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SMITHSONIAN  
**FOLK  
WAYS**  
RECORDINGS

# LEAD BELLY

THE  
SMITHSONIAN  
FOLKWAYS  
COLLECTION

 Smithsonian Folkways

# LEAD BELLY

**LEAD  
BELLY**

THE  
SMITHSONIAN  
FOLKWAYS  
COLLECTION

PRODUCED BY JEFF PLACE AND ROBERT SANTELLI

WRITTEN BY JEFF PLACE

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT SANTELLI

LEAD  
BELLY

Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection

SFW CD 40201

Produced by Jeff Place and Robert Santelli

Written by Jeff Place

Introduction by Robert Santelli

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# CONTENTS

- 6 TRACK LISTINGS
- 11 LEAD BELLY: A MAN OF CONTRADICTION AND COMPLEXITY  
by Robert Santelli
- 16 THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF LEAD BELLY  
by Jeff Place
- 29 DISC ONE
- 36 DISC TWO
- 43 DISC THREE
- 50 DISC FOUR: Lead Belly on Radio
- 55 DISC FIVE: *Last Sessions*
- 62 DISCOGRAPHY
- 65 SELECTED LEAD BELLY RECORDINGS
- 66 SELECTED LISTENING
- 67 SOURCES AND SELECTED READINGS

# TRACK LISTINGS

## DISC ONE

- 1. IRENE (GOODNIGHT IRENE)** 1:53 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax/TRO-Ludlow Music, Inc., BMI)
- 2. THE BOURGEOIS BLUES** 2:18 (Huddie Ledbetter-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 3. FANNIN STREET (MISTER TOM HUGHES TOWN)** 3:30 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 4. THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL** 2:03 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 5. JOHN HENRY** 3:10 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 6. BLACK GIRL (WHERE DID YOU SLEEP LAST NIGHT)** 2:07 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 7. PICK A BALE OF COTTON** 1:30 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 8. TAKE THIS HAMMER** 2:15 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 9. COTTON FIELDS** 2:06 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 10. OLD RILEY** 1:58 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 11. ROCK ISLAND LINE** 2:02 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 12. THE GALLIS POLE** 2:45 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 13. HA-HA THIS A WAY** 1:34 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 14. SUKEY JUMP** 1:04 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 15. BOLL WEEVIL** 3:07 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 16. SCOTTSBORO BOYS** 4:32 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 17. GOVERNOR O.K. ALLEN** 2:37 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 18. GOVERNOR PAT NEFF** 3:40 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 19. THERE'S A MAN GOING AROUND TAKING NAMES** 1:24 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 20. ON A MONDAY** 1:47 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Ludlow Music, Inc., BMI)
- 21. YOU CAN'T LOSE ME, CHOLLY** 2:37 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 22. KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF HER** 2:51 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 23. WE SHALL BE FREE** with Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston 2:34 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

# DISC TWO

**1. ALABAMA BOUND** 2:17 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**2. ALMOST DAY** 1:05 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**3. FIDDLER'S DRAM** 2:28 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**4. GREEN CORN** 1:15 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**5. SALLY WALKER** 2:40 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**6. BRING ME A LITTLE WATER, SILVY** 0:48 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**7. JULIE ANN JOHNSON** 0:41 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**8. LININ' TRACK** 1:11 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**9. WHOA, BACK, BUCK** 2:09 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**10. SHORTY GEORGE** 1:28 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**11. HAM AND EGGS** 1:42 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**12. MOANIN'** 0:60 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**13. OUT ON THE WESTERN PLAINS** 1:31 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**14. NOTED RIDER** 2:50 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**15. MEETING AT THE BUILDING** 0:59 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**16. GOOD, GOOD, GOOD (TALKING, PREACHING) / WE SHALL WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY** 2:11 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**17. AIN'T YOU GLAD (THE BLOOD DONE SIGNED MY NAME)** 2:19 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**18. I'M SO GLAD, I DONE GOT OVER** 1:21

**19. THE HINDENBURG DISASTER** 3:22 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**20. ELLA SPEED** 5:48 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**21. HAUL AWAY JOE** 2:48 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**22. OLD MAN** 2:35 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**23. SWEET JENNY LEE** 1:51 (Walter Donaldson/Donaldson Publishing Co., LLC, ASCAP)

**24. JEAN HARLOW** 1:40 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**25. LAURA** 1:41 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**26. QUEEN MARY** 4:46 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)



# DISC THREE

- GOOD MORNING BLUES** 2:24 (Huddie Ledbetter-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 2. SAIL ON, LITTLE GIRL** 3:14 (Amos Easton/Universal-MCA Music Publishing, ASCAP)
- 3. EASY RIDER** 2:51 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 4. POOR HOWARD** 1:36 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 5. DUNCAN AND BRADY** 4:06 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 6. HOW LONG, HOW LONG** 2:13 (Leroy Carr/Universal Music Corp., ASCAP)
- 7. T.B. BLUES** 3:43 (Victoria Spivey/Edwin H. Morris & Company, ASCAP)
- 8. JIM CROW BLUES** 3:30 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 9. PIGMEAT** 2:33 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 10. JOHN HARDY** 2:43
- 11. OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN** 2:40 (William Weldon-Roy Jordan/Universal-MCA Music Publishing, ASCAP)
- 12. 4, 5, AND 9** 2:20 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 13. IN THE EVENING (WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN)** 3:29 (Leroy Carr-Don Raye/Universal-MCA Music Publishing, ASCAP)
- 14. RED CROSS STORE BLUES** 3:09 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 15. DIGGIN' MY POTATOES** 2:34 (Bill Broonzy, BMI)
- 16. BLIND LEMON** 1:39 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 17. WHEN A MAN'S A LONG WAY FROM HOME** 2:57 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 18. ALBERTA** 3:11 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 19. EXCERPT FROM *THE LONESOME TRAIN*** 3:11 (Earl Robinson-Millard Lampell/Shawnee Press, Inc., ASCAP)
- 20. NATIONAL DEFENSE BLUES** 3:13 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 21. HITLER SONG (MR. HITLER)** 4:31 (Huddie Ledbetter-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 22. BIG FAT WOMAN** 1:10 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)
- 23. BEEN SO LONG (BELLEVUE HOSPITAL BLUES)** 2:44 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

# DISC FOUR

## RADIO

### 1. WNYC—FOLK SONGS OF AMERICA— LEAD BELLY 14:42

GREY GOOSE (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

BOLL WEEVIL (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

YELLOW GAL (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

HA-HA THIS A WAY (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

LEAVING BLUES (Huddie Ledbetter-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

IRENE (OUTRO) (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax/TRO-Ludlow Music, Inc., BMI)

