in these sets either by ear or by using the harmonic at the 12th fret -- you'll get perfect tunings with no distortion from string elongation. Work your way up, to the third set. Now since the second set is a third interval and the others are fourths, the harmonic method hits a block. So tune the first set to the harmonic of the highest pitched string of the bottom set. Then come down to the second set by fretting the 7th fret on the first set, then the 5th fret on the second. Like this, if you tune all the strings by harmonics:



(fig. 1)

Eleven steps total. You tune the bottom four sets, using harmonics and octave harmonics, then the first set by the harmonic of the thin string on the 6th set, then tune down to the second set. It sounds complicated, but if

you try it a few times you'll see that it's not only easier than 5th-fret tuning, but is more accurate as well. Moreover, the harmonics continue to ring after you remove your left hand from the strings, so you can shoot right up to the pegs and tune. The first two sets, you'll find with a little experience, are most easily tuned by ear: just tune them till there is no beating when they're played together.

CAPOING: This is a problem on 12-string guitars because in each octave set you've got one string being depressed more than the one next to it, and you don't get the benefit of a tilted or oblique bridge, as mentioned above. The problem doesn't arise on a six because of that bridge compensation and because you don't have all those unison notes. There are three solutions:

1. Try a cork capo: this device tends to develop grooves and therefore only depresses the strings part way; it has the disadvantage of developing grooves that are too deep to hold the strings down well enough.
2. Retune each time you move the capo more than a couple of frets. This is annoying.
3. Slip a piece of cardboard or folded paper under the strings under the bar of the capo just behind the fret. This reduces string elongation to a minimum and is quick and easy. Capo as close to the fret as possible.
4. Shape a thin piece of wood to use instead of the cork on the capo, and file small grooves to allow for the thicker strings.

ACTION: Be careful about lowering the action on a twelve too far. If you drop the bridge too much, you'll get a bad case of buzzing because of the loose bass strings. If your neck is straight, the old two-penny standard should work well enough with most strings: set the action so two pennies will just slip between the strings and the neck at the 12th fret.

Postscript: I've found that by putting a two complete thicknesses of springy rubber tubing over the capo bar (one tube slips over the other) I'm now able to capo up as much as five or six frets without retuning. However, many capos cannot handle the wide neck of a 12 stringer, and often the spring is not powerful enough to hold the 12 strings firmly down on the frets. It helps if you're handy with tools.

LEADBELLY SONG BOOKS AND RECORDINGS

The *Leadbelly Song Book*, (74 songs, \$1.95, Oak Publications, 121 W. 47th St., N.Y., N.Y.) is your best place to look for complete words and music for more of Leadbelly's songs. The larger book about him*, written by John Lomax and his young son Alan in 1936, has long been out of print, but you may be able to find a copy in a large library. The Lomax's, on one of their pioneer folksong collecting trips through the South in 1933 met Leadbelly, and arranged for him to tour northern colleges with them the following year, demonstrating Negro folk music. He made an explosive impact on everyone he met.

Unfortunately they soon split up. John Lomax was a conservative Texan, and Leadbelly, finding a freedom up North which he had not known before, settled down with his wife in New York. When the book

"Negro Folk Songs As Sung By Leadbelly" appeared, Leadbelly himself had this to say about it:

*Because don't for get because
of one thing about my life and i don't think nothing
of one thing about the book was my away baby of
of one thing because Lomax did not write nothing like
i told him*

To which we must still add: If it hadn't been for old John Lomax, we would never have known Leadbelly, his genius, and his songs.

RECORDINGS: There is a Capitol LP available now, entitled "Leadbelly" with songs he recorded on the west coast right after World War II (songs include, I just find out "Ella Speed"). And the Mount Vernon Record Co., Mt. Vernon, N.Y. has re-issued the excellent Musicraft album Leadbelly recorded in 1938 in New York City, under Alan Lomax's direction. It includes "Fannin Street" and "Gallus Pole".

The following recordings are available through Folkways:

FA2004 Huddie Ledbetter Memorial, Reels and Blues. Green Corn, Yellow Gal, You Can't Lose Me Cholly, Laura, Good Morning Blues, Leaving Blues, Big Fat Woman, Take This Hammer, Bring Me A Little Water, Silvy, Moaning, Meeting at the Building, We Shall Walk Through the Valley, Irene.

FA2014 Huddie Ledbetter Memorial, Vol. 2 Rock Island Line. Cotton Song, Ha Ha This A-way, Sukey Jump, Black Girl, Rock Island Line, Blind Lemon, Bottle Up And Go, On A Monday (Almost Gone), Shorty George, Duncan And Brady, Old Riley, Leavin' Blues, Pigmeat.

FA2024 Leadbelly Legacy, Vol. 3 Fort Worth And Dallas Blues, (Good Morning Blues) - Black Snake, Roberta, part 1, Roberta, part 2, Driving Song, Daddy, I'm Coming Back To You, See See Rider, Pigmeat.

FA2034 Leadbelly Legacy, Vol. 4 Easy Rider. There's A Man Going Round Taking Names, Easy Rider, Red Bird, Line 'Em, T.B. Blues, Jim Crow Blues, Bourgeois Blues, Army Life (I Don't Want No More of Army Life) - Mr. Hitler (Hitler Song).

FA2488 Leadbelly - Sings Folk Songs. (with Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee). There's A Man Going Round Taking Names, Stewball, Keep Your Hands Off Her, Good Good Good, We Shall Walk In The Valley, Lining Track, Outskirts of Town, We Shall Be Free, The Blood Done Sign My Name, On A Monday, Jean Harlow, Alabama Bound, Corn Bread Rough, Defense Blues, Children's Blues, Fiddler's Dram, Meeting At The Building.

FA2941 Leadbelly's Last Sessions, Vol. 1 I Was Standing in the Bottom, Yes, I'm Goin' Down in Louisiana, I Ain't Goin' Down to The Well No More, Dick Ligger's Hoiler, Miss Liza Jane, Dog-Latin Song, Leaving Blues, Go Down, Old Hannah, Blue Tail Fly, Nobody in the World is Better Than Us, We're in the Same Boat, Brother, Looky, Looky Yonder, Jelly O' The Ransom, Ship of Zion, Bring Me a Little Water, Silvy, Mistreatin' Mama, Black Betty, Ain't Goin' Down to the Well No More, Ain't It A Shame To Go Fishin' On Sunday, I Ain't Going To Drink No More, My Lindy Lou, I'm Thinking of a Friend, He Never Said a Mumblin' Word, I Don't Want No More Army Life, In The World, I Want To Go Home, New Iberia, Dancing With

* *Negro Folksongs As Sung by Leadbelly*, MacMillan Publishers, N.Y.

Tears In My Eyes, John Henry, Salty Dog, National Defense Blues, Easy Mr. Tom, Relax Your Mind, Bottle Up and Go, Polly Polly Wee, Pig Latin Song, Hawaiian Song, Drinkin Lum Y A Alla, The Gray Goose, Silver City Bound, The Titanic, Death Letter Blues, Mary Don't You Weep, He Never Said a Mumblin' Word.

FA2942 Leadbelly's Last Sessions, Vol. 2
 Midnight Special, Boll Weevil Blues, Careless Love, Easy Rider, Cry for Me, Ain't Goin' Drink No More, Birmingham Jail, Old Riley, Julie Ann Johnson, It's Right Like That, 4, 5, and 9, Good Morning Babe, Jail House Blues, Well You Know I Had to Do it, Irene, Story of the 25¢ Dude, How Come You Do Me Like You Do Do Do, Hello Central, Give Me Long Distance Please, The Hesitation Blues, I'll Be Down on the Last Bread Wagon, Springtime in the Rockies, Chinatown, Rock Island Line, Backwater Blues, Sweet Mary, Irene, Easy, Mr. Tom, In the Evening When the Sun Goes Down, I'm Alone Because I Love You, House of the Rising Sun, Mary Don't You Weep and Don't You Moan, Talk About Cannin Street, Fannin Street, Sugared Beer, Didn't Old John Cross the Water, Nobody Knows When You're Down and Out, Bully of the Town, Sweet Jenny Lee, Yellow Gal, He Was the Man, We're in the Same Boat Brother, Leaving Blues.

FC7533 Negro Folk Songs for Young People, sung by Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly) with 12-string guitar. Irene Goodnight, John Henry, Boll Weevil, When a Man's a Long Way From Home, Good Morning Blues, Every Time I Feel The spirit, They Hung Him on the Cross, Swing Low Sweet Chariot, By and By When the Morning Comes, Rock Island Line, Julie Ann Johnson, Haul Away Joe, Christmas Is Coming, We're in the Same Boat Brother.

THE 12 STRING GUITAR AS PLAYED BY

LEADBELLY

Verbatim transcript

SIDE 1, BAND 1

*We shall walk through the valley
 In the shadows of death
 We shall walk through the valley in peace
 If Jesus himself shall be our leader
 We shall walk through the valley in peace*

Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FA 2004

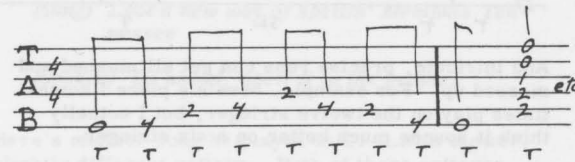
Huddie Ledbetter died in December, 1949, and if you want to learn from him, you'll have to listen to his records. He played a big twelve string guitar. It had double strings, six pairs of them, usually tuned very low.



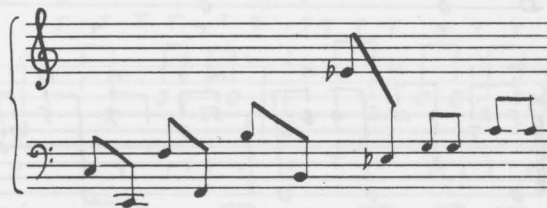
Of course, he didn't tune to exact concert pitch. It might be up sometimes like this:



Other people who play this same type of instrument sometimes drop one of the two top strings. Jesse Fuller, out in Oakland, California, plays an eleven string guitar, and he feels he can get more out of a single first string. *Other people for example, like silk and steel strings, instead of all steel.



Fred Gerlach and I like a slightly different tuning than Leadbelly used, only one octave difference on the sixth pair, and an octave difference on the third pair. Here's my guitar:



In any case, it's tuned about three or four notes lower than a regular guitar, so that an E chord actually sounds more about C



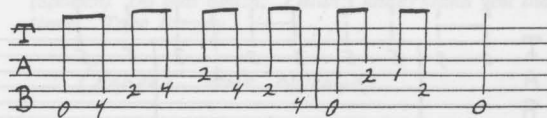
Compare that same chord on a regular six string guitar:



Furthermore, the double strings give it a rich tone



A kind of importance that you don't get out of the six stringer. Hear those same notes on the six string:



However, there are also definite disadvantages to a twelve stringer. After all, for everything you gain in this world, you lose something. Gain experience and you lose innocence. Now, the twelve stringer may have richness, but it doesn't have clarity. It tends to lose that intimate feeling that a six stringer can have. The top strings may be mellow - the top pairs on a twelve stringer:

* I met Jesse again in 1962, and find he's using all 12 strings now (flat wound, steel guitar type) and unisons on all but the 5th and 6th pairs.

