

# LEAD BELLY'S LAST SESSIONS

### DISC #1 SF 40068

- 1 Yes, I Was Standing In The Bottom 1:40
- 2 Yes, I'm Going Down To Louisiana :43
- 3 I Ain't Going Down To The Well No More 1:23
- 4 Dick Ligger's Holler:43
- 5 Miss Liza Jane 2:09
- 6 Dog Latin Song :52
- 7 Leaving Blues :29
- 8 Go Down, Old Hannah 5:00
- 9 Blue Tail Fly 2:20
- 10 Nobody In This World is Better Than Us 1:24
- 11 We're In The Same Boat, Brother 2:18
- 12 Looky, Looky Yonder 1:33
- 13 Jolly O' The Ransom: 56
- 14 Old Ship Of Zion 1:52
- 15 Bring Me A Little Water, Silvy 1:27
- 16 Mistreatin' Mamma 1:25
- 17 Black Betty 1:53
- 18 Ain't Goin Down To The Well No More 2:43
- 19 I'm Going Back Down In Louisiana :29
- 20 I Don't Know You, What Have I Done 3:11
- 21 Rock Island Line 1:03
- 22 Old Man, Will Your Dog Catch A Rabbit? 1:30
- 23 Shorty George :46
- 24 Stewball 2:34
- 25 Bottle Up & Go 1:25
- 26 You Know I Got To Do It :52
- 27 Ain't It A Shame To Go Fishin' On A Sunday 1:22

- 28 I Ain't Gonna Drink Anymore 2:35
- 29 Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues\* 2:15
- 30 My Lindy Lou 1:08
- 31 I'm Thinking Of A Friend 3:18
- 32 He Never Said A Mumbling Word 2:28
- 33 I Don't Want No More Of Army Life 4:00
- 34 In The World 2:01
- 35 I Want To Go Home 1:26

## DISC #2 SF 40069

- 1 New Iberia 3:08
- 2 Dancing With Tears In My Eyes 3:12
- 3 John Henry 4:56
- 4 Salty Dog 3:29
- 5 National Defense Blues 3:30
- 6 Easy, Mr. Tom 2:08
- 7 Relax Your Mind 4:07
- 8 Bottle Up And Go 3:37
- 9 Polly Wolly Wee 1:42
- 10 Pig Latin Song (2nd Version) 2:11
- 11 Hawaiian Song 2:16
- 12 Drinkin' Lum Y A Alla 1:50
- 13 The Grey Goose 2:17
- 14 Silver City Bound 6:01
- 15 The Titanic 5:12
- 16 Death Letter Blues 3:26
- 17 Mary Don't You Weep 3:24
- 18 He Never Said A Mumbling Word 2:49

previously issued as Folkways 241/2941 and 242/2942 contains 2 previously unissued selections Recorded Fall, 1948. New York, N.Y. All songs published by Folkways Music Publishers, Inc./BMI unless noted.

#### DISC #3 SF 40070

- 1 Midnight Special 2:11
- 2 Boll Weevil Song 3:07
- 3 Careless Love 6:27
- 4 Easy Rider 3:00
- 5 Cry For Me 3:30
- 6 Ain't Going To Drink No More (De Kalb Blues) 3:51
- 7 Birmingham Jail 2:57
- 8 Old Riley 1:47
- 9 Julie Ann Johnson 1:12
- 10 It's Tight Like That 3:09
- 11 4, 5 & 9 4:53
- 12 Good Morning Babe, How Do You Do? :40
- 13 Jail House Blues 4:31
- 14 Well, You Know I Had To Do It 2:53
- 15 Irene (Ludlow Music Inc., BMI) 1:19
- 16 25 Cent Dude 2:20
- 17 How Come You Do Me Like You Do? 3:23
- 18 Hello Central 5:27
- 19 Hesitation Blues 2:17
- 20 I'll Be Down On The Last Bread Wagon 3:35

## DISC #4 SF 40071

- 1 Somebody's Diggin' My Potatoes 3:57\*
- 2 Springtime In The Rockies 3:02 (Woolsey/ Sauer/CBS Catalogue Partnership, ASCAP)
- 3 Chinatown 1:09
- 4 Rock Island Line 1:55
- 5 Backwater Blues 3:25
- 6 Sweet Mary 3:10
- 7 Irene (Ludlow Music Inc., BMI) 2:40
- 8 Easy, Mr. Tom 2:12
- 9 In The Evening, When The Sun Goes Down 2:51
- 10 I'm Alone Because I Love You 2:52
- 11 House Of The Rising Sun 2:21
- 12 Mary Don't You Weep 1:55
- 13 Talk About Fannin Street 3:41
- 14 Fannin Street 3:37
- 15 Sugared The Beer 1:37
- 16 Didn't Old John Cross The Water 1:58
- 17 Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out 3:16
- 18 Bully Of The Town 2:04
- 19 Sweet Jenny Lee 1:52
- 20 Yellow Gal 2:04
- 21 He Was The Man 3:48
- 22 We're In The Same Boat, Brother 4:14
- 23 Leaving Blues 2:37

<sup>\*</sup> previously unreleased

## INTRODUCTION TO LEAD BELLY'S LAST SESSIONS

Lead Belly's Last Sessions bear witness to the remarkable talent and repertory of one of the twentieth century's great musicians, recorded a year before his death in December, 1949. They are also a testimony to a breakthrough in recording technology. These are probably the only commercial recordings of Lead Belly that were recorded on magnetic tape, and they have a distinctive quality lacking in many other releases. The long playing time of the tapes preserve the legacy of Lead Belly introducing his songs, describing how many of them related to his own life, and discussing them with his friends. The new audio tape technology, gives added fidelity and dynamics to Lead Belly's voice and guitar.