### 2. WNYC—FOLK SONGS OF AMERICA— LEAD BELLY AND THE OLEANDER QUARTET 14:45

ALMOST DAY (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

BLUES IN MY KITCHEN, BLUES IN MY  
DINING ROOM (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways  
Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

I WENT UP ON THE MOUNTAIN (arr. Huddie  
Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

GOOD MORNING BLUES (Huddie Ledbetter-Alan  
Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

BABY, DON'T YOU LOVE ME NO MORE (Leroy  
Carr, ASCAP)

T.B. BLUES (Victoria Spivey/Edwin H. Morris &  
Company, ASCAP)

IRENE (OUTRO) (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax/  
TRO-Ludlow Music, Inc., BMI)

3. IF IT WASN'T FOR DICKY 2:15  
(Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-  
Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

4. WHAT'S YOU GONNA DO WHEN THE  
WORLD'S ON FIRE with Anne Graham 2:12

5. ROCK ME (HIDE ME IN THY BOSOM)  
with Anne Graham 2:19 (Thomas A. Dorsey/Hill  
& Range Songs, BMI)

6. PACKIN' TRUNK BLUES 2:35  
(Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/  
TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

7. LEAVING BLUES 2:58 (Huddie Ledbetter-  
Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

8. HOW COME YOU DO ME LIKE YOU  
DO? 3:26 (Gene Austin-Roy Bergere/EMI Mills  
Music Inc., ASCAP)

9. ONE DIME BLUES 2:25 (Lemon Jefferson)

10. I'M GOING TO BUY YOU A BRAND  
NEW FORD 1:40 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways  
Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

11. JAIL-HOUSE BLUES 1:13 (Huddie  
Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways  
Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

12. SHOUT ON 2:09 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-  
John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music  
Publishers, Inc., BMI)

13. COME AND SIT DOWN BESIDE ME  
1:02 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers,  
Inc., BMI)

14. RED RIVER 2:14 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/  
TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

# DISC FIVE

## LAST SESSIONS

**1. YES, I WAS STANDING IN THE BOTTOM** 1:41 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**2. AIN'T GOING DOWN TO THE WELL NO MORE (VERSION 2)** 1:23 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**3. EVERYTIME I GO OUT** 1:25 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**4. GO DOWN, OLD HANNAH** 4:58 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**5. BLACK BETTY** 1:53 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**6. NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU'RE DOWN AND OUT** with Bessie Smith 3:42 (Jimmy Cox/Screen Gems-EMI Music, ASCAP) Bessie Smith recording under license from Sony Music Commercial Music Group, a division of Sony Music Entertainment

**7. STEWBALL** 2:34 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**8. AIN'T IT A SHAME TO GO FISHIN' ON A SUNDAY** 1:22 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**9. RELAX YOUR MIND** 4:05 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**10. PRINCESS ELIZABETH** 3:33 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**11. SILVER CITY BOUND** 6:01 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**12. THE TITANIC** 5:11 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**13. HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN** 2:24 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**14. IT'S TIGHT LIKE THAT** 3:09 (T. Dorsey-H. Whittaker/Edwin H. Morris & Co., BMI)

**15. DIGGIN' MY POTATOES** 3:57 (Bill Broonzy, BMI)

**16. SPRINGTIME IN THE ROCKIES** 3:02 (Woolsey-Sauer/EMI Robbins Catalog, Inc., ASCAP)

**17. BACKWATER BLUES** 3:23 (Bessie Smith/Frank Music Corp., ASCAP)

**18. DIDN'T OLD JOHN CROSS THE WATER** 1:56 (arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**19. DE KALB BLUES** 3:51 (Huddie Ledbetter-John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**20. THEY HUNG HIM ON THE CROSS (VERSION 1)** 2:26 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**21. THEY HUNG HIM ON THE CROSS (VERSION 2)** 2:49 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

**22. IN THE WORLD** 2:02 (Huddie Ledbetter/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI)

BY ROBERT SANTELLI

# LEAD BELLY

A MAN OF CONTRADICTION  
AND COMPLEXITY

Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly, owned one of the oddest nicknames in all of American folk music—odd, but not exactly out of place in pre-World War II African American culture, where odd and funny nicknames were common, especially with musicians and entertainers. Add the nickname Lead Belly to a list that included Bumble Bee Slim, Butterbeans & Susie, Memphis Minnie, Muddy Waters, and Howlin' Wolf, for starters.

It isn't difficult to surmise how he might have gotten the nickname. Perhaps sometime in his youth in rural Louisiana, a friend or family member altered the sound of Ledbetter by substituting the *t*'s with *l*'s, eliminating the *er*, and pasting a *y* at the end of it. The result was Lead Belly—for some reason, two words, not one, which was often how early biographers, record company men, and newspaper reporters wrote it out in print.

Or, as my colleague and co-producer Jeff Place believes, *Ledbetter* became *Lead Belly* in prison, a place in which Huddie spent considerable time in his early days. Prisoners, especially black prisoners, were often anointed with nicknames, some of them amusing, others downright threatening. Two of Lead Belly's fellow inmates were known as Iron Head and Clear Rock. With those kinds of monikers, the nickname Lead Belly would have fit right in.

The great American folksinger Woody Guthrie was as interested in how his friend and fellow musician got his first name, Huddie, as in how he got his nickname. Guthrie once wrote, "Leadbelly (sic) is a hard name. And the hard name of a harder man. The name that his mama spoke over him down in the swamps of Louisiana when he was born was Huddie Ledbetter, and because she liked the sound and the roll of Huddie..."

Lead Belly might have sounded like a perfectly normal nickname in black southern culture. But to a white, Italian American kid from New Jersey who fell in love with folk music in the 1960s after hearing Bob Dylan sing of his admiration for Woody Guthrie ("Song to Woody," off of Dylan's self-titled 1962 debut), the Lead Belly nickname sounded as if this African American folksinger had a midsection full of buckshot and was definitely not to be messed with. I wondered about him and his music, imagining that his songs were dark and mysterious and not at all like the more homogenized folk sounds of Peter, Paul and Mary, the Chad Mitchell Trio, and the few other popular folk artists whose records I owned back then.

I was right. Sometime after hearing his name, I came across his music. I can't quite remember where. It probably was at Izzy Young's Folklore Center in Greenwich Village, where I occasionally bought a folk record, spending tips from my paper route, or just peered inside, wishing I could talk folk music like many of those who hung out there did. And once again, it was a name, this time of an album title, that immediately drew me toward it. The recording was called *Negro Sinful Songs sung by Lead Belly*. Whew, what a title. What did they mean by "sinful songs"? What kind of folksinger would sing "sinful songs" anyway? The album wasn't for sale, but even if it was, I doubt I would have had the courage to buy it and bring it home. My New Jersey State Trooper father was already growing suspicious of my music tastes.