But not as pointed:

And intricate, precise runs can get all mushed and messed up. For example, here's a piece I sometimes play on the twelve stringer, but I actually think it sounds much better on a six stringer.

*(Living In The Country)**

D Tuning (see p. 23)

*Tune by Pete Seeger, ©1962 by Fall River Music, Suite 602, 200 W. 57th St., N.Y.C. Complete guitar part available from them. Recorded on Folkways LP FA2439 ("Nonesuch").

Now here's that same bit played on a six stringed guitar.

(same as above)

However, there's another thing you can't do on a twelfth stringer, that is, choke a guitar. You know what I mean? You Twist the string to raise the pitch. On a six string it's easy.

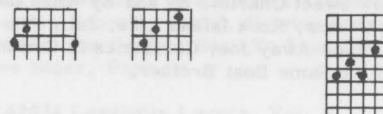
H = hammer down sharply with left finger on string

On the twelfth string all you can do is give it a slide, perhaps

Can't choke it

A slide is the only thing

Now the genius of Leadbelly, I think, was not so much in the notes he played, but in the notes he didn't play. Often he accompanied a song with single big bass notes, and practically no full chords. Listen to the way he played "Good Morning Blues" now; he's using the G position on his guitar, though the actual pitch is nearer E flat.



BAND 2

Handwritten musical notation for the first system of 'Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?'. It consists of a single staff with notes and fingerings (0, 2, 2, 5, 4, 4, 5, 5, 4, 4, 3, 3, 2, 2) and a series of 'T' characters below representing a walking bass line.

Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?
 Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?
 I'm doin' all right, good mornin', how are you?
 (spoke) Come with me now . . .

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub.,
 and Folkways LP FA 2004.

Now, he does all this with his thumb. Read the
 tablature as I play it (approximately same as above)

Oh, me. It's hard to do that slow. 'Course, when
 you get to do it a couple thousand times, you'll get
 that powerful, sure touch, which helped Leadbelly
 keep such good rhythm. Remember, also, he never
 did it twice exactly the same. He varied it occasion-
 ally if he felt he had good musical reasons for doing
 so. As a matter of fact, on all these songs, you
 should hear them all the way through, to hear how he
 really put a piece of music together. For example,
 later on in "Good Morning Blues, he might play it
 this way:

(spoken) Take it easy.

Handwritten musical notation for the first system of 'Take it easy'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (0, 0, 2, 2, 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 2, 2, 0, 0, 2, 2) and a series of 'T' characters below. The text 'Take it' is written below the staff.

Handwritten musical notation for the second system of 'Take it easy'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (3, 3, 2, 2, 0, 0, 2, 2, 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 2, 2) and a series of 'T' characters below. The text 'easy"' is written below the staff.

Handwritten musical notation for the third system of 'Take it easy'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (3, 3, 2, 2, 0, 0, 2, 0, 3, 3, 2, 0, 3, 2, 0, 2) and a series of 'T' characters below.

Handwritten musical notation for the fourth system of 'Take it easy'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (3, 3, 2, 2, 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 2, 0) and a series of 'T' characters below.

Handwritten musical notation for the first system of 'I got a new way of spellin' Memphis, Tenn.'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (0, 2, 4, 5, 4, 4, 0, 2, 4) and a series of 'T' characters below, including 'HSL'.

Handwritten musical notation for the second system of 'I got a new way of spellin' Memphis, Tenn.'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 2, 2, 3) and a series of 'T' characters below. The text 'I got a new way of spellin' Memphis, Tenn.'" is written above the staff.

(Sung) I got a new way of spellin' Memphis Ten-
 nessee

(Spoken) Go ahead, spell it to the people.

Here's another song he played in G. Little slower,
 slightly different pattern. Both of these patterns
 are what blues musicians call a 'walking bass'. He
 just walks all around down there.

Handwritten musical notation for the first system of 'I got a new way of spellin' Memphis, Tenn.'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 2, 2, 0, 0, 2, 0) and a series of 'T' characters below.

Handwritten musical notation for the second system of 'I got a new way of spellin' Memphis, Tenn.'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (3, 2, 0, 0, 2, 0, 3, 2, 0, 0, 2, 0) and a series of 'T' characters below.

Handwritten musical notation for the third system of 'I got a new way of spellin' Memphis, Tenn.'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 2, 3) and a series of 'T' characters below.

Handwritten musical notation for the fourth system of 'I got a new way of spellin' Memphis, Tenn.'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (5, 5, 5, 4, 5, 0, 0, 0, 2, 0) and a series of 'T' characters below.

Handwritten musical notation for the fifth system of 'I got a new way of spellin' Memphis, Tenn.'. It shows a staff with notes and fingerings (3, 3, 2, 2, 3, 3, 2, 2) and a series of 'T' characters below. The text 'Do that again..."' is written below the staff.

(Spoken) Do that again; I didn't understand you that
 time. Take it easy.

(Repeat same passage)

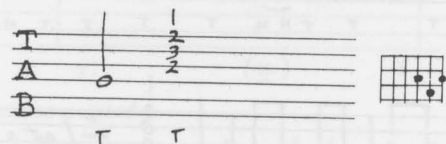
Yes, yes

(Sung) Hitler started out in nineteen hundred and
 thirty two
 Hitler started out in nineteen hundred and thirty two
 When he started out, he took the home from the Jew
 We're gonna tear Hitler down. . .

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub.,
 and Folkways LP FA 2034

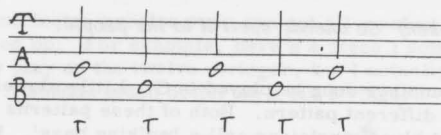
BAND 3

Almost half of his songs, Leadbelly accompanied in the D position

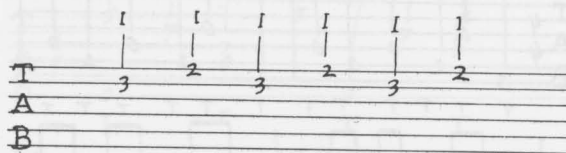


Of course it sounds, the way he usually tuned his strings low, an actual pitch near B flat or A.

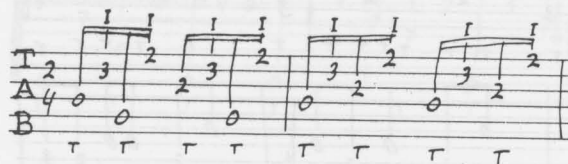
Now, in addition to using his thumb, he'd alternate with notes plucked up on the top strings by his first finger. While the thumb was doing something like this



The index finger of his right hand does something like this:



But they alternate



Listen to the way he does it. His guitar this time was tuned even lower than usual.

*Green corn, green corn,
Green corn, come along Cholly (Charlie)
Green corn, don't tell Polly
Green corn, green corn,*

*All I want in this creation
Little bitty wife and a big plantation
Two little boys to call me papa
One name Tom, the other named Davy
Green corn, green corn, come along Cholly*

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FA 2004

Now, I've tried writing down the notes he's playing, but it's impossible, of course. This is just a guess. But it's the general idea. You try it slowly.

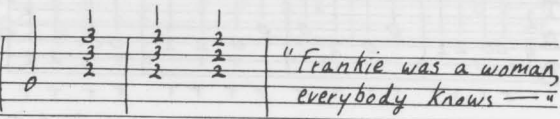
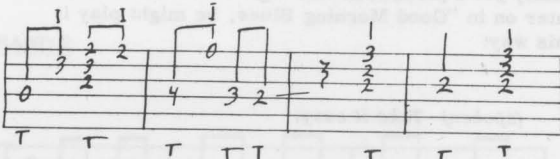
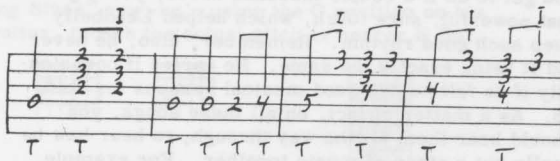
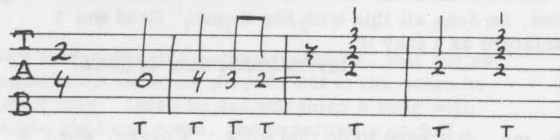
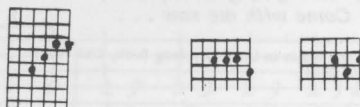


Now, there's something else important to note here. He lifts up the fingers of his left hand, dampening

the strings, lifting them up all the way off the string, on the second beat of every measure, like this:



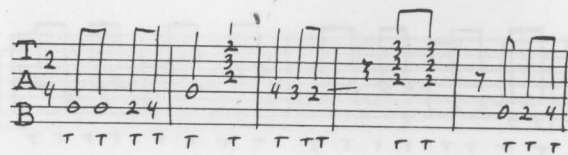
Another song he accompanied in D was his epic version of Frankie and Albert. He didn't put any instrumental breaks in it; I think he - he didn't want to destroy the continuity of the story. But he put a few real nice runs in the introduction. See how good you are now at reading tablature.