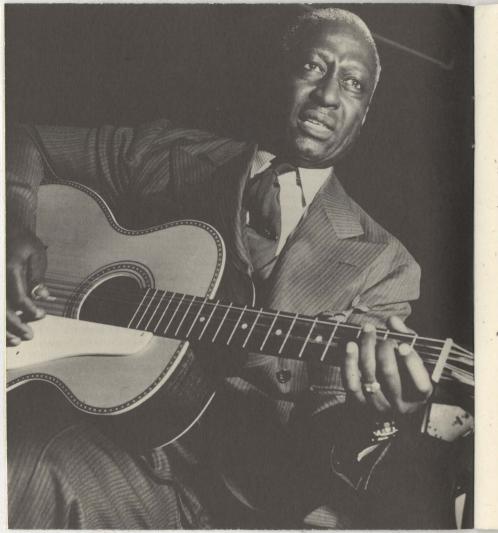
Lead Belly (1888-1949) was a great interpreter of songs, a great teacher, and the possessor of a huge repertory of songs he had absorbed over a lifetime. These sessions were set up with the intention of recording his entire repertoire, and none of his performances have been omitted. During the three evenings at Frederic Ramsey's home, in the company of his wife Martha and other friends, Lead Belly sings field shouts and hollers, playparty games, ballads, blues, Western songs, popular songs, and autobiographical songs. Unlike commercial recordings, which generally focus on a single genre—blues, children's music, country and western, popular song—these recordings illustrate that a single musician may know many genres and many songs, only a few of which may ever appear on commercial releases.

Most commercial recordings are compiled from individual songs, recorded separately, then arranged by a producer for the best commercial effect. Lead Belly's Last Sessions instead, follow the flow of three evening recording sessions—each song in the order in the original recorded sequence. Most of the songs were not even separated by bands on the original LPs. The sequence follows Lead Belly's own thoughts and interests, as well as suggestions, usually from Frederic Ramsey and Charles Edward Smith.

These recordings are also significant as historic documents because they present music in the way it is often made—by people sitting around their homes, in bars, or elsewhere, talking about the songs, relating them to their lives, singing one after another. But Lead Belly wasn't just any person sitting in someone's home: he was a master. And the home wasn't just any home: it belonged to a jazz scholar who had one of the new tape recorders.

Frederic Ramsey refused to give his tapes of Lead Belly's sessions to any record company that would not put them out in their entirety, following the original temporal

sequence. The only record company that agreed to do so was Moses Asch's Folkways Records, a label dedicated to accurately documenting the sounds of the world, directed by a man who declared he had a particular affinity to Lead Belly, and had first recorded him in 1941. Even though Lead Belly died before completing the full documentation of his repertory, and even though some of these songs were recorded elsewhere, these recordings speak for themselves, and we must be grateful that these particular people got together when they did and created them.



## **ABOUT THE NOTES**

The notes to this recording are in six parts. The first and second are contained in this introduction, prepared in 1994. The third and fourth appeared with the original LP release in 1953. The fifth was written from a more recent perspective, in 1993. The sixth is a guide to learning more about Lead Belly and his music.

- 1 Introduction to the Recordings, Anthony Seeger, 1994.
- 2 Technical Notes, Jeff Place and Matt Walters, 1994.
- 3 About the Sessions, Frederic Ramsey Jr., 1953.
- 4 Preparing the Masters. Moses Asch, 1953.
- 5 Lead Belly-his Career in 1948, Sean Killeen, 1993.
- 6 Selected Bibliography and Discography

Frederic Ramsey prepared the notes to the original set of four 12" LP records, describing what he was trying to do. An audio magazine later published his notebook logs of the sessions. Moses Asch added a few notes of his own on the production of the LPs from the original session tapes. Sean Killeen, founder of the Lead Belly Newsletter, places Lead Belly's participation in the sessions into the context of his career in the late 1940's.

Anthony Seeger, 1994

## **Technical Notes**

We have taken particular care with the sound quality on these recordings. We obtained Frederic Ramsey's original 7" reel-to-reel session tapes from his daughter Alida Ramsey Porter. Jeff Place, the Center for Folklife Programs' archivist, compared the original session recordings with the 1953 Folkways LP releases and noted that two songs had been omitted. We decided to add them to this reissue for their musical virtues, in the interest of completeness. We have sequenced them (track #'s 29 and 74) where originally recorded.