Later on, when I finally did hear the album, it didn't disappoint, though it was hardly "sinful" in the bawdy sense, as I had secretly hoped. Still, the tunes on *Negro*

*Sinful Songs* sounded as if they were chiseled from human bones in a dimly lit alley or a dark field at midnight, with a full moon staring straight down and all kinds of bad things lurking about. Strong and forceful was how he sang the songs. It almost felt like if you didn't pay attention to every word he sang and every chord he strummed on his guitar that he'd somehow reach out of the record and shake you silly until you did.

Eventually, I heard more songs Lead Belly recorded: "John Henry," "John Hardy," "Rock Island Line," "Alberta," "Alabama Bound." They too were fascinating and irresistible. And then I heard how other artists, most notably the band Creedence Clearwater Revival, interpreted Lead Belly songs in a rock and roll context. Though Creedence hailed from the Bay Area, John Fogerty, their guitarist, singer, and driving force, had discovered Lead Belly when he too was a kid. A chunk of Creedence Clearwater Revival's set centered on a pair of Lead Belly songs, "Midnight Special" and "Cotton Fields," that Fogerty and the rest of the band absolutely aced.

All of this prompted a musical journey I was still on some 25 years later. In early 1994 I became one of the five original curators of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. The institution, which would be based in Cleveland, Ohio, was still nearly two years from completion when we all came together to plan the opening exhibitions.

I'd been a New Jersey-based music journalist, writing for publications such as the *Asbury Park Press*, *New Jersey Monthly*, and *Rolling Stone*. A year earlier Penguin had published my *Big Book of Blues*, a music encyclopedia that had taken me five years to research and write. Thus, with all that information still swirling in my head and the blues and folk-blues contacts I worked hard to get still fresh in my Rolodex (remember those?), Jim Henke, the museum's chief curator and former music editor at *Rolling Stone*, assigned me the task of collecting and organizing artifacts for a *Roots of Rock* exhibition. It would demonstrate how blues, folk, work songs, and spirituals, among other indigenous American musical forms, set the foundation for the emergence of rock and roll in the early 1950s.

I began my curatorial career with Lead Belly, not just because of my deep interest in him and his music, but also because, of all the traditional music forms I was to concern myself with as a curator, Lead Belly had been a master. His songbook was like taking a trip down the river of American roots music. Lead Belly knew the forms and sang them with undeniable authority and authenticity. To tell the music story of Lead Belly, I reasoned, was to tell the story of the blues and folk roots of rock and roll.

I knew that Lead Belly's niece, Queen "Tiny" Robinson (clearly, unusual names were part of this family's tradition) lived in Nashville, having been told that by Harold Leventhal, Pete Seeger's manager and longtime friend, as well as the executor of the Woody Guthrie estate. Leventhal kindly introduced us and shortly thereafter, I was en

route to Nashville, hoping to secure artifacts, instruments, anecdotes—anything that would help me tell Lead Belly's story in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum exhibition.

Tiny Robinson met me at the door of her suburban Nashville home. After an exchange of pleasantries and some coffee and cookies, she took me to a room where, she said, she kept her Lead Belly “history relics.” What that meant I wasn't quite sure. But I was anxious to find out.

It didn't take long for me to grasp the importance of the “history relics.” There on the bed was Lead Belly's famous 12-string Stella guitar, the one that a year or so earlier Kurt Cobain allegedly wanted to buy. Cobain had covered Lead Belly's “Black Girl” (aka “Where Did You Sleep Last Night”) with his Seattle grunge band, Nirvana, and had apparently connected with Lead Belly on a level that few other rockers his age or of his genre had. Tiny Robinson didn't sell it, though, and it was my good fortune (and the Rock Hall's too) that she hadn't.

Next to the guitar was one of Lead Belly's hats—a tall, white felt one, rather nicely preserved—and a cardboard box full of documents: letters, official proclamations, notes, contracts, even one of his prison pardons. A smaller box contained some simple jewelry and other personal items, like his pocketknife. Tiny could sense my rising excitement. I had never before been up close to so much American music history.

“Is this all what you're looking for?” she asked in a pleasant, slightly southern drawl, not quite sure what a curator actually did, or needed, or how he figured which pieces were right for an exhibition and which ones weren't. Truth be told, neither did I, exactly, but I nodded, and smiled. “Oh yeah, this is *definitely* what I was looking for.” I tried not to show it, but I felt as if I had hit an American folk music mother lode on my first real curatorial outing, and it was a Lead Belly mother lode, at that.

After we went back in the kitchen, we talked about things like loan agreements, insurance, shipping dates, and such. Tiny also wanted to make sure that we told Huddie's story (I was surprised she didn't refer to him as Lead Belly) in the right way, emphasizing his music legacy rather than his often troubled personal life. I told her music was the main thing, but it was hard to separate the music from the man, especially in Lead Belly's case. She said she could understand that and gave her OK, provided it was done properly. She promised to lend the Rock Hall everything I had selected to be part of the exhibition.

Long ago I had met Lead Belly through his name, then his music. Later, I had read about him and had even heard fascinating stories about his life from Pete Seeger, who had known him and performed with him, much as Woody Guthrie had. But being in the company of his guitar, personal items, and papers, and eventually putting them all into a story that would be told to the many thousands of music fans that would visit the Rock and Roll Hall of

Fame and Museum each year—some of whom, I might add, would learn the Lead Belly story for the first time—was a responsibility I didn't take lightly.

I looked at Lead Belly's 12-string Stella guitar one last time, still not quite believing that there on the bed lay one of the most important instruments in the history of American music. Tiny said she'd make sure it arrived in Cleveland safely, and gave me a batch of cookies for the road. I left Nashville feeling pretty darn good about the day's events and my new, deeper connection to Lead Belly.

**L**ead Belly was a man of contradiction and complexity. It was hard to truly know him, said the people who tried, and it was next to impossible to place him in a particular music style or form and have him remain there for long. He was a folk musician who also played the blues. He knew his share of work songs and field hollers, having sung them while picking cotton and doing farm chores. He learned prison songs while incarcerated, and he sang them like a man who had seen life's underbelly.

Spirituals and gospel tunes came naturally to him. He gave new life to old ballads whose origins were buried in the past. He could sing children's songs when kids were present. And at house parties and local fish fries, if someone wanted to hear a few standards or a pop hit of the day, he could sing and play them too.

Lead Belly moved through American music genres and song circles naturally and effortlessly, never seeing the boundaries and categories that were created for commodity's sake by men with bow ties and clean suits. He was the very definition of a “songster,” an old-time, old-school human jukebox of a performer and recording artist who never quite realized just what an American music treasure he had become in his life.