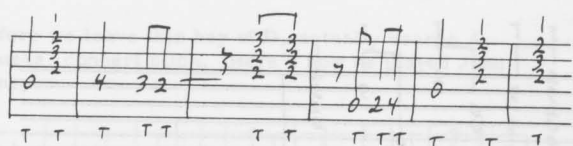
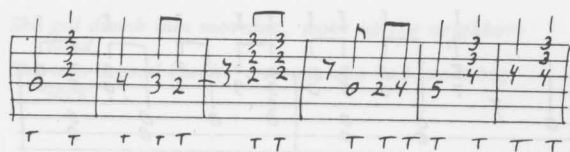


*Frankie was a woman, everybody knows
Paid one hundred dollars just to buy her man a
suit of clothes
He was her man, 'cos he done her wrong*

© Complete words and music in Negro Folksongs as Sung by Leadbelly, MacMillan

Now if you try playing this yourself, you may change it a little, but it's worthwhile noting that he puts in extra beats, makes things irregular in the most surprising way. I think this is true of a lot of folk music. Now, you could make it kind of regular if you wanted, like this:



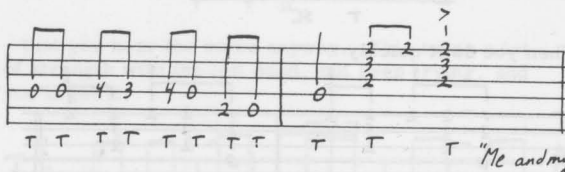
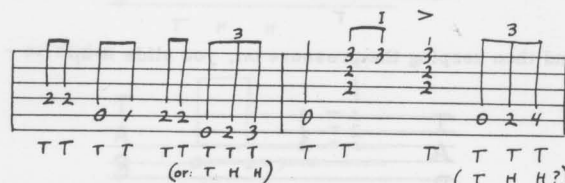
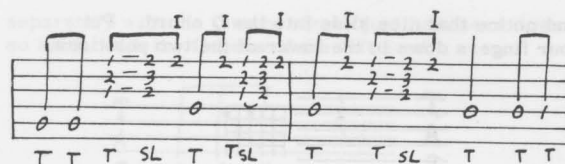
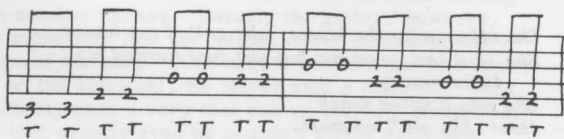
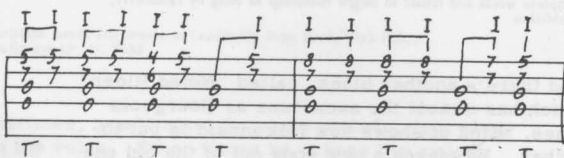
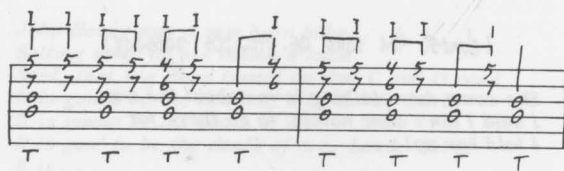
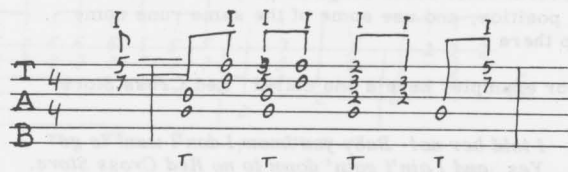
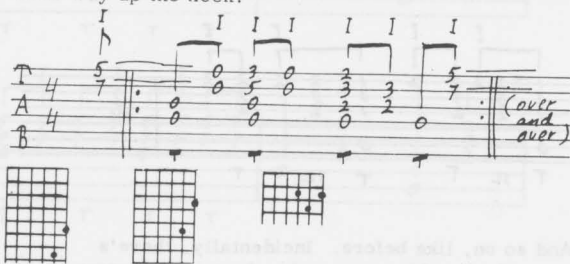


But I think if you look at the notes the way he played it, it comes out a lot better. Now we come to the first real piece de la resistance, piece der resistance, or sock dollaper

*Listen hear people, listen to me
Don't try to buy no home down in Washington, D. C.
Cause it's a bourgeois town
Ooh! It's a bourgeois town
I got the bourgeois blues, I'm gonna
Spread the news all around
Me an my sweet wife and Miss Barnicle . . .*

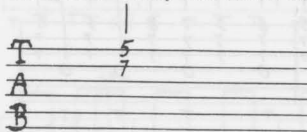
© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FA 2034

Now, he made up this song in 1938, out of an experience he had in Washington D.C. He and some white friends were told to leave first one hotel and then another, because the management didn't want an interracial party on the premises. Well, fortunately, Washington in many ways is improved nowadays, and who knows but what this song might have helped in a small way. First of all, get that final phrase on each verse. Runs way up the neck.

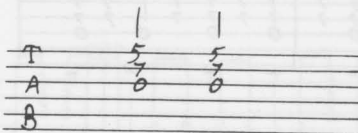


*Me and my sweet wife Martha, was standing upstairs
Heard a white man say I don't want no Negroes up there
He was a bourgeois man
Hoo! Living in a bourgeois town*

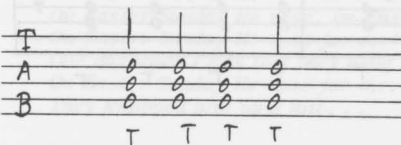
On the instrumental break, Leadbelly again went up the neck. Now, see these two notes



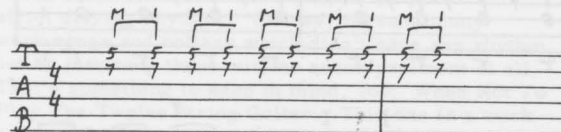
Now, forget if the lower notes don't seem to harmonize. It doesn't matter.



The rhythm gets very tricky, and don't think you're going to be able to play this piece right away. The thumb stays rock-steady:

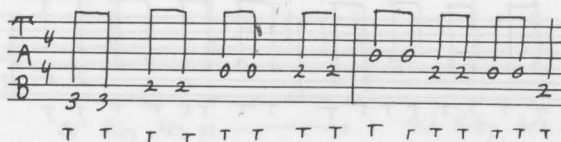


Now you may not be able to do it all with your index finger, either. I myself use my middle finger as well, to help out.

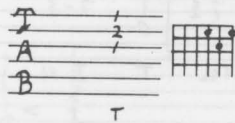


Adds up to a lot of work for the top strings. And if you can do it all with an index finger, fine, but if you can't, I'd say use two fingers to divide the job.

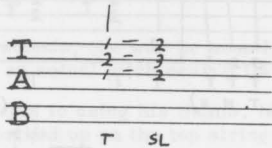
And then he does a simple walking bass:



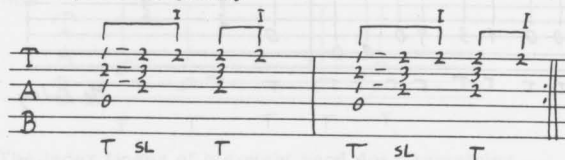
And notice that nice slide into the D chord. Put your fingers down in the lower of the two positions



And then keeping the pressure on, you slide it up

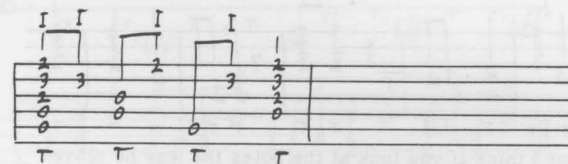
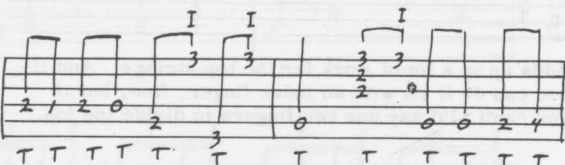
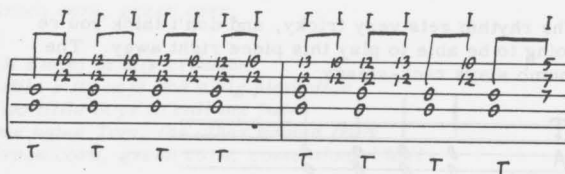
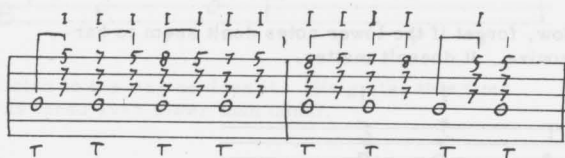
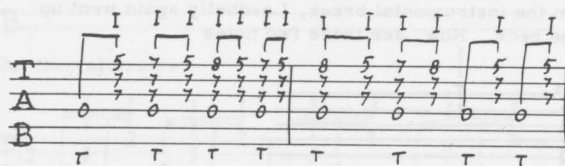


When you do it quickly -

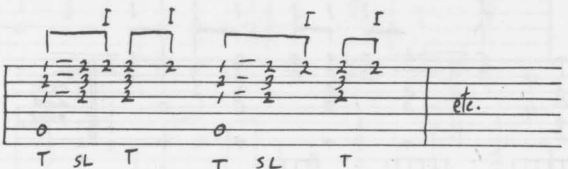
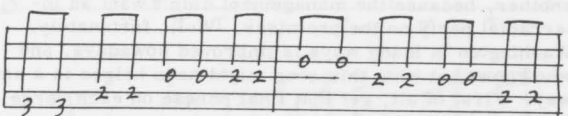
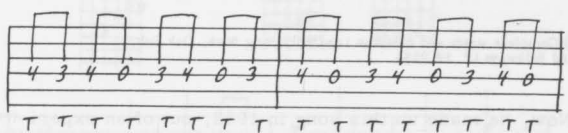
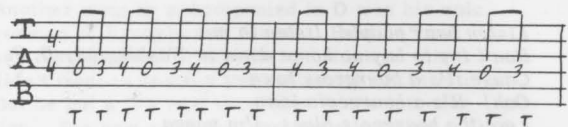


When you learn to play that like Leadbelly, it's enough for this month - or this year.

I've heard him sometimes do that break like this:



I've also heard him just walk around in the bass. It calls for a really agile thumb:



And so on, like before. Incidentally, there's several other blues songs he plays in this same D position, and use some of the same runs come up there

For example, here's one called "Red Cross Store"

*I told her no! Baby you know I don't want to go
Yes, and I ain't goin' down to no Red Cross Store.*

(almost the same as previous passage)

*She come down talking to me about the war
I said I ain't done nothin' to go there for
I told her no!...*

Complete words and music in Negro Folksongs as Sung by Leadbelly, MacMillan

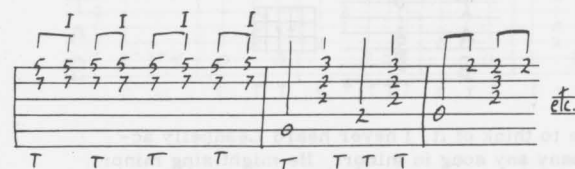
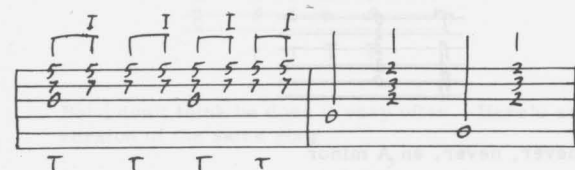
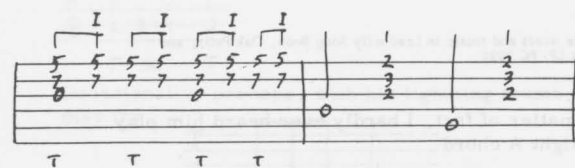
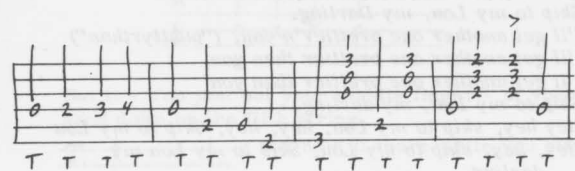
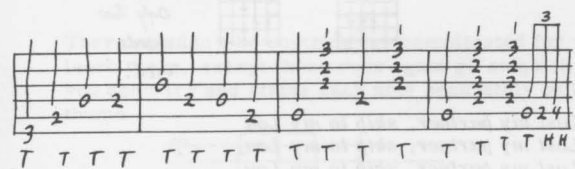
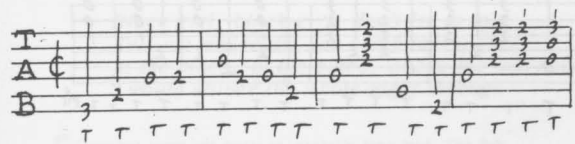
And there's another blues, called "Noted Rider" which has almost the same tune as Bourgeois blues. Kind of shows how folk music is put together. He makes a new song out of the old one.