After carefully comparing the original 1948 session tapes with the 1953 production masters prepared by Peter Bartok (described in Moses Asch's essay), we found that the 1948 originals (paper-backed 1/4" magnetic recording tape) — which were already deteriorating in 1953 — were often in much worse shape than the later production masters. As a result, engineer Alan Yoshida re-mastered this release from the 1953 production masters, with the exception of the two previously unreleased tracks, which come from the 1948 session tapes. The new CD and cassette 1630 production masters were made directly from these two sources without any digital processing, to ensure the most natural possible sound.

Jeff Place and Matt Walters, 1994

## Reprinted from an article written by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. High Fidelity Magazine, Nov.—Dec. 1953

In the United States, not so long ago, we had a giant of a man with us, a singer and adventurer whose exploits, if we did not know the actual facts of his existence, might one day have been amplified into a sort of Paul Bunyan legend that could hardly have been more colorful than the truth.

Leadbelly, Huddie Ledbetter, was born in Mooringsport, Louisiana, son of a negro farmer who worked 68 acres of land in the Caddo Lake district. From the beginning, young Huddie was bewitched by music. One uncle had a guitar; his friends played small accordions, or "windjammers," as they called them in that part-Cajun, part-Negro country. At twelve or thirteen, Huddie started riding off in the canebrakes and bottomlands to play for sukey jumps and breakdowns—Saturday night get-togethers in cabins and little, low dance halls. He was soon "good as they had on a windjammer," according to his own testimony.

It was a rough crowd. In the North, social workers would probably have intervened. But late 19th century Negro youngsters in the South were allowed to go their way and settle their problems (no one considered them problems, anyway) amongst themselves. They drank, they made love and they got into fights. It was one of these fights, a few years later, that started Huddie on the hardest part of his life, and shaped his career for years to come. In a bottomland fracas involving Huddie, a man was killed.

They hung the sentence on Huddie, and sent him to a prison camp, or county farm. He broke out of that, but soon got into other troubles. He was too young, too handsome, too powerful. Women couldn't let him alone, and he couldn't let them alone. But through it all—from 1918, when he was released from the Angola State Prison Farm, in Louisiana—Huddie kept close to his music. He broke jail, he rambled, he married and re-married, he picked cotton, he worked in a car agency; all this was part of, but strangely incidental to, the main drive of his life—the need to learn more songs, the need to perform them, anywhere.

He was released from Angola on "good time." There he had known work hard enough to kill other men, and the sting of the lash, administered because of his "impudence." By that time, John A. Lomax, expert folklorist and curator of the Archives of American Folk Music of the Library of Congress, had found him. Setting off in the Lomax car the folklorist and

his discovery began an informal "lecture" and "recital" tour, stopping at several universities.

At Harvard, Professor Kittredge, longtime student of music and folklore, was impressed. It must have been a strange moment. All their lives, folklorists in musty retreats examine, weigh and compare ballads and songs that have to do with robber bridegrooms, pale horses, pale riders, brigands, cutthroats, and deeds of lust and violence. But here was pale Professor Kittredge, and here was Leadbelly. Looking up from his books, Kittredge must have swallowed hard. Turning to Leadbelly's impresario, he whispered "He is a demon, Lomax."

During the latter years of his life, Leadbelly shed the demon. More and more, he placed music ahead of everything; and with his wife, Martha Promise, settled down to a relatively calm life. It was Martha who made this possible. She loved him; she took care of him; she was there when he needed help. And it is because of Martha that Huddie settled down, too, to the long task of recording the great body of folk lore and song he had collected all along the way of his rambling, rough career. For the Library of Congress, Leadbelly recorded close to 135 songs. Later, for commercial record companies, he cut a disappointingly small total of his repertoire.

I cannot recall the exact date of my first meeting Lead Belly, but I shall never forget hearing him sing for the first time. Charles Edward Smith and I had just completed work on the book *Jazzmen*. It was Smith who heard Leadbelly first, and suggested that we should both know more of the music that, he was convinced, had done much to deed jazz some of its most vigorous material. So he dragged me to a Greenwich Village bistro where Leadbelly was singing for coffee and cake. We sat at a table and talked with Huddie.

My immediate impression was of the man's strength. Years later, when Martha once remarked, "He's built like King Kong," I knew what she meant. Here was the individual who had been lead man on the hardest chain gangs of Texas and Louisiana, working under broiling July and August sun in the canebrakes, and who had survived. There were tales told of him that were almost superhuman; that he could pick 1,000 pounds of cotton a day (this wasn't true, but like some of Bunyan's feats, it was close to true; he had out-picked every other man on the gangs); that he had cut away from one gang with the ball and chain still in his hands, and the guard's bullets ripping the dirt out from under his feet; that a man had once got a knife in his neck and pulled it halfway 'round before Huddie's girl friend beat off the assailant; that he could dance and play all night long in the com-

pound, and then go out and do a full day's work.

The scar was still there, on his neck. Only this was a man who dressed quietly, in a dark gray or brown suit, and who sat and talked quietly, in heavy southern speech that rolled and murmured with retards and elisions; at first, it was hard to understand what he was saying.

We talked a bit, and I noticed that Leadbelly didn't go in for "conversational" speech. Always, it was about something he had just sung, or was about to sing. Of the past, he was blank. He was content to forget.