Lead Belly possessed a powerful, virile voice, yet he could be remarkably gentle at times. In the song “Bring Me a Little Water, Silvy,” a plea for a simple sip of water turns into a touching display of human emotion from a calloused field worker who is all but immune to such things as compassion and dignity. “Irene,” one of Lead Belly's best-known songs, is a beautiful lullaby sung by a man who probably slept half his life with one eye open.

While most other musicians of his kind played a 6-string guitar, Lead Belly played that 12-string Stella much of the time, its rich, resonant sound competing with his strong, arching voice through every step of a song. Woody Guthrie described it this way: “His guitar was not like a friend of his, not like a woman, not like some of the kids, not like a man, you know. But it was a thing that would cause people to walk over to where he is, a thing that made sounds that

gave his own words richer sounds, and would give him his way to show his people around him all of the things that he felt inside and out.”

He could play solo on a street corner in Shreveport, Louisiana, and he could play with like-minded musicians in cafés and bars in bigger American cities. After he came to New York, he included among his musician friends the bluesmen Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, the jazz horn player Bunk Johnson, and Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, both folksingers every bit the national treasure that Lead Belly was.

In his life he had known good luck and bad, and that came through in his music too. Lead Belly knew the pain of the penitentiary and the passion for life that free men have. Both emotions were often evident in his best songs. His life in Louisiana was hard and strained, and late-night scuffles often landed him in jail. He wasn't afraid to defend himself—even kill someone—if he had to. He loved women a bit too much and whiskey too, and together, they sometimes led him down a dark road.

He had a mean temper and yet a tender touch. With a woman, he could be as affectionate and intimate as any great lover and do so in a way that belied the trouble that often waited for him outside her door. In a fight, he could flash a blade, handle men much meaner than he, and still be standing when it was all over.

Musically, Lead Belly thrived in the country and in the city too. He looked sharp in a suit but often wore denim coveralls, even when performing in high-browed concert halls. It's not surprising that Lead Belly became good friends with Woody Guthrie. To New York intellectuals Lead Belly and Guthrie were American music primitives. Concert hall or beer hall, street corner or recording studio, out of these two folksingers came the songs that reflected an America many of those people would never feel firsthand.

Guthrie was an Okie. He had experienced personally the dust, the wind, and the dry land that drove folks from Oklahoma and other parts of the lower Plains and Southwest to California. Guthrie also saw how in that Promised Land they met with other tribulations, namely, no jobs, discrimination, hunger and homelessness, police brutality, and worst of all, a general despair that robbed men and their families of hopes and dreams.

Guthrie came to New York in 1940, fresh from the West Coast turmoil. He reported what was going on there through his songs. Lefties loved him. To them, Guthrie was a survivor, a musical proletarian hero of sorts, a spokesman for his people. Quickly he became quite the personality in union halls, in Bowery bars, and at benefit performances for striking workers and migrants. The songs from his album *Dust Bowl Ballads* were a testament to his authenticity and talent as a musical storyteller, and he was writing up a storm in New York, adding to his song list something he'd ultimately call “This Land Is Your Land.”

Lead Belly had his own history, one that was every bit

the equal of Guthrie's. He was born in 1888 on a Louisiana plantation in the rural hamlet of Mooringsport, where he learned the basics of the guitar and accordion. Mostly, he made his living as a sharecropper, but sometime around 1912 he met and traveled with the legendary Texas bluesman, Blind Lemon Jefferson. While with Jefferson, Lead Belly was introduced to the 12-string guitar by a traveling medicine show. Lead Belly loved its big, ringing sound and the way it matched his equally big voice. He would hardly play anything else after that.

Like Guthrie, Lead Belly saw the meaner side of life in Louisiana and other parts of the South. Racism and economic oppression were two things he lived with, but hated, and they made the fuse of his frustration and anger that much shorter. Despite his reputation as a man with a fiery temper who was quick to the fist, Lead Belly wasn't a large man. By most accounts he was no more than 5 feet, 8 inches tall. But he was powerfully built. He had a thick neck, muscled arms, big hands, and a broad chest to go with dark black skin and piercing eyes.

And he liked to fight. It's the reason why he spent nearly 20 years on prison chain gangs, first in Texas and later in Louisiana. But here's the curious, even incredible part of Lead Belly lore: Not once, but twice he cleverly used his talents as a singer, songwriter, and performer to secure prison pardons. The first time occurred in 1925 at the Sugarland Prison, near Houston, Texas. Governor Pat Neff heard Lead Belly perform a song he had written about the governor, who offered up the pardon as a second chance for Lead Belly to use his musical gift to make something of his life.

Lead Belly squandered the opportunity. Five years later, he was again arrested, this time for murder, though the charge was questionable at best. So Lead Belly was back behind bars. As at Sugarland, he spent his days at Angola Prison toiling in the fields, shackled. But his free time was mostly spent singing and playing music, and learning new songs that fellow prisoners taught him. His songster reputation was well-earned as he broadened his repertoire to include hundreds of songs.

Which is why when John Lomax and his son Alan of the Library of Congress visited Angola in 1933 with the intent of collecting African American folk, work, and prison songs, the warden introduced them to Lead Belly. This fortuitous event changed the life of Lead Belly—and the lives of the Lomaxes. Taken by the sheer number of songs Lead Belly knew and the manner in which he performed them, John and Alan Lomax eagerly recorded Lead Belly and promised to return the following summer.

Lead Belly was no fool. If John and Alan Lomax came back to Angola as they said they would, it might present yet another chance at freedom. The Lomaxes returned to Angola in July 1934. Lead Belly worked his songster magic again. By this time, the father-son song-collecting team was so convinced of Lead Belly's value as an American folk musician of the highest quality that they convinced Governor O.K. Allen to pardon him, and he did.

Lead Belly didn't stay in the South. With John Lomax's blessing, Lead Belly headed north, to New York, which is where he would reside for just about the rest of his life.

He reluctantly fit into a wild savage, outlaw image that the media enjoyed exaggerating. The *Herald Tribune* actually ran a story about Lead Belly with the headline “Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes Between Homicides.”

Lead Belly endured the insults because he had to. Urban black record buyers had little or no interest in a convict-singer whose repertoire came squarely out of the Jim Crow South they detested. It was left to white, liberal music fans to purchase his records (not many did) and to pay to

hear him perform (the curious were happy to do so). The money was not much, but it was enough to keep him in New York and take a wife.

