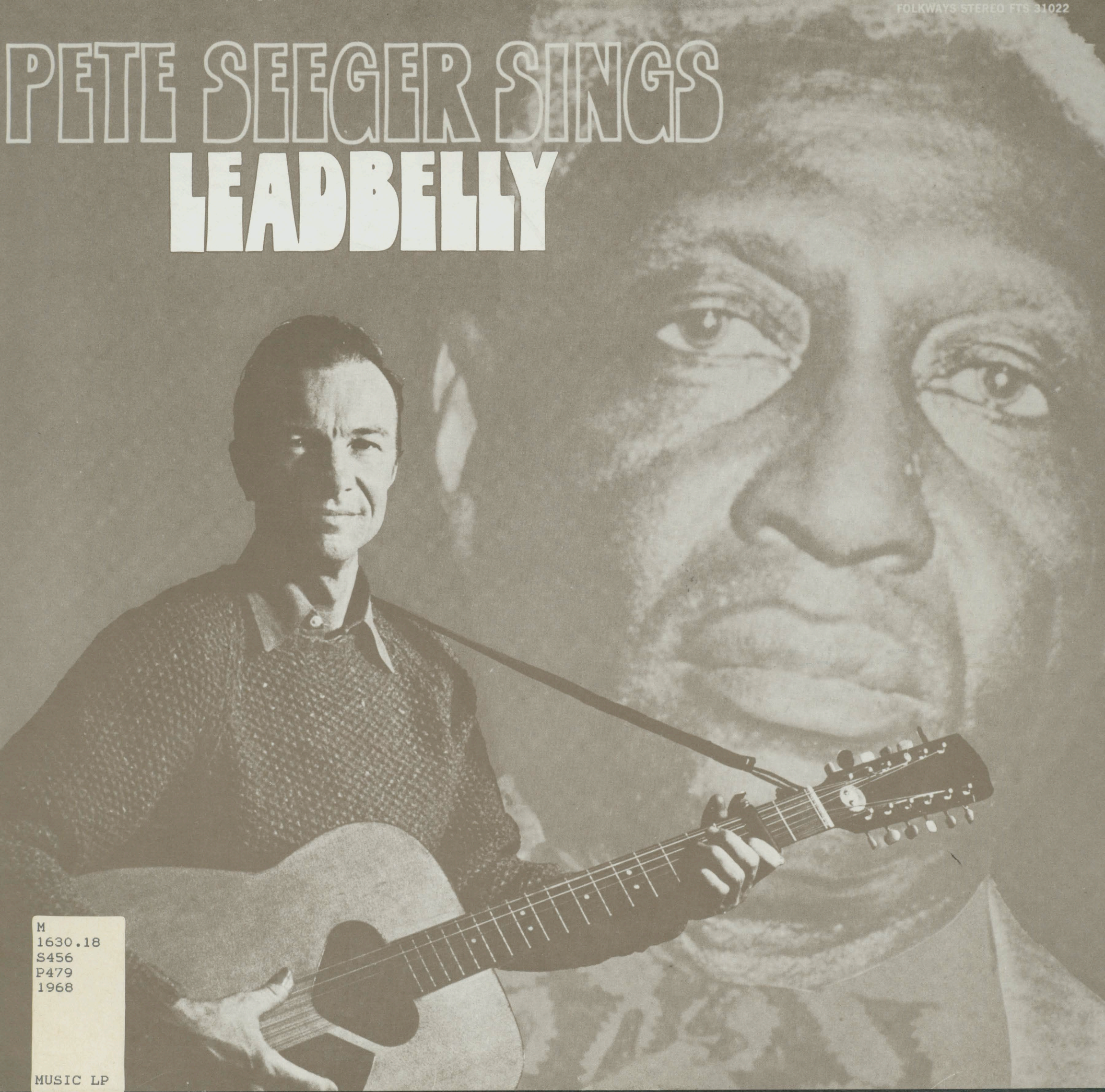
FOLKWAYS STEREO FTS 31022

PETE SEEGER SINGS
LEADBELLY



FOLKWAYS RECORDS FTS 31022

PETE SEEGER SINGS LEADBELLY

Side I

Band 1 —	**MIDNIGHT SPECIAL**	3:33
Band 2 —	**STEWBALL**	4:51
Band 3 —	**PICK A BALE O' COTTON**	1:41
Band 4 —	**NEW YORK CITY**	2:03
Band 5 —	**HA, HA THIS A WAY**	4:00
Band 6 —	**BOURGEOIS BLUES**	2:40