We sat and drank beer, and then someone up on the little platform announced that "Leadbelly, King of the Twelve String Guitar," was about to sing some more. Leadbelly got up, walked slowly over to the platform, guitar in hand (it never left him), and with a few slow words of introduction to the audience, thrashed into his song.

His was not a subtle voice; it lacked agility and it had grainy, hard overtones. But there was rhythm in every syllable and conviction in every word—and incredible volume: he never needed a microphone to sing in a crowded hall, and everything he sang rang out loud and clear; clear—that is, if you understood Louisiana.

Underneath his suit, his muscles rippled visibly as he strummed his guitar. Before that evening was over, we had heard *Gray Goose, Rock Island Line, Ha Ha This A Way, Ol' Riley, Salty Dog,* and a big fistful of Leadbelly's other classics. Furthermore, I had become convinced that if you cared about music at all, you couldn't ignore Leadbelly.

This was the beginning of a long friendship. And all along the way, I learned from Huddie—what his songs meant, why he sang them, and how he loved them.

Two or three years later, I found myself preparing, for an English publication, a discography of all the songs Leadbelly had recorded. At that time, I got hold of as many of the recordings as I could, and listened to them. And although I was overwhelmed by the number of titles in his repertoire, I was at the same time disappointed. The earlier, Library of Congress recordings, by far the most complete collection of his songs, had been taken for the most part on a portable machine, and the best that could be said of them was that they were highly unfaithful to the original. (In 1935, the phrase "high fidelity" was only a password to dingy backrooms frequented by renegade engineers and other dangerous persons.)

The commercial recording, too, lacked a great deal in quality, and gave no idea of the vitality of Leadbelly's gargantuan voice. Then, too, something else was lacking—a characteristic immediately perceptible in his "live" performances, but dead as padded ante-

room in the records. It was the warm, intimate quality that came over when Leadbelly sat and performed for a small group, talking as he sang, singing as he talked. It may be that then, sometime back in 1942 or 1943, I first thought of recording Leadbelly as I felt he should be recorded.

However. I still hoped that one of the big studios would come through with some crisp, clean recordings of Leadbelly, something that would give an idea of his personality as well as his music. But Leadbelly's brushes with commercial companies were annoyingly unproductive. They simply didn't have the time or the interest to deal with artists whose music-making had to be spontaneous. Leadbelly experienced the frustration of sessions cut short just as he was warming up; of recordings made, then withheld because they weren't "commercial" enough.

By the fall of 1948, Leadbelly was also smarting from the grade B reception Hollywood had accorded him. He had set off for that city during the feverish war years, sure he would conquer it and after it, the world. Instead, he had ended up as entertainer at parties given by celebrities—but no one ever took him seriously as a star or an artist. His song 4, 5, and 9 reflects some of his disillusionment. An executive at one of the parties had said, laughingly, "Sure, call me up tomorrow at 45 to 9," when Leadbelly had asked for a test. Leadbelly didn't realize that this was a Sunset Boulevard brush-off, and had to go through the additional pain of being laughed off the switchboard when he took the remark literally and put through a call at a quarter past eight.

His last "commercial" records, a mere handful of five or six sides, were made for Capitol around 1946, and although *Irene*, the title he knew would someday be a hit (– a year after his death), was one of them, no one did anything to promote them. Yet Leadbelly wanted to perform and to record. When he returned to New York, the director of WNYC, the municipal station, arranged a series of half-hour programs, and he began to feel a little better. But he had an increasing awareness that he probably never would be a "commercial" success.

Leadbelly's final acceptance of this fact, and my growing conviction that more could be done with an artist of his stature than was ever likely to be done commercially, finally brought us both to undertake private recordings. Then too, time was running out; Leadbelly was no longer young, and too often I had seen projects postponed until it was too late. Years before, when I had first thought of recording Leadbelly, he probably would have refused, politely but firmly, to contribute so much time to a venture which he had

been told would bring no financial return.

We had one thing in our favor. The long era of the big, clumsy acetate disk had just come to an abrupt close with the introduction, for the first time in the United States, of tape recording. In June of 1948, Columbia Records, Inc., had launched the long playing record. The combination of tape and microgrooves pointed to a different recording procedure. No longer would each separate selection have to be cut on a disk that, at its very longest, could play only five minutes in final form. No longer would artist and recorder have to labor over exact timing for each selection. And if Leadbelly wanted to talk between his selections, we could leave the microphone open and pick that up, too.

For Leadbelly, when he got going, had a routine that was like that of the record collector who, with a large library to choose from, spends an evening pulling out his favorite disks in a sequence both varied and suggestive. With tape, it was possible to record in sequence, and to preserve that sequence. From the first through the ninety-fourth, then, all the selections in the four-disk Folkways album we made are presented in exactly the same order as played by Leadbelly. The final editing was simply a matter of removing a few extraneous bits of conversation that had crept into the proceedings.

The recording sessions got under way exactly as I had hoped. One evening late in September, Leadbelly and Martha came to dinner. Afterward, we sat and talked. I had broached the subject of recording to Leadbelly, and showed him the tape machine. He began talking about the WNYC broadcasts, rehearsing them aloud as he went along. His guitar was at home, as I had said we'd merely discuss the project on that first evening. But when he began to sing, I got the machine going, and set the microphone down beside him. We were on our way.