Lead Belly's impact was mostly felt on other musicians. Guthrie, in particular, was taken with Lead Belly, as were Cisco Houston, Josh White, Pete Seeger and the other Almanac Singers, and later, the Weavers. Guthrie wrote about Lead Belly in the book, *American Folksong*, first published in 1947. "I went with Leadbelly (sic) to all kinds of places where he performed, in your school, church, your theatre, your radio studio, at your cocktail club, and at your outdoor rally to call you to come together to meet, talk, argue, theorize, and speak your voice against the things that poison your life and your world around you."

Guthrie recorded some songs with Lead Belly, and Lomax had him record more sides for the Library of Congress. In addition, Lomax secured a contract for Lead Belly to record as a solo artist for the American Recording Corporation. Later, Lead Belly would also record for Asch, RCA, Columbia, and Musicraft, among other labels. But he never had a hit record in his lifetime.

It was through performing that Lead Belly made his living. To see and hear him onstage was to witness the very essence of African American country folk music culture, something rare in New York City concert circles. He'd come out onstage, proud and purposeful, and deliver his songs with the authority of a man who had seen some hard times yet, through music, had survived and carried on. He made a living, but barely. For a spell, John Lomax had managed Lead Belly, but there is evidence to suggest that Lomax did not always have Lead Belly's best interests in mind when it came to performance payouts and record royalties.

Lead Belly learned nearly as much from Guthrie and Seeger as they did from him. He watched how Woody worked a crowd and strove to do the same thing, but with less successful results. No one, it seemed, could match Woody's storytelling genius and way with words. Lead Belly also took songwriting cues from his friends. During and just after World War II, he incorporated into his set some topical and protest songs, including the brilliant "Bourgeois Blues," "National Defense Blues," and "Hitler Song" ("Mr. Hitler"). Though these pieces weren't as effective as his earlier classics, they nonetheless framed Lead Belly as something of a protest singer, prompting left-leaning intellectuals to fill seats at his performances.

In 1948 the muscular pain that Lead Belly felt and had thought was the result of prison life and hard labor on the farm and chain gangs prompted him to see a doctor. Lead Belly was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. A year later he was dead.

"What a tragedy he died when he did," wrote Pete Seeger in the notes to his 1968 album *Pete Seeger Sings Leadbelly* (sic), "just six months before his song 'Irene' (aka 'Irene, Goodnight') sold two million copies and made Hit

Parade history. If he could have lived ten more years he would have seen his dreams come through—young people by the millions learning and singing his songs."

Seeger and his group, the Weavers, had recorded the Lead Belly song. It went all the way to #1 on the pop charts, a rare feat for a folk tune. Later, other artists and groups would record Lead Belly songs or songs that Lead Belly interpreted and made his own. In addition to Creedence Clearwater Revival and Nirvana, the Beach Boys, Led Zeppelin, English skiffle star Lonnie Donegan, Frank Sinatra, Little Richard, Tom Waits, and even pop crooner Perry Como all recorded their versions of Lead Belly classics.

"He bequeathed to us a couple hundred of the best songs any of us will ever know," added Seeger. So, with the hope that they never are forgotten and are sung by folksingers now and in the future, here is, dare I say, the definitive Lead Belly collection, a musical story of a man and his songs, powerful statements all, about the many sides of life and the humanity that is somewhere in all of us. **RS**



**THE  
LIFE AND  
LEGACY**

**BY JEFF PLACE**

Lead Belly was one of the musical giants of the 20th century. Since his death, his songs have lived on. People know them, whether they know the singer or not. Every self-respecting “American folksinger” performs them, and they were part of the repertoire of early rock and roll singers both in the United States and England. Ironically, Lead Belly is often spoken of as the “discovery” of folklorists, but in many ways he was a walking and singing collector of American folk songs in his own right. He possessed an amazing memory for lyrics and melodies. They could be work songs, blues lyrics, prison songs, children’s games, or even popular songs from Tin Pan Alley. He would hear a song in passing and commit it to memory; then he morphed and combined these memories into his own music and new compositions. He was what music scholars call a “songster,” able to dig into his bag of tricks to entertain any audience.

# **OF LEAD BELLY**

Growing up in the Deep South at the beginning of the 20th century—a hellish experience for a young African American—gave Lead Belly his musical background. There he heard songs performed by rural blacks for work and entertainment, and songs expressing frustration. From passing blues musicians he would learn other songs and fell in love with the barrelhouse rhythms of piano players.

Lead Belly described to his niece Tiny Robinson why he wrote certain songs:

Lead Belly never spent hours and hours thinking up a new song. He always sang songs the way he felt, what he had experienced and seen. They were not just words to make sense, they were not words to complete a sentence, and they were not words without meaning to him. Lead Belly had a very close feeling to all of his songs. He felt he had much more to sing about besides chain-gang songs. Some of the things were about the environment which he was brought up under. Don't do this, don't do that, be careful what you say, and where you go, you have no right walking down that road where those folks live, and stay on this side where you belong. He was connected with those series of episodes soon as he was able to walk a block by himself. "I have my people to sing about. The way they struggle and nothing seems to be coming their way. Nothing was done to improve the matter. The violent grasp was too strong for us to escape. So we had to sing about them." (Tiny Robinson, handwritten note, John Reynolds Collection)

His "discovery" by John and Alan Lomax has been the legend attached to Lead Belly, a case of a great story embellished for publicity's sake. However, it makes him a novelty, and it diminishes the importance of his music. Historically, Lead Belly lived during the period that linked the music of the post-Civil War and the mid-20th century. Ultimately, his music reflected both. During his lifetime many producers and impresarios in the music world could not understand the variety in his music and assumed it would not sell. They saw a black man with a guitar and thought "blues." Yet he was more than that. Pete Seeger saw that "he was determined to build a successful career as a musician. If he could have lived ten more years he would have seen all his dreams come through—young people by the millions learning and singing his songs" (Seeger 1972, 28). Unfortunately for him, he came along just before the great revival of folk music in the United States. Lead Belly was on welfare when he died.



Huddie Ledbetter was born January 15, 1888, in the Caddo Lake District near Mooringsport in the northwest corner of Louisiana, near the Texas and Arkansas lines. It was barely more than 20 years since Emancipation, and the freedoms African Americans had gained were being stripped away. His father, Wes Ledbetter, was a hard-working farmer, a sharecropper on a fairly large farm for the area. Although he was a free man, the sharecropping system ensured that a farmer would be tied to the property and that most of his profits would go to the landowner. Wes was ambitious, saving what money he made, and had plans to someday own property of his own, to escape the sharecropping system. Huddie's mother Sallie was part Indian, and both parents were members of the local Shiloh Baptist Church. When he became old enough, Huddie labored in the cotton fields with his parents.

Two of Huddie's uncles, Bob and Terrell, were musicians and introduced him to new songs. Playing music was a delightful alternative to the backbreaking work in the hot Louisiana sun. His uncle Terrell gifted him a small "windjammer" accordion when he was seven years old—an important event for young Huddie. Huddie learned as many songs as he could on the instrument. He would acquire a guitar around 1903 (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 17).