*She take me to the house, she called me honey
She said she loved me but she just wanted my
little money
She was a noted rider
Hoo! She ain't no good.*

She got drunk this morning, woke up the neighborhood.

She was a good lookin' woman, she had great big legs...

Before we leave this key of D, actually nearer A, I guess, concert pitch. Here's how he played John Henry.

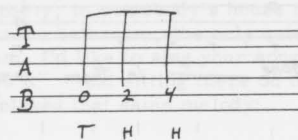


John Henry was a new born baby
Setting down on his mama's knee
Said, that Big Bend tunnel on that C and O road
It is gonna be the death of me, Lord, Lord,
It is gonna be the death of me.
It is gon' to be the death of me, Lord, Lord,
It is...

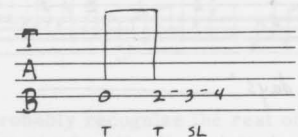
© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FC 7533

Sometimes, you'll note, he plays melody right along with the voice. Other times he echoes the melody after the phrase. Sometimes he answers the melody with another phrase. Usually the guitar, however, was more than just accompaniment. It was actually a part of his song. Now here's another one in D also, it's an old spiritual, He Never said a Mumblin' word. Leadbelly uses a very fast run on the fifth string. So fast that usually even he couldn't strike each note

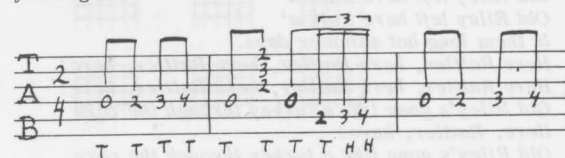
separately with the thumb. So he just hammers down so hard, with the fingers of the left hand



- or slides

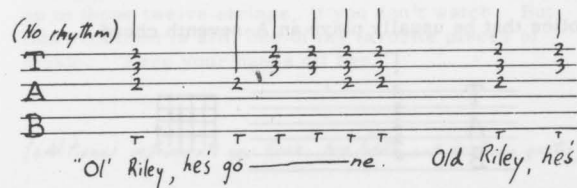


- that you hear the notes anyway. This takes a lot of strength with the left hand, but keep trying, and you'll get it.



On Easter Sunday He rose, on Easter Sunday He rose,
On Easter Sunday He rose for me!
One day when I was lost they hung Him on a cross
On Easter Sunday He rose for me.
They whupped him up a hill...

Oh, here's one other song in the key of D. And one of the very few ones which he didn't play with a strict driving rhythm. 'Course, he sang many work songs and hollers which didn't have any rhythm, but he just sang those with no accompaniment at all. That's something to keep in mind, too: When Not To Play The Twelve String Guitar. This one is a work song, "Old Riley crossed the waters, on those long hot summer days." Alan Lomax and I figure that this song is really two separate worksongs which Leadbelly combined together to make a fine performance piece.



gone, gone, gone ——— In them long,

hot, summer days ———

Old Riley, he's gone
 Old Riley, he's gone, gone, gone
 In them long hot summer days
 Old Riley left here walkin'
 Old Riley left here walkin'
 In them long hot summer days.
 Here Rattler, here Rattler, here Rattler, here!
 Here Rattler, here Rattler, here Rattler, here!
 Old Riley's gone like a turkey through the corn
 Here, Rattler, here!
 Old Riley's gone like a turkey through the corn...

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FA 2014

SIDE II, BAND 1

Leadbelly occasionally played Old Riley in the key of A, too. It's easier to sing the high notes, but he can hardly make the low ones:

"Ol' Riley walked the wa ——— ter ———"

Old Riley walked the wa ——— ter

In them long, hot, summer days."

Old Riley walked the water, Old Riley walked the water,
 In them long, hot, summer days!
 Old Riley, he's gone, Old Riley, he's gone,
 In them long, hot, summer days.
 (spoken)
 Now they're gonna call for the bloodhounds
 Riley walked the water, here Rattler, here!
 Old Riley walked the water, here Rattler, here!

Notice that he usually plays an A-seventh chord

- rather than a straight A chord

He does this on a number of these songs. Here's Skip To My Lou

Only two chords used.

Lost my partner, skip to my Lou
 Lost my partner, skip to my Lou,
 Lost my partner, skip to my Lou
 Skip to my Lou, my Darling.
 I'll get another one prettier'n you, ("puhttyrthan")
 I'll get another one prettier than you,
 I'll get another one prettier than you
 Skip to my Lou, my darling.
 Hey hey, skip to my Lou, hey, hey, Skip to my Lou
 Hey, hey, skip to my Lou, Skip to my Lou my darling.

Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FC 7020

As a matter of fact, I hardly ever heard him play a straight A chord

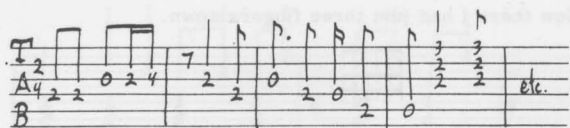
And never, never, an A minor

Come to think of it, I never heard Leadbelly accompany any song in minor. He might sing minor notes, but he'd play major chords. This is quite common in a lot of American folk music. Take this "cowboy" song.

When I was a cowboy, out on the western plains,
 When I was a cowboy, out on the western plains
 I made a half a million, pulling on the bridle reins
 Come a cow cow yicky, come a cow cow yicky yicky yay
 Come a cow cow yicky, come a cow cow yicky yicky yay

© Complete words in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub. and Allegro 4027

You know, the words of this song may be sarcastic nonsense - or not, but the music is unequivocal and magnificent, I think. You try playing that:

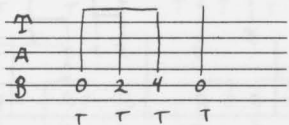


And in this key of A seventh, or whatever you want to call it, he also plays that slow and moving song which he first called "Black Girl", later on "My Girl" and Woody and I learned it from him and sang it as "Little Girl".

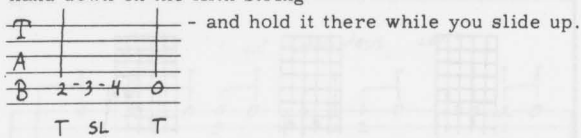
*Black girl, black girl, don't lie to me
Tell me where did you sleep last night?
In the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shines
I would shiver the whole night through*

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP 2014

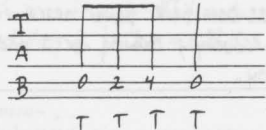
There shouldn't be anything too complicated for you to learn there, except those runs again go so quick, that you don't try and strike each note separately with the thumb



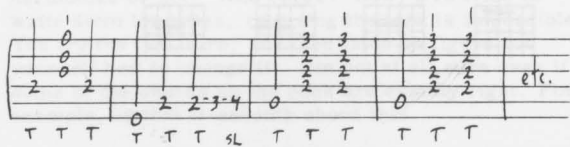
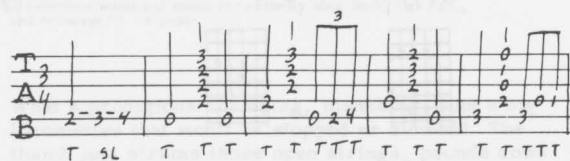
But it - You just put your middle finger - of your left hand down on the fifth string



Occasionally, perhaps, with his lightning thumb, he may try

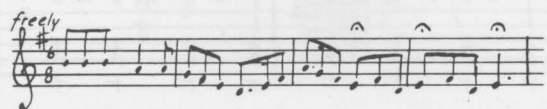


But I don't think he does it very often. Here's another version of the same song

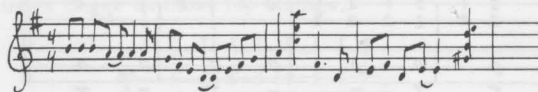


*My girl, my girl, don't lie to me
Tell me where did you sleep last night?
In the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shine
I shivered the whole night through*

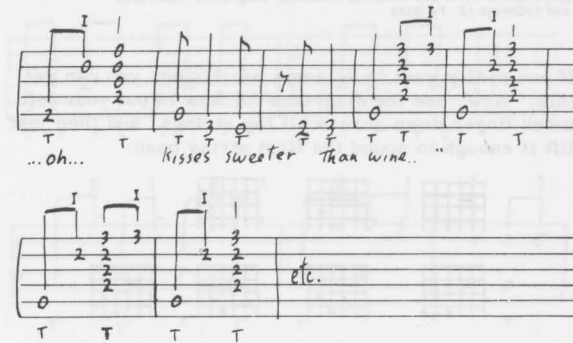
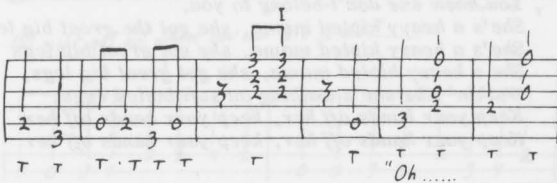
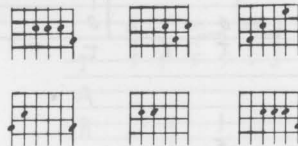
In 1939 Leadbelly used much the same chords to accompany another modal, minor melody. He learned this tune from a fine Irish singer named Sam Kennedy. And Sam's tune was kind of like this



One of these lonesome, Irish songs. Leadbelly wanted to sing it, but he wanted to change it to his own style. So one evening he met Sam at a crowded New York fund raising party, in somebody's house or apartment. They went into the bathroom, the only quiet place, and Huddie said "Sam, I'd like to sing your song, but this is how I'd like to do it". And sitting there on the edge of the bathtub, he played that same melody:



You'll probably recognize the rest of the story now. Years later, after Huddie had died, the Weavers put new words to it, and it even got on the Hit Parade.