Selections 1 through 34 were recorded on that first evening with Martha joining in on several of the choruses. Because he hadn't brought the guitar along, Huddie sang many of the songs which he normally did without accompaniment—shouts and hollers, field calls, and blues. Among them was a long version, longer than any previous recording, of the splendid Ol' Hannah, the song workers in the gangs address to the sun—"Go down, Ol' Hannah, and don't you rise no more." Others were Yes, I'm Standing in the Bottom, a long chant not recorded before, and the Dick Ligger's Holler. I Ain't Goin' Down to the Well No More, a sort of lonely, penitent holler, Black Betty, and I'm Goin' Back Down in Louisiana, were others of the same kind. There was a rollicking version of Blue Tail Fly, with new verses improvised as Leadbelly went along, and a spirited Rock Island Line. There were

spirituals like Never Said a Mumbling Word, and Old Ship of Zion.

When he heard a playback of the first "takes," Leadbelly was enthusiastic. "Man, you got something there, "he said. "You can just let that thing run. Now let's try some more."

It was that way all through the first evening, the second, and the third. At first, Leadbelly wanted to hear all the playbacks. Then, when he was satisfied that these were "the best ever," he just kept on going. There was hardly time, between breaths, to get new tapes on the reels. Once in a while he stopped and asked to hear a favorite he had just put on the tape. Then he forgot all about playbacks, because he had to stop and listen, and that made him stop singing. Leadbelly was competing with Leadbelly, and that would never do. I don't think he ever heard any of the songs he recorded after that first evening.

There is hardly any need to put down in writing what happened after Leadbelly set forth on his songs, reminiscences and talk. For everything that took place has been kept and is to be heard on the records. That the material has been preserved in this way is no accident. It also serves to explain why it had to wait so long, since 1948, to be released. For when Irene became a hit, there was a flurry of interest among all the companies who had neglected Leadbelly. Several wanted to bring out part, or some of the material that Leadbelly had recorded on tape, but not one of the major companies cared to preserve the sequence which is so vital a part of the feeling of these recordings. The only person in the entire record industry who would go along with this idea was Mr. Moe Asch, of Folkways Records. But in 1948, when the tapes were made, Folkways Records had a very small list, and had to proceed with caution.

There was a second evening in October, and for that occasion, Leadbelly's old friend, Charles Edward Smith, came to hear and to help. Selections 35 through 75 were recorded on that night. Leadbelly was in particularly fine form this evening, and gave us one stunning example after another of his favorite blues and ballads, throwing in a popular tune here and there for variety.

It began to be evident, as the evening progressed, that Leadbelly was doing his very best to get down selections which he had never before recorded, and to bring forth from memory much of his past life. The thing that seemed to be running through his mind was a re-creation of his early wandering years—of the days when he "banished away" from his childhood home and took to the road as a wandering ballad singer.

Particularly revealing is his song about Blind Lemon Jefferson, who was among the first major influences on Leadbelly's long musical life. Blind Lemon was to Leadbelly what

Ma Rainey was to Bessie Smith—he took the young boy, and taught him his repertoire and his way of living. A fresh glimpse of that way of life is provided by Leadbelly's remarks about their train and bus rides together, and their boisterous trips to Silver City, a wide-open frontier district outside of Dallas, Texas. There is probably no clearer account on record of the way American folk musicians have traveled and learned together and of the way their song, passing freely from each man to his companion, grew and was enriched.

Notable, too, is the story Leadbelly tells about the ballad of The Titanic. According to Leadbelly, the captain of that boat had refused passage to Jack Johnson the celebrated Negro pugilist. When the boat went down, Negroes who had been shocked by the captain's callous statement (quoted as: "I ain't haulin' no coal") tended to feel that a higher hand had passed judgement on the captain's man-made laws of segregation. And Leadbelly, fresh from the same sort of refection in Hollywood, puts more than a little bite into his account of the disaster.

As we had planned it, the third evening (selections 75 through 94) might have taken us a little less than halfway through the project of recording all of Leadbelly's repertoire. But we never saw Leadbelly after that night, when he had sung as his last number, the "Leaving Blues"—"I'm leaving you, and I won't come back no more."

Not long after this, a trip to Europe was arranged for Leadbelly and he set out with high hopes. But in Europe, he was almost unable to play. After giving one concert at the Foundation des Etats-Unis which was well received by the small group of Parisians who attended, Leadbelly was afflicted by latter stages of the disease which killed Lou Gehrig, chronic poliomyelitis. With atrophied muscles, it became impossible for him to go on Sadly, he returned to the United States. Not long after, on December 6, 1949, he died at Bellevue Hospital in New York City.

## Leadbelly's Last Sessions

Perhaps it would be fairest to Lead-belly to say that when he made the recordings contained in this set of long-playing records, he had no idea they were to be his last. Nor were they recorded under "professional" circumstances; in a big studio with acoustical dampers, a dozen microphones to choose from, a battery of control consoles, and a staff of prompters and technicians. Had they been made this way, they might have been quite different.