African American music in the Deep South at the turn of the 20th century was a collection of spirituals, work songs, and country dance. Black string band music was common. Huddie had become adept at all of the styles, and found that he could pick up a few extra cents playing at local country dances, or "sukey jumps." Musicians would perform tunes like "Green Corn," "Yellow Gal," or "You Can't Lose Me, Cholly." The dances were held in private houses; the owners would take the furniture out of the living room (much as the Cajuns in southern Louisiana also did for events they called *fais do-dos*). Food was cooked, alcohol was usually present, and since a fine musician would attract the attention of the local women, tempers often flared, with trouble frequently ensuing. A fellow resident of Caddo Parish, Chris Franklin, was interviewed by the WPA in 1939 about the dances: "They have to frolic, with the fiddle or banjo or windjammer. They dance out on the grass, 40 or 50, and the big girls 19 years-old get out there barefoot as a goose. Sometimes they call the jig dance and the prompter calls out 'swing your partner' and 'all promenade' and they go in a circle. He says 'bird in a cage' [and] three join hands around the gal in the middle, and they dance around her, and then she gets out with her partner and they dance a while" (quoted in Snyder 1994, 148).

Since visiting Shreveport with Wes as a child, Huddie had often found Fannin Street tantalizing. Shreveport was Louisiana's second most populous city then, and Fannin Street was its red light district. In the bottoms were dozens of saloons, dance halls, gambling houses, and about 40 whorehouses (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 31). There were many musicians playing for the dancers, and other traveling musicians would pass through. Huddie particularly liked the "rolling bass" of the piano players, or what was called "walking the basses" (ibid., 35).

By the time Huddie left Mooringsport in 1906, he had fathered two children out of wedlock and had a bad reputation locally. After some rambling to New Orleans and other places, he landed in Shreveport. Along the way he had learned all types of songs, including popular songs of the early 1900s. To be a traveling musician one had to have a varied repertoire and be able to take requests from the audience. He later told Ross Russell in an interview that as a young man he occasionally listened to records and even learned songs from sheet music (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 195). He continued to learn from the musicians in Shreveport until an illness forced him to retreat back to the farm.

Around 1910, a now-married Huddie moved to Dallas, Texas, where he and his bride worked as cotton pickers. Much like Fannin Street in Shreveport, Dallas had Elm Street or Deep Elum. Around this time, Lead Belly encountered his first 12-string guitar. "I saw one of the old 12-string Stellas sitting in the window of a Dallas store. The year before I'd heard a man play it in one of those traveling medicine shows where they sold a cure-all for 50 cents a bottle, the price of the guitar was \$12, I knew I had to have it" (quoted in Russell 1970, 13). Lead Belly would be identified with a 12-string Stella guitar from that point onward. He loved the sound and how it resonated. The 12-string had occasionally been used in blues prior to this (by Blind Willie McTell and Barbecue Bob Hicks, to name a couple), and Huddie liked it because he could use it to simulate the sound of a barrelhouse piano.

In 1912, he met and started playing as a duo with Blind Lemon Jefferson (1893–1929), who in the 1920s would become one of the best-selling blues artists in the country. Acting as his eyes, Huddie helped Lemon get around, and each undoubtedly learned from the other. The duo was able to make some money around the Texas area. In later years after Lemon's death, Huddie often played songs he composed in tribute to his former musical partner.

The possibility of violence always hung over any of the occasions he played, and, sure enough, trouble finally struck in June 1915, when Huddie was involved in an altercation and was sentenced to 30 days on a chain gang. It was his first experience with prison life. Shortly into his time, Huddie escaped and fled to New Orleans, and then back to Mooringsport. He could not stay there, and so, traveling with his wife, he began going by the name Walter Boyd and went to live with relatives in DeKalb, Texas.

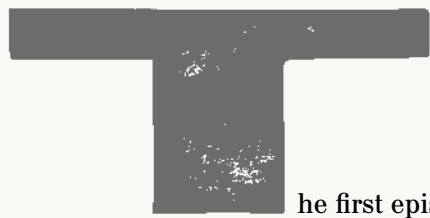
Trouble did not stay away long. In December 1917, Lead Belly found himself in a confrontation, a gun was fired, and Will Stafford lay dead. Huddie claimed it was self-defense but was sentenced to between 7 and 30 years in a Texas prison. He began at the Shaw State Prison and later was transferred to the notorious Sugarland Prison.

The inmates at Sugarland knew many songs, and the Library of Congress recorded a number of them on trips during the 1930s. The prison population included singers besides Huddie: James "Iron Head" Baker and Mose [later Moses] "Clear Rock" Platt. At Sugarland, you could hear songs such as "Go Down, Old Hannah," "Grey Goose," "Yellow Gal," "Black Betty," "Pick a Bale of Cotton," "Shorty George," "Young Maid Saved from the Gallows," and "Old Rattler." At the same time Augustus "Track Horse" Haggerty was recorded in the Huntsville, Texas, prison doing "Grey Goose," "Old Rattler," and "Go Down, Old Hannah," and a prisoner named Washington (aka "Lightnin'") at the Darrington State Farm in Texas was singing many of the same songs.

Prison songs were used to accompany work by the inmates. They were very improvisational; individual singers would modify a basic song to express what was on their mind. The prisoners would work all day in the heat, and singing would pass the time. These work songs have always been participatory, and some were used like sea chanteys of the past, to pace work (Jackson 1972, 29). In the 1960s, folklorist Bruce Jackson felt that these types of songs were dying and that was good, because it meant that the nature of work had changed; for example, hard labor like logging could be done by machine (ibid., xxi).

In the 1960s, when Jackson collected songs at Texas prisons, many of the songs Lead Belly had heard there were still part of daily prison life. Jackson's collection includes "Black Betty," "Go Down, Old Hannah," "Grey Goose," "John Henry," "Midnight Special," "Old Riley," "Pick a Bale of Cotton," "Rattler," "Roberta," "Shorty George," "Stewball," "Take This Hammer," and "Yellow Gal."

There has been debate over the years about how Lead Belly got his nickname and whether it is spelled as two words or one. He began to be referred to as Lead Belly around the time he was at Sugarland and given the fact that many of his fellow inmates had prison nicknames, it would seem that Lead Belly's followed that custom. His name was given as one word from the 1950s until the 1990s. His family has since requested that Lead Belly's name appear once again as two words.



he first episode in the “Lead Belly” myth was that he composed a song for the governor of Texas pleading for a pardon. As the story went, the governor was so impressed that he let Lead Belly go free. In truth, Governor Pat Neff toured Sugarland Prison, and some of the inmates were brought out to entertain him, including Lead Belly. He had a new song: “If I had you, Governor Neff, like you had me, I’d wake up tomorrow and set you free.” Neff returned later and requested that Lead Belly sing it for him. In January 1925, Neff signed a pardon. In actuality the seven-year minimum on his sentence had passed; the state maintains he was released for “good behavior.”