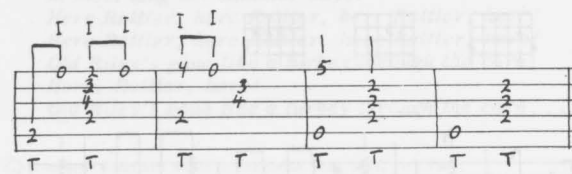
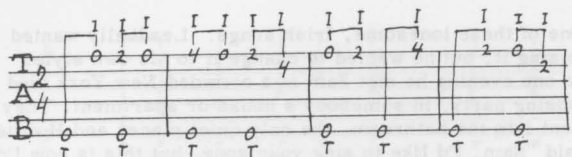


Oh, kisses sweeter than wine
Oh, kisses sweeter than wine

© Complete words and music in American Favorite Ballads as sung by Pete Seeger, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FA 2453

Before we leave this key of A seventh, which, I have to remind you, is actually about E or F, in concert pitch, here's a couple more songs which Leadbelly played in the A position. One is an old ragtime piece - I think he learned it from Blind Lemon Jefferson. They used to sing together in Dallas, Texas. It's actually the kind of piece I usually prefer on a six string guitar, because the notes can get all tangled up in those twelve strings, if you don't watch. But this rendition is still one of my favorite pieces of music. "Keep your hands off her!"

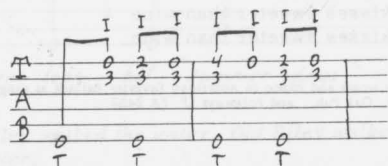
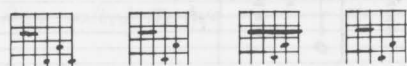
(additional instruments you hear: bass fiddle and 6-string guitar)



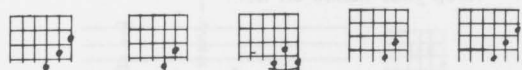
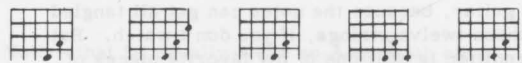
Keep your hands off her, keep your hands off her,
 Keep your hands off her, keep your hands off her,
 Keep your hands off her, you hear what I say,
 You know she don't belong to you.
 She's a heavy hipted mama, she got the great big legs
 She's a heavy hipted mama, she got great big legs
 She a heavy hipted mama, she got great big legs,
 Walkin' like she's walking on soft boiled eggs.
 Keep your hands off her, keep your hands off her,
 Keep your hands off her, keep your hands off her

©Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub.,
 and Folkways LP FA 2488

If you really want to do some practising, you can get this. Now, see the diagrams for how to put your left index finger down across all the strings, and then just lift it enough to sound the first string open:



Now here's a funny thing, though. The way Leadbelly plays those bass string often, I don't think he even bothers fretting them. He just pounds out the open strings and lets the rhythm be the most important thing.

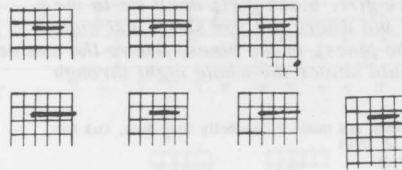


Now there I had just three fingers down.

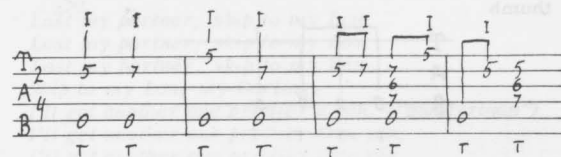


Ah, you practice it yourself. Maybe I will too, some day.

Postscript: Also perhaps the second phrase should not be this:



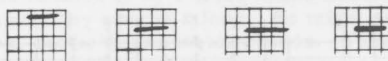
but perhaps should be more like this:



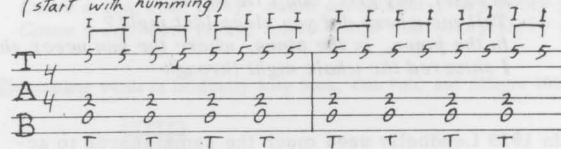
P.P.S. - The jazz bass fiddle player hears different chords than Leadbelly, making for a nice clash of harmony.

Now a great blues. The T. B. Blues.

watch for these chords:



(start with humming)



"Mm mm"



"Mm"

"mm"

mm- mm- ...

I got tuberculosis, consumption is killing me " etc.

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Followways LP FA 2034

What a prodigious champing, munching, like a big locomotive that won't be stopped or slowed! The thumb just strums those open strings, pounds down on 'em, for the rhythm's sake alone, whether they harmonize or not. Who cares! Now, I've tried to write down the notes, realizing the task is impossible. You try the tablature, and then later on figure out yourself how to change it. I'm not at all sure even if some of the chords up the neck are exactly right. For example, is that D-seventh chord this

Or would this be better?

Or maybe it's just like this

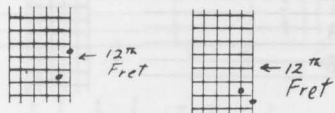
And also, while Leadbelly probably just used his index finger on those top strings,

- if you find it too hard, try using both your index finger and your middle finger

The general feeling is more important than any one note, of course. Later on he takes an instrumental break, and walks the bass. Listen to it now:

"All right, get out where you can talk to me"

Now, if you've got courage and power, try this next. It's not as hard as it looks. Got to have nerve to try it. Go wayyyy up the neck.



Handwritten musical notation for the first system, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves with fingerings and fret numbers.

Handwritten musical notation for the second system, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves with fingerings and fret numbers.

Handwritten musical notation for the third system, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves with fingerings and fret numbers.

Handwritten musical notation for the fourth system, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves with fingerings and fret numbers.

Handwritten musical notation for the fifth system, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves with fingerings and fret numbers. Includes the lyrics "You're doing all right" and "etc.".

BAND 2

De Kalb Blues, Lord, make me feel so bad
De Kalb Blues, Lord, make me feel so bad

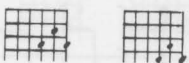
© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub.

De Kalb Blues! When Leadbelly put that guitar part together, I think he composed as great an opening line as Beethoven's fifth symphony - you know, the one that goes "dut-dut-dut-dah". Well, those notes of Leadbelly's twelve stringer are just as emphatic

Handwritten musical notation for the De Kalb Blues introduction, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves.

It was such a great line, in fact, that he used it for half a dozen other blues as well. Alberta, for example:

watch for this:



and this:



Handwritten musical notation for the first system of the Alberta blues, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves.

Handwritten musical notation for the second system of the Alberta blues, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves.

Handwritten musical notation for the third system of the Alberta blues, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves.

Handwritten musical notation for the fourth system of the Alberta blues, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves.

Handwritten musical notation for the fifth system of the Alberta blues, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves. Includes the lyrics "Oh, Alberta" and "etc.".

Oh, Alberta, oh, Alberta,

Handwritten musical notation for the sixth system of the Alberta blues, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves. Includes the lyrics "Don't you hear me - calling you?" and two fretboard diagrams.

Don't you hear me - calling you?

Complete words and music in Folk Blues by Jerry Silverman, MacMillan

Nothing complicated about that introduction, but if you learn that, you've learned a highly useful piece of music.

Handwritten musical notation for the introduction of the Alberta blues, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves.

And that seventh measure, that's the tricky part

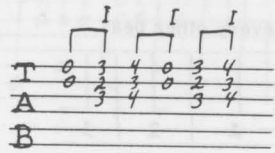
Handwritten musical notation for the seventh measure of the Alberta blues, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves and a fretboard diagram.

Handwritten musical notation for the eighth measure of the Alberta blues, including treble (T), alto (A), and bass (B) staves and a fretboard diagram.

Follow me down! Follow me down!
 Follow me down by Mister Tom Hughes's town!
 Mm - mm - mm!
 (Spoken) This song was made when I was a boy
 I put on long pants.

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub.,
 and Folkways LP FA 2942

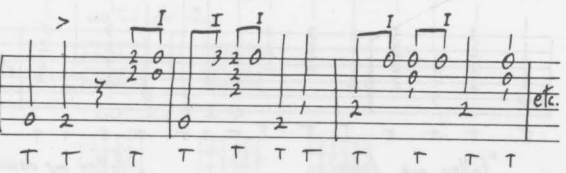
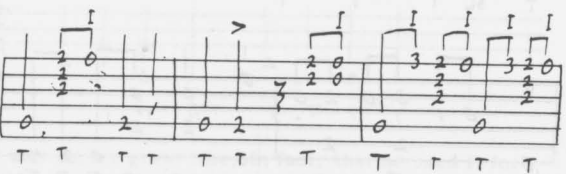
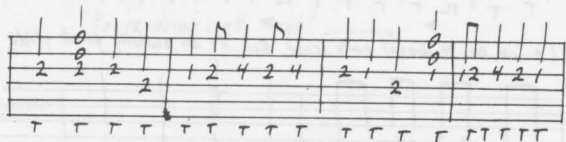
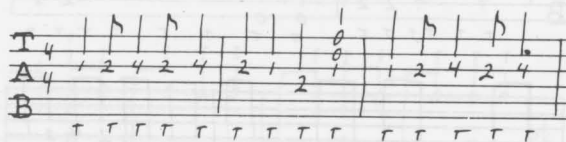
I can remember him going further up the neck than
 just this



He'd go



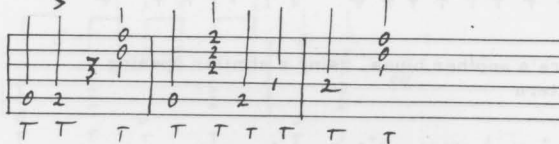
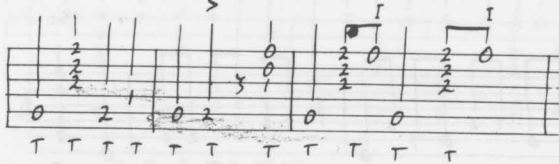
Some of this last was also used for Leadbelly's
 famous version of the old English ballad, Gallows
 Pole



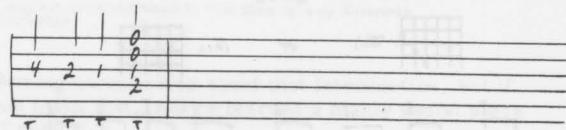
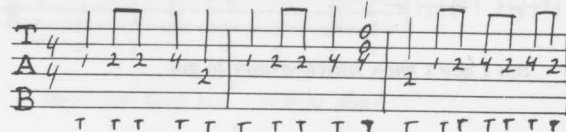
Father, did you bring me any silver
 Father did you bring me any gold?
 What did you bring me, dear father
 To keep me from the gallows pole? Yeah!
 . . . what did you? . . . Yeah! . . . what did you?
 What did you bring me, to keep me from the gallows
 pole?
 (Spoken) In olden times -

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub.

One of the trickiest places here is the emphatic
 beat on that fifth string. I'm not sure if I can do
 it, but I'll try



Ah, it's hard to play it slow. You either have to
 play it up to tempo or not at all. There's another
 blues using a similar run. "Bottle Up and Go",
 remember, some people called it "Borrow Love and
 Go", I think Leadbelly left a trail of misunderstood
 words up here. People couldn't get his Louisiana
 accent.