#### A Short Technical Note About Recordings of Leadbelly's Last Sessions

The acoustics of the New York apartment were corrected as much as possible with drapes, and the best equipment available in the early days of tape recording was used. The first evening, a small vocal microphone was employed. The second and third evenings (with guitar) a dynamic microphone of good quality would provide the best pick-up.

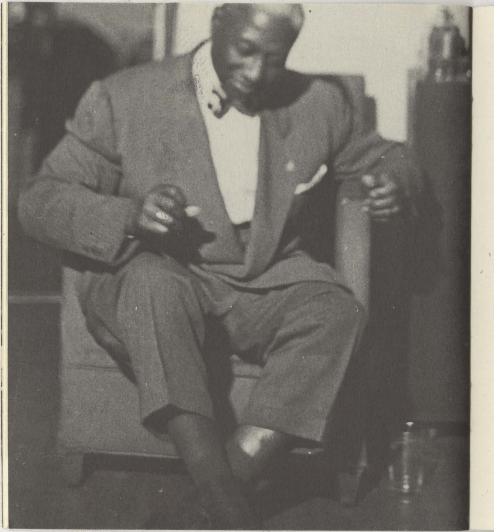
It would therefore be misleading to claim that, by today's standards, these are "extended range" recordings, although we do believe that they are adequately clean and crisp, and represent an advance over all other older, acetate recordings of Leadbelly. Everything has been done to clear the tapes of obvious defects due to faulty tape manufacture; some difficulty was experienced with tape purchased in good faith which began to peel off in spots not long after it had been used for recording. Fortunately, a better tape became available before we had gotten too far along, and a majority of performances are well preserved.

Frederic Ramsey, Jr. is co-author and editor of Jazzman, The Jazz Record Book, and Jazzways, and editor of the Folkways Jazz Series. He is a 1953 recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship for studies in Afro-American music.

## Original Production Notes by Moses Asch

At the time of these recordings, recording tape was in its experimental stage. In 1953 when the tapes were taken out of their original boxes and played, some of the tape was found to be damaged and in a few cases it adhered to the next winding. We proceeded then as follows. Peter Bartok re-dubbed all the tape, and Ramsey edited the dubbed tape for a six-sided long-playing records set. However it was found that by eliminating most of the bands as suggested by Ramsey we could get 30 minutes on one side of a 12" record to make a four-records set.





# Leadbelly And His Last Sessions

In the fall of 1948 Leadbelly recorded what the musical world now knows as the *Last Sessions*. But what did Leadbelly's world consist of, a little more than a year before his death?

In recalling his experiences with *Leadbelly's Last Sessions*, Fred Ramsey wrote that the three evening sessions in September, October and November with Huddie and Martha went "exactly as I had hoped." Nearly 100 songs were recorded on tape and preserved for posterity. Ramsey sensed Leadbelly was still "smarting from the grade B reception he received in Hollywood." Ramsey also noted that time was running out for Leadbelly and commercial recording success was more and more unlikely. He correctly foresaw that Leadbelly had entered the twilight of his career.

Ramsey felt the Sessions would be a chance for the new mode of long play tape to catch the spontaneity of Leadbelly's music. After the 3rd session concluded, Leadbelly and Ramsey never met again. Leadbelly died within 14 months.

In 1956, Fred Ramsey spoke to Dick Weissman about the Last Sessions. "Leadbelly was always trying to tailor his style to what he felt would make him a star, a performer with a big reputation; and I think he was aware that meant being like a popular singer." Ramsey felt this was apparent when Leadbelly talked about meeting Gene Autry. "He hoped to make it big, to get to be a main performer, a real star; this was one of Leadbelly's main drives," according to Ramsey. "If he thought a certain kind of song would bring him notoriety, he would sing it with great relish." For example, Leadbelly hoped "Relax Your Mind" would be adopted by the National Safety Council.

Ramsey also knew Leadbelly had numerous "Tin Pan Alley" songs in his repertoire. He had sung them in the south long before he began performing for northern audiences. Songs like "Dancing With Tears In My Eyes", "Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine", and "Bully Of The Town," or even his "Hawaiian Song" had all been popular songs, but carry Leadbelly's unique mark and original rendition. Ramsey said that Leadbelly's reputation in 1948 was built on being a "backwoods folksinger" and a great many New York people wanted him to stick with this type of music. When Leadbelly tried to cross-over and do more popular songs, he often was not well received.

In a 1991 interview, Fred Ramsey told me he believed the *Last Sessions* were Leadbelly's best recordings when compared to the radio recordings of the early forties and

the Library of Congress collection. Not solely because of the technological advantage of a continuous, uninterrupted flow of a spontaneous Leadbelly, but because "the music was more than just music—it was a whole emotional feeling. It flowed out of him, and with each song put him more and more into the mood of it. When he heard himself on the playback, he really began to play and inspire himself."

Ramsey had discouraged an audience during the taping. He wanted an ideal situation, intimate instead of "big time". Charlie Smith was there for two evenings and Jim Chapelle, the photographer, the final night.