He would be free for just five years; in 1930 another fight landed him in Louisiana’s notorious Angola Prison for six to ten. Lead Belly friend and jazz scholar Fred Ramsey commented:

It’s quite doubtful as to whether he had really participated in anything very serious there—he was going home from work and some men came up to him and said that they wanted the whiskey that he had in his dinner pail, and he said he didn’t have any whiskey and—it sounds a little drunken, the whole thing to me—anyway they jumped him and somebody was hurt, I think somebody was killed. Anyway, so there he was, and that was a second conviction on a murder charge so by all rights he should have been a doomed man and we should never have heard from Lead Belly. (Ramsey, WRVR radio show [undated], Ramsey Collection, RR-449).

Angola was one of the worst prisons in the South; it was probably as close to slavery as any person could come in 1930 (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 12). Lead Belly became known around the prison for his singing and guitar playing. This was the situation when John Lomax wrote the prison warden L.A. Jones about visiting on behalf of the Library of Congress to record prison songs.

John Lomax and his young son Alan were traveling and recording African American folk songs in prisons in the South. They were hoping to find older African American vernacular music not “contaminated” by the popular blues and jazz of the present day, and they felt long-term prisoners who had been isolated from society might just be the answer. Fresh from recording some of Lead Belly’s fellow prisoners at Sugarland on July 5, 1933, they arrived at Angola on July 16. Lead Belly was suggested to them as a good singer to record, and they realized they had really made a “find.” In a radio program Fred Ramsey commented:

Anyway, Lomax found Lead Belly in Angola. Lead Belly was a waiter, he was at camp F. I’ve been there, it’s a brutal stretch of, I think, over 100,000 acres of bottom land and swamp and Mississippi River and old plantation. And that’s where John A, the old man, found Huddie, and there was no question about it, Huddie was the man. Huddie was a great singer, he was leading the gang in the work songs, and he was probably getting preferential treatment because of his ability to sing and because of his extraordinary ability to work. He could really out-run, outwork, outpick anyone on any gang in the South, and when you say that, you’re talking about a man of nearly superhuman ability because the work in that sun, which goes up to 110 degrees, is enough to put anyone like you or me out of business in a very short time. So there he was, this giant of a man, this man who was all muscle, who was all hard steel, out there, leading the gangs, and then even at night as Lomax pointed out cutting the capers for the guards all night long. (Ramsey, n.d.)

The Lomaxes made 12 recordings. Lead Belly saw an opportunity in this situation for himself and “wondered if a pardon song” might work again. Unlike Neff, Louisiana governor O.K. Allen did not tour prisons, so Lead Belly didn’t have access to him. When the Lomaxes returned the following July to record 15 more songs, he had a special one prepared, “Governor O.K. Allen.” He asked if John Lomax would deliver a recording of the song to Allen’s office. Lead Belly had previously written asking for a pardon as well. It is not known whether Allen listened to the song, but Lead Belly was officially granted a pardon on July 25, 1934. Again, the state maintained it was purely on the basis of “good time.”

He returned to Shreveport and began to lobby John Lomax for a job. Alan was suffering from an illness, and John needed a driver. In the fall, performing this role, Lead Belly took off with them on a recording trip. He would sometimes warm up the prisoners by singing his songs and showing them the kinds of things Lomax wanted. At Cummins Prison Farm in Arkansas, Lead Belly would hear a group of convicts sing “Rock Island Line” for the first time. They traveled to Shreveport, then Alabama. After a break, Lomax, with Lead Belly in tow, traveled north with stops in Atlanta and the Carolinas to record. John Lomax was anxious to present his new discovery to a meeting of the Modern Language Association in Philadelphia, which launched the flurry of sensationalism that accompanied Lead Belly’s arrival on the scene. Even the headline of the local black newspaper, the *Philadelphia Independent*, read: “Two Time Dixie Murderer Sings His Way to Freedom.” He then played Bryn Mawr College for a group of well-bred college girls. Finally it was the big move to New York. Lomax presented his new, “exotic” find to various gatherings, including a group of “Texas-Exes.” The New York *Herald Tribune* reported: “Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes Between Homicides” (Lead Belly would actually use the first five words on his stationery later). In January, he appeared on a nationwide *March of Time* radio show playing up his prison background. A newsreel film was also made of John Lomax and Lead Belly re-enacting the “discovery” in Angola, with Lead Belly dressed in prison garb. One person who witnessed the March 13, 1935, concert at Harvard University, Conrad Wright, remembered his professor saying he felt the need to get Lead Belly “liquored up” before the show (*Lead Belly Letter*, 1, no. 3, Spring 1991). During this time Lead Belly made a discovery too. Whereas he knew what to expect from white people at home in the South, he now found northern

whites who could be friendly but condescending.

John Lomax had moved him to a house in Wilton, Connecticut, owned by Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, another folk music scholar who was extremely supportive of Lead Belly. For a number of years, Lead Belly had been seeing a young Shreveport woman named Martha Promise, whom he had known since she was just a child. Having divorced his first wife, Lead Belly proposed marriage to Martha and they sent for her to come to New York. Martha's arrival in the train station to meet Lead Belly became a media circus. It was pitched as Lead Belly being a wild beast whose young bride was coming to tame him. They were married in Connecticut.

In 1935, the Lomaxes had lobbied for Lead Belly to sign a recording contract with the American Recording Corporation (ARC), with a \$250 advance. The Lomaxes' old friend Tex Ritter also lobbied on his behalf. The producer was a British gent named Art Satherley (he later signed Hank Williams, Sr.). ARC had put out a series of "race" records (recordings marketed to black audiences), which were usually blues because that's what they imagined their audience wanting. They were interested in recording Lead Belly's blues repertoire, not his folk material, despite Lomax's encouragement. John Hammond, who was present at the session, wrote in a November 3, 1959, letter to John Reynolds that he "remembered Satherley trying to tell Lead Belly how to play blues." He did manage to record "Shorty George," "Pick a Bale of Cotton," and his song for O.K. Allen. The first two songs released, "Honey I'm All Out and Down" (b/w) "Packin' Trunk Blues," did not sell. Even with subsequent recording sessions, only two more 78s were released, and they did not sell either. Of the 43 songs Lead Belly recorded for ARC, only six saw the light of day. The others remained in the vault until future ARC owner Columbia finally released some of them in 1970. Among the titles thought unworthy in 1935 was "Irene."