"Got to bottle up and go...."

You got to bottle up and go!
 You got to bottle up and go!
 These high powered women,
 Sure got to bottle up and go!
 I jumped in the river, started to drown
 I thought about my gal and I turned around

© Complete words in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and
 Folkways LP FA 2014

He'd usually play that instrumental break on the
 first string, though. It was more commonly
 done like this:



3 5 5 7 7 5 7 5 3 5 5

If we have time, one more blues in the E position - remember, it's actually C. I think you can follow the notes. Easy Rider.

T 4
A 4
B 2 1 2 2 2 2 1 2 2 2 2 1 2

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

(other instruments also on this recording)

Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FA 2034

SIDE III, BAND 1

One other key Huddie Ledbetter mainly played in, the C position, which on his guitar, remember, came out sounding more like A flat or G, actual pitch. Here's a blues with a walking bass, similar to the one we heard in G, a long while ago.

T 4
A 4
B 3 3 3 2 2 0 0 2 2 3 3 2 2 0 0 2 2

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

(Walking bass continues under the singing)

(Spoken) Hey, Defense!

I had a little woman, working on that national defense
I had a little woman, working on that national defense.
That woman got to the place, act like she did not
have no sense.
Just because she was working . . .

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FA 2941

And here, in the same key, is an old hit song of nineteen twelve. But in his own version. I never heard anyone else sing it just like this.

T 4
A 4
B 0 3 3 2 3

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

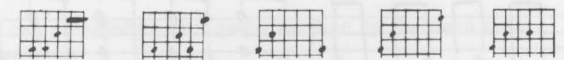
T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Here are some of the chords you'll use:

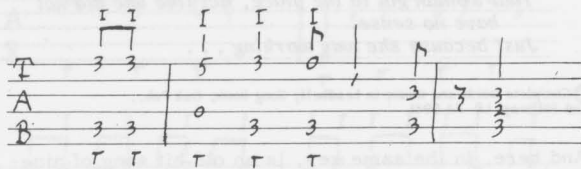


(in)

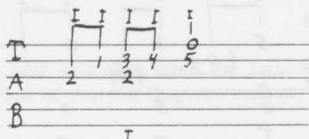


It was midnight on the sea
The band was playing "Nearer my God, to thee"
Fare thee Titanic, fare thee well
Titanic when it got its load,
The captain hollered "All aboard"
Fare thee Titanic, fare thee well. . .

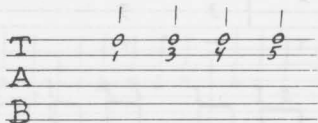
On the opening, there, the thumb and forefinger kind of pinch together, while the left hand slides up the neck, on that opening line.



And the second string comes up until it's playing a unison with the first string.

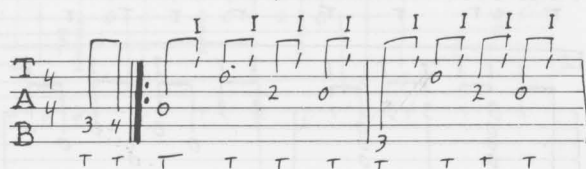


He does the same trick on another song, from that era; I think he also learned it from Blind Lemon Jefferson, who played the six stringed guitar. It's aptly titled "So Easy When You Know How". Listen how he slides up on that second string.

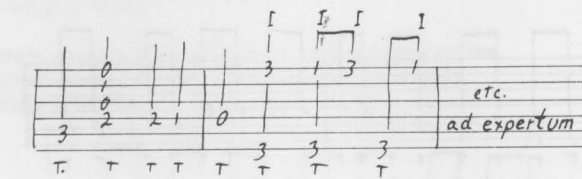
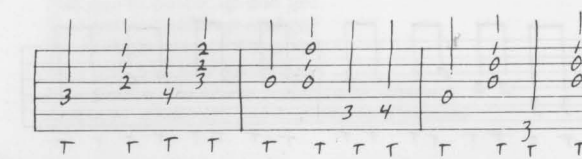
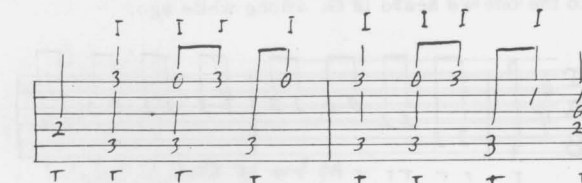
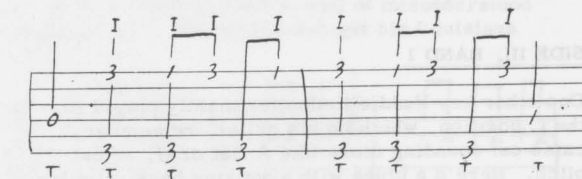
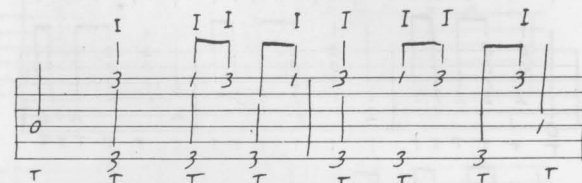
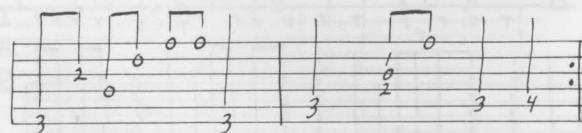
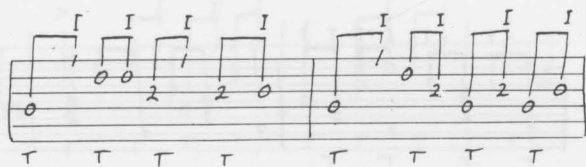
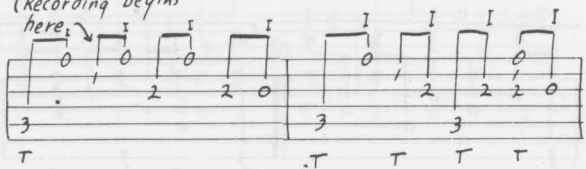


Make it sing in unison with the first.

(A free translation)

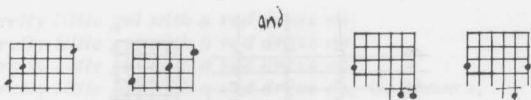


(Recording begins here)



Try these on for size:

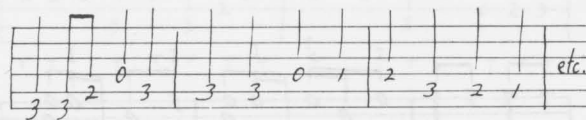
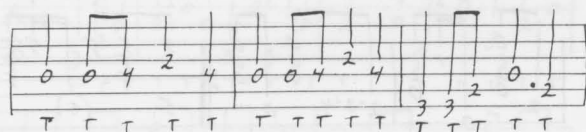
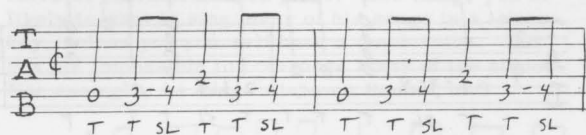




Also in the C position, Leadbelly plays the well-known "Salty Dog".

Mama let me be your Salty Dog!
I don't want to be your man at all
Salty dog! Oh, you salty dog!
Mama, let me be your Salty dog,
I don't want to be your man at all
Your Salty dog, ah, your Salty dog!

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FA 2941

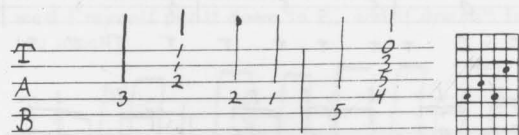


Ah, little fish, big fish, swimming in the water
Come on back here man, you gimme my quarter
You Salty dog, Oh, you salty dog!
Little fish...

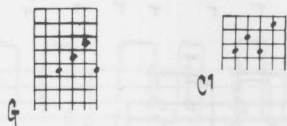
This progression, of four chords, over and over again, was used for several songs. You know, just:



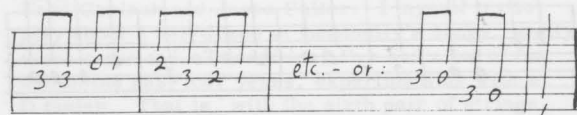
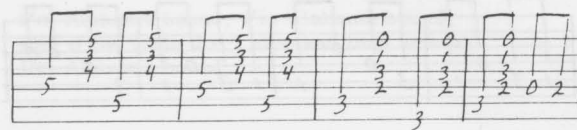
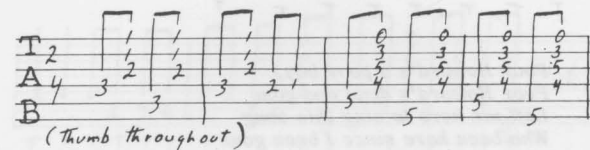
Another one was "Going Home to Mary". He'd play it in F, actually.



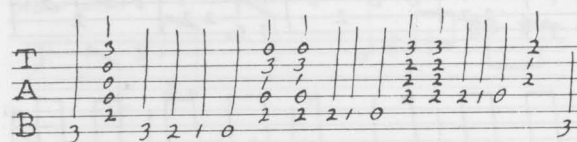
D seventh - over to a nice version of G - and then down to C seventh -



Going home to Mary, sweet Mary!

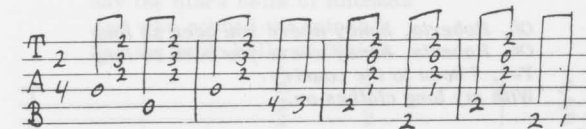


And Huddie also had a great melody he used for the ballad of Ella Speed. I can't locate a recording of it, but it can easily be sung in the key of G. That is, G to E to A to D

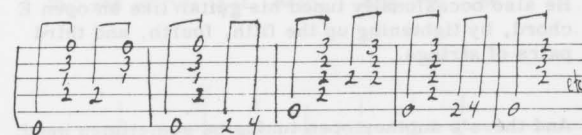


Bill Martin, he was long and slender
Better known by being a bartender
Complete words and music in Negro Folksongs as Sung by Leadbelly, MacMillan

And as long as we're on this kick I'll show you one other easy way to do the same progression. Four chords, over and over. It's a song Woody Guthrie made up



(thumb throughout)



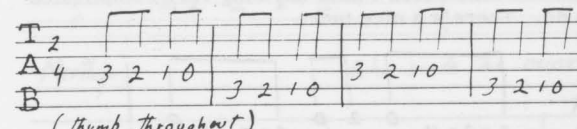
Well, all this world is a poker game
The way it's played is a doggone shame
I'm looking for that New Deal now!
All the bankers, I believe
Got a good hand up their sleeve
I'm looking for that New Deal, now.