Side II

Band 1 —	**BRING ME LI'L' WATER, SILVY**	5:32
Band 2 —	**ALABAMA BOUND**	2:13
Band 3 —	**BOLL WEEVIL**	3:14
Band 4 —	**BLACK GIRL**	2:32
Band 5 —	**GOODNIGHT, IRENE**	3:24

LEADBELLY

by Pete Seeger

I was seventeen, living in New York City, when I first met Huddie Ledbetter. He was not tall — perhaps five feet seven or eight — but compactly built, and he moved with the soft grace of an athlete. He was grey-haired — in his late fifties, I'd say. Always neatly dressed. There I was, trying my best to cast off any traces of my Harvard days, scorning to waste money on clothes other than blue jeans. But Leadbelly always had a clean white shirt and starched collar, well-pressed suit and shined shoes. He didn't need to dress like a workingman. His powerful ringing voice, his muscular hands moving so surely over the strings of his huge twelve-stringed guitar, his honesty and pride — everything about him proved he was one.

He was wonderful with children. He'd get them singing with him, clapping their hands and swaying their bodies. It was hard to believe the stories we read of his violent youth. I have always figured that Leadbelly's early experiences are a clear example of what brings otherwise gentle people to violence. Those little Southern honky-tonks were — and still are — known for fights and killings. And the Southern prison farms to which Negroes are sent are murderous places.

That Leadbelly survived prison at all is remarkable. Perhaps the guards liked to keep him to entertain them with his guitar. I guess he learned what so many Negro entertainers have had to learn to do upon occasion — "make a fool of yourself and take the white folks' money". But he stayed alive and got out of prison.

Up North he met a different kind of white people — the enthusiastic young people in the Progressive Movement in New York City. He never wanted to live in the South again. He and his wife Martha had a little flat on the lower east side. Woody Guthrie and I visited him often there, and made music together with him, till the neighbors complained of the noise. I was proud that he accepted me. Perhaps he wondered at my earnestness in trying to learn folk music.

What a tragedy he died when he did — just six months before his song GOODNIGHT IRENE sold two million copies and made Hit Parade history! If he could have lived ten more years, he would have seen all his dreams as a musician come true — young people by the millions learning and singing his songs. But in the nineteen thirties and forties the hit parade was dominated by the big bands. And all entertainment, to be successful, had to be geared to Hollywood standards. So Leadbelly sang for left-wing causes, Greenwich Village parties, and occasional college concerts. We loved him, but I wish we hadn't been his only audience.

Too bad he was never in movies. He was an expert at country-style buck-and-wing clog dancing. In one number, he would imitate the gait of all the women of Shreveport, high and low. And in another dance which accompanied the story of a duck hunter, his guitar became the gun. Pow!

He'd sometimes get on a rhyming kick. For a couple of hours on end, every sentence that came out of his mouth was rhymed. Sitting in the car, on our way to bookings, he'd go on fanciful flights of poetry and imagination.

O Huddie! How we miss you. Sometimes audiences couldn't understand your Louisiana accent. Sometimes young people thought your style of music was old fashioned. But you were always honestly yourself, never trying to pretend you were someone else, never trying — chameleon-like — to take on the fashions of the day.

He was not the cleverest guitar player; he didn't try and play the fanciest chords, the trickiest progressions, or the fastest number of notes. Rather, the notes he played were powerful and meaningful.

This modern age is not liable to produce again such a rare combination of genuine folk artist and virtuoso. Because nowadays when the artist becomes a virtuoso, there is a much greater tendency to cease being "folk". But when Leadbelly rearranged a folk melody he had come across — he often did, for he had a wonderful ear for melody and rhythm — he did it in line with his own great folk traditions.

Looking back, I think that the most important thing I learned from him was the straight-forward approach, the direct honesty. He bequeathed to us also, it is true, a couple hundred of the best songs any of us will ever know. I wish people would stop trying to imitate his accent and learn instead from his subtle simplicity and his powerful pride.

Well, one year, in 1949, he started having to use a cane to go on stage. His voice, always soft and husky when speaking, still rang out high on the melodies. But his hands grew stiffer and less certain on the guitar. Then one day he was gone, and we were left with regrets that we had not treasured him more.

Notes by Pete Seeger, from The Leadbelly Songbook, Published by: Oak Publications, Inc., New York, 1962.
Cover photographs by David Gahr and Frederic Ramsey, Jr.
Cover design by: Craig Mierop

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FTS 31022