Abe Greiss recalled that Leadbelly never thought of himself as a recording artist even though he had already done a few albums. The instant replay of the tape was intriguing to him, and made him listen to himself. He found this entertaining and Leadbelly "really enjoyed himself at the Session, not in a vain way, but because this new technology allowed him a new means of expression on what he'd been doing for 50 years." When he heard himself on the playback "Leadbelly laughed," Greiss continued. "He wasn't a funny man, a man to make jokes, but he always had something to say that was worth hearing."

In mid-September of 1948, Fred Ramsey invited the Ledbetters to dinner in his apartment, to talk about recording Leadbelly. The first *Session* resulted in Leadbelly singing a cappella with his wife Martha accompanying as she did occasionally both other nights. While Leadbelly hadn't been asked to bring his guitar, his not bringing it was somewhat purposeful and professional. On one hand the evening was to be social with a bit of preliminary business talk. On the other hand if they agreed on a business deal, he'd have his guitar soon enough in hand when the time came to start the formal recordings.

Over the course of the previous 12 months, Marjorie Fairbanks and her son Austen had taken over Leadbelly's professional management from Austin Wilder Artistic Management. The Fairbanks made big tour plans for the fall of '48 and throughout '49. Leadbelly would be rather busy with an NYC radio show, 10 school concerts including nearly a month in Minnesota where his return for the fall of '49 was tentatively planned. The Fairbanks paid Leadbelly's Musician Union dues, generated publicity and promotional material, and even booked Leadbelly at an "industrial" show near Sandusky, Ohio. They were building up steam for the Paris Festival in May 1949, and they didn't want Leadbelly to give anything away. He was very excited and responsive to their new confidence and interest in him. A summer '49 southwest tour after Europe was booked. Leadbelly would play in Texas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Iowa before his fail-

ing health forced his return to NYC in July.

During those fall sessions at the Ramsey's, Leadbelly knew he was losing his muscular control. Despite illness, Huddie fought to maintain control over his life and music. Encouragement came from friends and family who always hoped for signs of good luck and impending success. Abe Greiss, a neighbor and good friend of Huddie's, accompanied the Ledbetters to the October 15th session. He recalled that Leadbelly told him "they want me to sing "My Girl" instead of "Black Girl." Greiss told him not to do it. "It wasn't true, it insulted Martha, and it wasn't poetic." Greiss, however, encouraged Huddie to do the Last Sessions. He hoped these recordings would inspire Huddie in his battle for artistic recognition.

Leadbelly recorded the *Last Sessions* in the spirit of an investment. He hoped this release would exhibit his versatility and the broad range that folk music allowed. His concerts in Minnesota-less than a month after the *Last Sessions*, and those in the spring of 1949-reflect the wide variety of music he offered his audiences.

This investment did not pay off immediately. The Last Sessions were not released until 1954. Huddie's untimely death in December of 1949 prevented him from enjoying the fruits of the Last Sessions. However, these recordings have kept the legacy and the legend of Leadbelly alive.

The music which indeed became Leadbelly's Last Sessions, brought him belated but hard-earned and well-deserved artistic recognition.

In 1991, Fred Ramsey said: "I am very proud of the *Last Sessions* because [these cuts contain]...indisputable evidence of Leadbelly's talents."

Listen and you'll agree.

Sean Killeen, 1993



## LEARNING ABOUT LEADBELLY

## Bibliography:

Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Legend of Leadbelly*. New York: Harper Collins, Publishers, 1992. Cloth and paper. This is the best place to start. Certainly the fullest treatment of Lead Belly's life from a contemporary perspective. Carefully researched, it has an extensive bibliography and discography.

The Leadbelly Letter. This is a fine publication for Lead Belly enthusiasts published by the Leadbelly Society, whose stated objective is to "appreciate and celebrate Leadbelly's music." Edited by Sean Killeen and published in Ithaca, New York, the Leadbelly Letter contains short pieces on specific periods of Lead Belly's life, current bibliography and discography, and keeps people in touch with one another. Address: The Leadbelly Society, P.O. Box 6679, Ithaca, NY 14851-6679.

### Selected Discography

The Legend of Leadbelly (listed above) presents a 32 page discography, certainly the best source for scholars and fans. The following recordings are in print on CD at the time of this publication:

Folkways:Lead Belly recorded for Moses Asch between 1941 and 1948. The "sides" (78 rpm sides) appeared on the Asch, Disc, and Stinson labels, and many of them were subsequently reissued on Moses Asch's Folkways label after its founding in 1949. Moses Asch kept all of the Lead Belly albums in print once released, and under the Smithsonian Institution's Center For Folklife Programs' administration they remain available.