...you really need a kazoo to play this song.

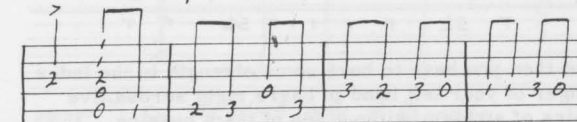
© Woodrow Wilson Guthrie

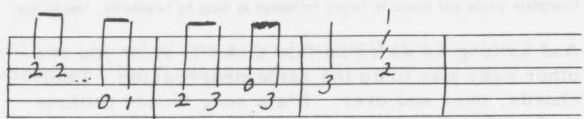
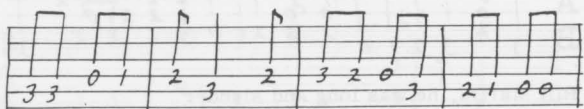
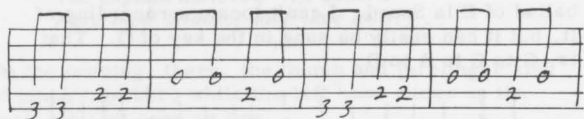
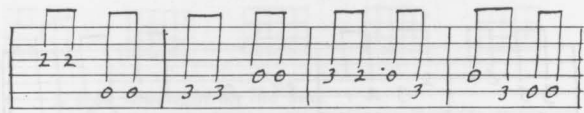
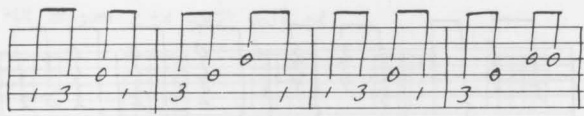
BAND 2

Now, Leadbelly rarely played outside these five keys, E, A, D, G, and C - keeping in mind that all of them turn out about three or four notes lower in pitch, because he tuned his strings slack. A few early records, though, he made in F. Here is one of them.



(thumb throughout)





"Oh, Roberta..."

Oh, Roberta, honey where you been so long
 Oh, Roberta, honey where you been so long
 Yes, I been to the country
 With my long clothes on.

© Complete words and music in Negro Folksongs as Sung by Leadbelly, MacMillan

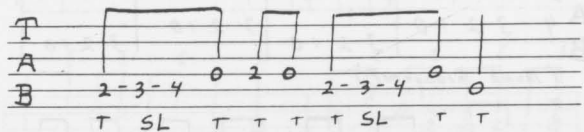
He also occasionally tuned his guitar like an open E chord, by tightening up the fifth, fourth, and third pairs of strings.

And there's another open tuning he sometimes used: Poor Howard's Dead And Gone. He does it in an open A tuning, that is, he tightens up the fourth, third, and second pairs of strings a whole tone each, resulting in the following tuning

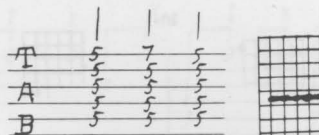


Of course, if your strings are already tight enough, you can simply lower the sixth, fifth, and first strings, and you get the same effect.

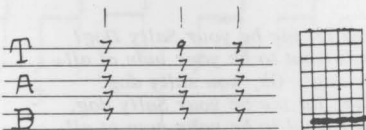
The left hand doesn't have anything very complicated to do. There's a nice tune:



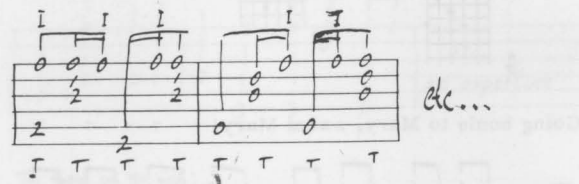
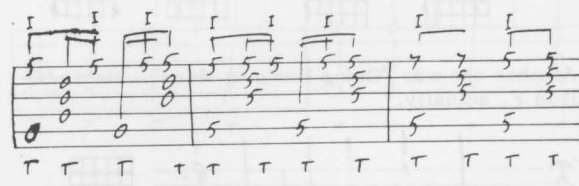
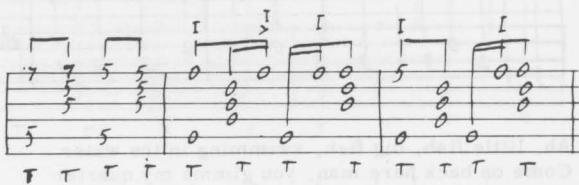
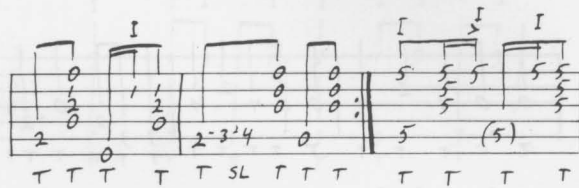
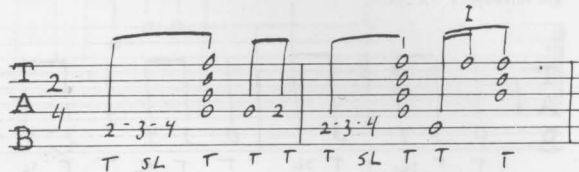
But then you have to have some strength in the index finger of your left hand to barre right across five pairs of strings, without any of them buzzing



And - way up on the seventh fret



Ah. Hear Leadbelly playing it. "Poor Howard's Dead And Gone."



Poor Howard's a poor boy,
 Poor Howard's dead and gone
 Left me here to sing this song
 Who been here since I been gone

Pretty little gal with a red dress on
 Pretty little gal with a red dress on
 Pretty little gal with a red dress on
 Pretty little gal with a red dress on, God knows,
 Pretty little gal with a red dress on.
 (Spoken) Poor Howard was a poor boy -

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub.

BAND 3

Now, where do you go from here? In the first place, the surest recipe for failure is to try and learn everything all at once. Better: learn a few of the pieces on this record really well. And as you grow and get better, you'll be adding more of yourself in each piece. One thing, you're likely to want to sing many of his songs in a lower key, unless you yourself have a tenor voice. But it's not impossible to transpose many of the pieces. For example, he sang "Alabama Bound" in G

Musical notation for 'Alabama Bound' in G major. It includes guitar chords for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs, and a thumbstrum pattern (T) below the staff. The notation shows a sequence of chords and rhythmic patterns, ending with 'etc.'.

I'm Alabama Bound, (I'm Alabama Bound)
 I'm Alabama Bound, (I'm Alabama Bound)
 If the train don't stop and turn around
 I'm Alabama Bound, (I'm Alabama Bound)
 O, don't you leave me here -

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP 2488

Now, for a good many people, that's too high to sing it. I'm Alabama Bound, I'm Alabama - ahem - well I myself put it down in E, and it doesn't lose too much

Musical notation for 'Alabama Bound' in E major. It includes guitar chords for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs, and a thumbstrum pattern (T) below the staff. The notation shows a sequence of chords and rhythmic patterns, ending with 'etc.'.

I'm Alabama bound, I'm Alabama bound,
 And if the train don't stop and turn around
 I'm Alabama bound...

Well, let's see what else. If you're interested in other examples of twelve string guitar playing, I'd suggest you look up some of the fine records of Fred Gerlach and Jesse Fuller. I myself try to play about a half dozen of Leadbelly's songs, pretty much as he did. In addition, I've had a lot of fun within the past four years, experimenting with a D tuning. That is, with the sixth pair of strings, tuned one whole tone lower

Musical notation for 'Alabama Bound' in D major. It includes guitar chords for Treble (T) and Bass (B) clefs, and a thumbstrum pattern (T) below the staff. The notation shows a sequence of chords and rhythmic patterns, starting with '(Actual pitch)'.

One octave below the fourth strings

Now, this chord is actually about B flat (B^b) concert pitch. (nearer Bⁿ)



Oh, what will you give me
 Sang the sad bells of Rhymney
 Is there hope for the future
 Say the brown bells of Merthyr
 Who made the mine owner?
 Say the black bells of Rhondda
 And who robbed the miner?
 Say the grim bells of Blaina.

Musical notation for 'Alabama Bound' in D major. It includes guitar chords for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs, and a thumbstrum pattern (T) below the staff. The notation shows a sequence of chords and rhythmic patterns, starting with '(Thumb Throughout)'.

"Oh, what will you give me?" sang the sad

Musical notation for 'Alabama Bound' in D major. It includes guitar chords for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs, and a thumbstrum pattern (T) below the staff. The notation shows a sequence of chords and rhythmic patterns.

bells of Rhym - ney. Is there

Musical notation for 'Alabama Bound' in D major. It includes guitar chords for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs, and a thumbstrum pattern (T) below the staff. The notation shows a sequence of chords and rhythmic patterns.

hope for the future? Say the brown bells of

Musical notation for 'Alabama Bound' in D major. It includes guitar chords for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs, and a thumbstrum pattern (T) below the staff. The notation shows a sequence of chords and rhythmic patterns.

Merthyr. Who made the mine

Musical notation for 'Alabama Bound' in D major. It includes guitar chords for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs, and a thumbstrum pattern (T) below the staff. The notation shows a sequence of chords and rhythmic patterns.

owner? Say the black bells of Rhondda

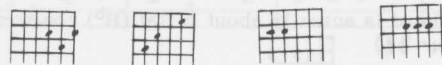
And who robbed the miner? Say the grim

bells of Blain — a.

Here are the chords I use:



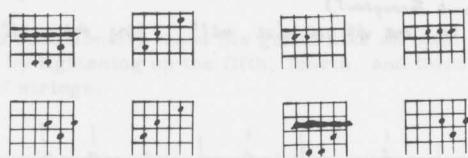
Then for the middle two lines:



Sometimes I use these chords for the 4th line.



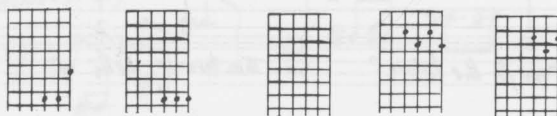
The 3rd verse uses slightly different chords as well as melody, for 2nd and 3rd lines:



"why so worried?"

After singing all three verses I usually break into a regular rhythm

The chords go up the neck here:



(x means repeat previous measure)

"Oh, what..."

Continue this pattern while repeating all or some of the 3 verses. Don't be afraid to add or subtract measures, or hold notes for an irregular number of beats.

Oh, what will you give me?
Sang the sad bells of Rhymney.
Is there hope for the future?
Say the brown bells of Merthyr.
Who made the mine owner?
Say the black bells of Rhonnda.

And who robbed the miner?
Say the grim bells of Blaina.
Throw the vandals in court,
Say the bells of Newport.
All would be well if, if, if, if, if, if, if, if,
Say the green bells of Cardiff.
Why so worried, sisters, why?
Sang the silver bells of Wye.
Oh, what will you give me?
Sang the sad bells of Rhymney.
(whistle)

Words by Idris Davies, music by Pete Seeger. Complete sheet music (with all verses) on this song from Ludlow Music, 10 Columbus Circle, NYC, © 1957

Now, Leadbelly never used a capo, at least not on a twelve string guitar. Although Martha says that he used to on a six stringer. But if you have a good wide and strong capo, you might try occasionally putting it way up the neck. It makes almost a different instrument out of it.

(Free rhythm) (capo on 5th fret, D tuning)

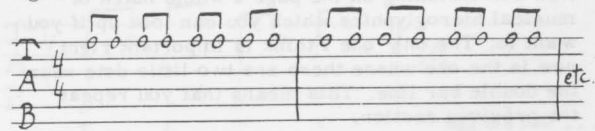
(thumb throughout) "A ship there was..."

and she sails the sea... She's loaded

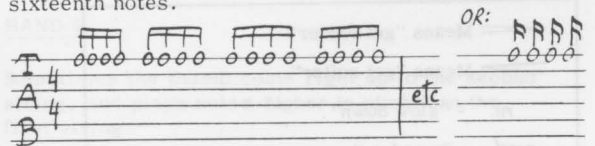
Hope you got it. As in regular notation, the shorter notes are indicated by little tails on the end of the stems. They're called "eighth notes". The regular notes are called "quarter notes". You don't have to know why, but here's a batch of little eighth notes. Now, I'm still beating four beats to the measure. One, two, three, four



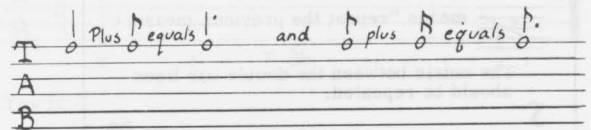
Usually they're tied together, but they're the same eighth notes.



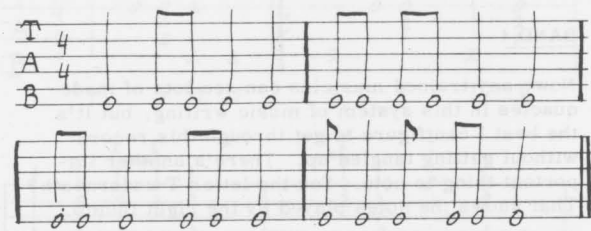
And if you want to go extremely fast, you call 'em sixteenth notes.



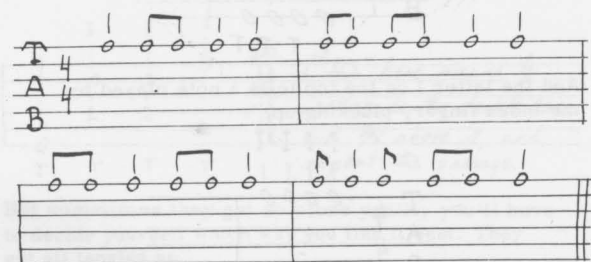
Don't bother trying to divide up notes any quicker than that. Incidentally, putting a dot after a note increases its length by just a half.



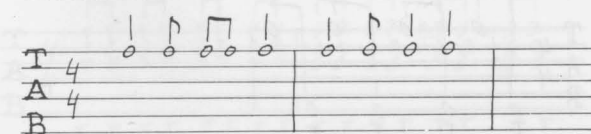
No matter how many or how few the notes are, they should all add up to the same number of beats for every measure. Now, follow me slowly, and you'll see that all the measures here have four beats in them. Again, tap your foot: one, two, three, four.



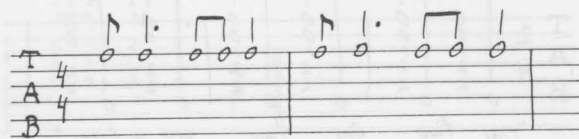
Did you get that? Try it on the top string



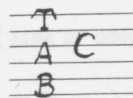
If you want to use a few dotted notes, see how this would sound



Or this one

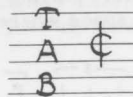


4/4 time when it goes quite fast, is sometimes called "cut time" and instead of printing the 4/4 at the beginning of the song, or just the big letter C

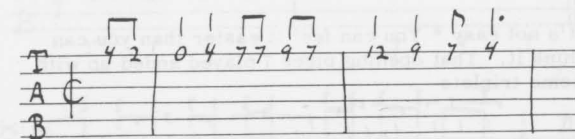


"cut time"

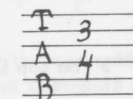
which stands for Common time, you put a C with a line through it.



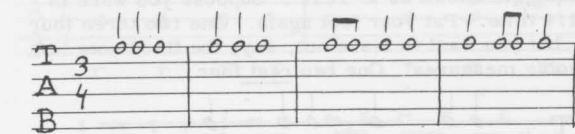
Now, this is the rhythm you might use for some fast blues, or jazz songs.



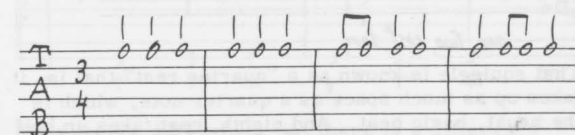
Now 3/4 time, or waltz time, would be written like this, the letter three over the four



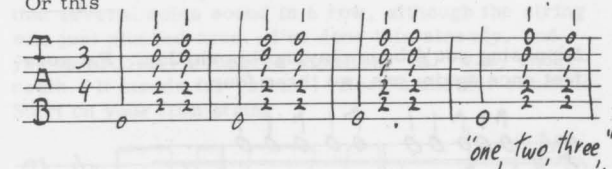
Here's just a bunch of measures. See if you can follow.



Try it again



Or this



Now, there's many other kinds of rhythms. Some square dance tunes might be printed as 2/4 time, instead of 4/4 time. That is accenting every second beat, instead of every fourth beat.

"One two One two one two"

And there's 6/8 time, and many other kinds of rhythm, but I'll let you learn about them from better music teachers than me. For this record, we'll skip 'em.

BAND 3

Oh, I will mention triplets. This is when you squeeze three notes into the space usually occupied by two. Listen to this measure. You have a regular 4/4 time. Pat your feet: one two three four. But you start playing six notes, equally spaced out, in the space where four usually would go

It's not easy.* You can feel it easier than you can think it. That opening piece I played ended up with some triplets

Anyway, the little number "3" on top indicates the triplets.

Now, when no notes are played, but the rhythm is supposed to keep on going, you write down a little squiggle known as a "rest". Suppose you were in 4/4 time. Pat your feet again. One two three four - but you want to leave out, say, the third note in some measures. One two rest four

"one, two, rest, four"

That squiggle is known as a "quarter rest" that is, it takes up as much space as a quarter note, which is the usual, basic beat. And eighth rest takes up half as much time, and looks like this, and looks like a number seven. Here's a measure using one

Supposing you'd been playing this rhythm. Pat your feet once again: one two three four

etc.

*Try rapidly counting to six over and over. Pat your left hand on one and four and your right hand on one and three and five.

Then suddenly you leave out the first note

"Rest"

Sixteenth rests, incidentally, look about the same, except they have two, instead of one jigger on top. You can see.

Now I'm including on the page a whole batch of musical hieroglyphics which you can look up if you want to. The only one I think is important right now is the one where there are two little dots near the double bar line. This means that you repeat the previous section.

Means "get louder"
 Means "get softer"
rit. - "slow down"
accel. - "speed up"
f loud **ff** very loud
p soft **pp** very soft
 means "repeat the previous measure"
 The music between the double bar lines should be repeated.

BAND 4

Now, any trained musician can see lots of inadequacies in this system of music writing, but it's the best I can figure to get through this record without getting tangled up. There's another important thing to note. See the letter T underneath? That shows the notes played by the right thumb.

T T T T

And the letter I on the top tells a note played by the index finger, plucking up.

I I I I

See if you can play this

T T T T

Now, usually, the finger plays the top two or three pairs of strings, and the thumb plays the lower three or four pairs of strings. Well, see if you can get this little passage

If you can get that going fast, you've got 90% of this record. It's not easy

BAND 5

Sometimes the thumb come right up to the second string, and plays notes higher in pitch than the first string.

Try it

And sometimes the thumb and finger play at the same time. Now this may be easy to understand if the notes are far apart.

But sometimes they get so close you'll, you'll have to decide yourself which way you like it best. They get all tangled up

Maybe the thumb plays just one note, and the finger two, or vice versa, or if you want, both can play two or three strings. Play it the way you think it sounds best

(same as above)

BAND 6

Some people like to use their middle finger to help out their index finger on fast passages. Leadbelly, I'm told, never did, but you decide for yourself. It does sound slightly different. Here I'll play something with just my index finger and thumb.

Now try that with your middle finger helping out. Same notes, but it sounds slightly different.

It's a subtle difference, but there is a difference there.

Now, sometimes the left hand slides up the neck, so that several notes sound in a row, although the string was just plucked once. I've done this already, and you've probably wondered what that "SL" was, underneath. It stands for "slide". Here's another example Start on your fifth string.

If you did it very slowly, it would be easy to hear them.

Somehow, it's rarely done that way. Its usually done so quick

BAND 7

Now, there's lots of things wrong with this system of music writing, but it's the best I've figured so far. Tablature was actually invented several hundred years ago by lute players, and this is just a modern version of it. In my opinion it beats regular music writing, because it's more easy to indicate which string is sounded, and which finger plucks the string.

The same note, middle C for example, (hum) could be sounded in eight different ways

Or, with my index finger

Furthermore, the complications of writing down all the strings that sound when you play a twelve string guitar, are almost insuperable. Here's a simple E chord described in tablature.

And look, underneath is how I'd have to describe it if I wrote it in regular music notation.

Not to speak of the confusion resulting from the fact that my guitar is tuned several notes lower than normal. It's actually sounding nearer C# now, instead of E.

Well, the things which tablature leaves out, you'll have to get from the record. Some notes are

sounded very loudly, some very softly. Some are allowed to ring out freely, and others are damped out, shortly after being sounded. Notice the difference between these two ways of playing an A⁷ chord. Now, first I'll keep my left hand down, gripping tightly on the strings.

But now I'm going to relax the grip of my left hand each time right after I strum the chord. See how differently it sounds.

Tablature doesn't indicate that difference. You'll have to hear it for yourself. And in the last analysis, too, no piece of paper can ever really teach you how to play music. You have to teach yourself, and from now on, you're on your own.

THE END



Photo by Mrs. Wah Ming Chang, Los Angeles, 1945. Leadbelly was about 58 years old.



Photo from 16 mm. movies taken by Blanding Sloan and Wah Ming Chang near Los Angeles 1945



Photo by Mrs. Wah Ming Chang, 1945



Photo taken in New York City about 1946-48.