Folkways: The Original Vision (with Woody Guthrie). Smithsonian/Folkways 40001

Leadbelly Sings Folk Songs. Smithsonian/Folkways 40010

Leadbelly's Legacy, Vol. 1: Take This Hammer. Folkways 2004

Leadbelly's Legacy, Vol. 2: Rock Island Line. Folkways 2014 Leadbelly's Legacy, Vol. 3: Early Recordings. Folkways 2024

Leadbelly's Legacy, Vol. 4: Easy Rider. Folkways 2034

Midnight Special. Folkways 31046

Shout On. Folkways 31030

Leadbelly Sings Folk Songs For Young People. Folkways 7533

Alabama Bound. RCA 9600

Leadbelly. Columbia 30035

King Of The 12-String Guitar. Columbia/Legacy 46776

Midnight Special. Rounder 1044

Gwine Dig A Hole And Put The Devil In. Rounder 1045

Let It Shine On Me. Rounder 1046

## Selected Recordings on Smithsonian/Folkways

Bill Broonzy Sings Folk Songs. 40023

Elizabeth Cotten, Freight Train & Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes. 40009

Reverend Gary Davis, Pure Religion and Bad Company. 40035

Woody Guthrie, Long Ways to Travel: The Unreleased Folkways Masters, 1944-1949, 40046

Woody Guthrie Sings Folk Songs. 40007

Woody Guthrie, Struggle. 40025

Lightnin' Hopkins. 40019

Cisco Houston, The Folkways Years: 1944-1961. 40059

Lonnie Johnson, The Complete Folkways Recordings. 40067

Brownie McGhee, The Folkways Years: 1945-1959. 40034

Brownie McGhee & Sonny Terry Sing. 40011

Sonny Terry, The Folkways Years: 1944-1963, 40033

Pete Seeger, American Industrial Ballads. 40058

Pete Seeger, Darling Corey & Goofing Off Suite. 40018

Pete Seeger, Sing-along - Live At Sanders Theater, 1980. 40027/28

Joseph Spence, The Complete Folkways Recordings, 1958 40066

Been In The Storm So Long: Spirituals, Folk Tales and Children's Games From Johns Island, South Carolina. 40031

Sing For Freedom - The Story Of The Civil Rights Movement Through It's Songs. 40032

Wade In The Water 1: African American Spirituals: The Concert Tradition. 40072

Wade In The Water 2: African American Congregational Singing: 19th Century Roots. 40074

Wade In The Water 3: African American Gospel: The Pioneering Composers. 40074

Wade In The Water 4: African American Community Gospel. 40075

## Videotape

A Salute To Leadbelly. Narrated by Pete Seeger with rare footage of Leadbelly "live" singing and playing. 52 minutes, \$24.95 (outside USA add postage for 8 ounces). Central Sun Video, Box 3135 Reston, Virginia 22091.

A Vision Shared, A Tribute to Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly. 72 min., color (VHS-NTSC), \$29.95. CBS Music Video Enterprises 19V-49006. Some of Leadbelly's songs performed by Taj Mahal, Willie Nelson, Little Richard, Peter Seeger and Arlo Guthrie, and Sweet Honey In The Rock.

The following videos are available directly from the Leadbelly Society, P.O. Box 6679, Ithaca, NY 14851:

Leadbelly Sings to School Children. 30 min., color (VHS-NTSC) for \$24.95 (add \$5.00 for postage outside U.S.A.).

Leadbelly: A Seminar With Seven Specialists. 60 min., color, (VHS-NTSC) for \$39.95 (add \$5.00 for postage outside U.S.A.).

The Legacy of Leadbelly. 30 min., color (VHS-NTSC) for \$29.95 (add \$5.00 for postage outside the U.S.A.).

## CREDITS

Supervising Producers: Anthony Seeger and Matt Walters

Recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr., New York City

Disc #1, tracks 1-35 recorded September 27, 1948

Disc #2, tracks 1-18; Disc #3, tracks 1-20; Disc #4 tracks 1-3 recorded October 15, 1948

Disc #4, tracks 4-23 recorded November 5, 1948

Annotation: Frederic Ramsey, Jr., Moses Asch, Sean Killeen, Anthony Seeger, Jeff Place and Matt Walters

Archival assistance: Center for Folklife Programs archivist Jeff Place assisted by Steve Weiss

Editorial assistance: Mary Monseur

Mastering: Alan Yoshida, A & M Mastering, Hollywood, CA

Design: Visual Dialogue

#### Photo Credits:

Slipcase and booklet cover: courtesy of Tiny Robinson

Slipcase, booklet, and CD back cover: 1937, courtesy of Lead Belly Society

CD cover: original cover photo from LP release of *Lead Belly's Last Sessions* by James Chapelle, 1949

CD booklet inside photos: courtesy of John Reynolds and Tiny Robinson

## ABOUT SMITHSONIAN/FOLKWAYS

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1947 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are now available on high-quality audio cassettes, each packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings was formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels, and in collaboration with other companies also produces instructional videotapes, recordings to accompany published books, and a variety of other educational projects.

The Smithsonian/Folkways, Folkways, Cook, and Paredon record labels are administered by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies. They are one of the means through which the Center supports the work of traditional artists and expresses its commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.

You can find Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings at your local record store. Smithsonian/Folkways, Folkways, Cook, and Paredon recordings are all available through:

Smithsonian/Folkways Mail Order 414 Hungerford Drive, Suite 444 Rockville, MD 20850 phone (301) 443-2314 fax (301) 443-1819

(Visa and MasterCard accepted)
For a free catalogue, write:

The Whole Folkways Catalogue Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings 955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600 Smithsonian Institution Washington, DC 20560 phone (202) 287-3262 fax (202) 287-3699