In breadth and number, the greatest collection of songs Lead Belly ever recorded were the hundreds he did for the Library of Congress. Starting with those in Angola, he then recorded many at the house in Wilton, Connecticut, away from the distractions of the city. In August 1940, Alan Lomax invited Lead Belly to visit Washington for a marathon recording session (55 tracks). These sessions would remain at the Library of Congress "for study only" until 1964, when some of them were released commercially.

Around this time, Lead Belly was tiring of the arrangement with John Lomax. The two Lomaxes were acting as his managers and took two thirds of the cut—even of the money Lead Belly made passing the hat at shows. While on tour, Huddie had started spending some time alone in the black communities where he felt more at home. Lomax believed Huddie couldn't manage his money; Lead Belly felt he earned it, and it was his to spend as he wished. He also bristled at being dressed up in prison clothes and generally playing up his prison history. The two men had a falling out on a tour through upstate New York, and Lead

Belly and Martha returned to Shreveport, and eventually moved to Dallas.

After living in Dallas, Lead Belly obtained another manager, a white man who owned the service station where Huddie worked, and he returned to New York for another try. As usual the *Herald Tribune* announced that Lead Belly "jingles into the city, ebony shufflin' anthology of swampland folksong inhales gin, exhales rhyme" (quoted in Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 86). Realizing Lead Belly wasn't going to make him rich, the new manager quit, and old friend Mary Elizabeth Barnicle took over. Although the elder Lomax was a conservative Texan and a product of his era of race relations, Barnicle was an early supporter of the Civil Rights Movement (ibid., 191). She continued to fulfill roles in Huddie's life.

One friend of Barnicle's was folklorist Lawrence Gellert, who had written the important book, *Negro Songs of Protest*, in 1936. He was interested in the protest songs Lead Belly might know and how words of protest were couched in the lyrics of African American song. During the same time period, Lead Belly was being introduced to singers in New York who came from a strong protest song background. He met Aunt Molly Jackson, an exiled Kentucky labor singer and songwriter (along with her singing/writing siblings, Jim Garland and Sarah Ogan), and Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Some of Lead Belly's songs—"Jim Crow" and "Bourgeois Blues"—were of a protest nature. Songs like "Grey Goose" could be interpreted as representing the spirit of the black man encountering racism in the South. But Fred Ramsey felt Lead Belly wasn't political and that he wrote protest songs because he was coached to do so (Goldsmith 1998, 98). Ramsey felt that some people in the group that surrounded Lead Belly were very political and regarded him as their tool, attempting to make him a spokesman for their political agenda. But, Ramsey said, Lead Belly was a musician, not a PR vehicle (*Lead Belly Letter* 5, no. 2, Winter 1995). Pete Seeger thought that when Lead Belly found out that white people were willing to help him, "he simply was willing to ignore our radical politics." He remembered inviting Lead Belly to sing for a radical who had been thrown in jail, to raise money. Lead Belly earned ten dollars "so he was able to earn something to help the man with his music" (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 210).

Adding insult to injury, John Lomax's new book for Macmillan, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly*, portrayed Lead Belly in a way he and his family hated. Lead Belly's niece, Tiny Robinson, wrote in a note:

Lead Belly was introduced to us many years ago, but in the worst way. I did not approve of it neither did Lead Belly, Martha, or anybody else. I feel it my duty ... to enlighten on the circumstances now existing. Lead Belly really passed away before any corrections were seen. He was very unhappy about something that was printed about him. Such as, if he had a concert and played, the next day you would see "Lead Belly who has a big prison record, and known as a great folk singer of chain gain songs was a big success last night at so and so a place." Although we knew it was true, sometime we wanted to limit some portion of our life. At the time he was in no position to do anything about it. I recognize the facts still exist. Such as that he was a bad temper man, and hated white folks, which is so wrong. He did not have an ugly temper as it has been put so now. He had as many white friends as well as Negro friends. Lead Belly lived a bad, good, hard, and easy life. I say that because he told me there were some days he wished he could live over again and there were some days he didn't want to remember ever again.

Although he was able to overcome all of them he was not ashamed. I have heard him talk about his life over and over and over. He always said, “I paid for my bad doings, and did my best to enjoy the good part of it.” He didn’t get away with anything. It was long days of work with no income, not one, not two days, but years. (John Reynolds Collection)

Lomax now owned a good deal of the music publishing rights for Lead Belly’s songs. Ethnomusicologist George Herzog, who transcribed the songs, pointed out that many of the songs had been printed before; others were of white parentage. Some songs were already copyrighted by others, but Lomax claimed them regardless (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 195).

In April 1939, Lead Belly recorded a session for the small New York firm, Musicraft Records. Primarily a collection of prison, work, and country dance tunes, the recording was called *Negro Sinful Songs*—but there was not a lot of sin in it.

He traveled down to Washington to record in August 1940 for the Library of Congress, resulting in a prolific recording session with Alan Lomax. A March 26, 1939, *Washington Post* article had described Lead Belly’s previous visit to the Library. “Miss Rogers, secretary of the Library’s Music Division still shudders at the vision of Lead Belly’s giant frame stalking about the building’s gloomy halls.” The article begins by mentioning that he killed one man and maimed several others before writing anything about his music.

Throughout 1941 and early 1942, Lead Belly had a weekly show on WNYC’s *The American School of the Air* called *Folk Songs of America* (see disc 4), which was produced by anthropologist Henrietta Yurchenco. He would start and end each show with his theme, “Irene,” apparently by then a key song in his repertoire and a crowd pleaser. Alan Lomax at this time was also writing radio scripts and wanted to feature Lead Belly, but some producers had difficulties with his Louisiana accent. On one show, *Back Where I Come From*, Huddie joined with Woody Guthrie, Josh White, and Burl Ives for a program on outlaw ballads. Lead Belly’s contribution was “Ella Speed” (a copy of the transcription disc of this show is in the Smithsonian archives).

Alan Lomax, who had gotten RCA to record Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads*, convinced the label to give Lead Belly a shot. The sessions in June 1940 recorded both folk material and blues. The first session paired Lead Belly with the Golden Gate Quartet, whose polish conflicted with Lead Belly’s rawness (the same type of pairing would occur with the Oleander Quartet a year later on the radio). The material was released by Victor Records, the Golden Gate material as “*The Midnight Special*” and *Other Southern Prison Songs* (P-50). One of the producers at RCA was upset about Lead Belly saying “god damn” during “Whoa, Back, Buck.” Again, the recording did not sell well.



Against the background of these disappointments Moses Asch enters the scene. Moses “Moe” Asch (1905–86) was the son of the prominent novelist, Sholem Asch. He was born in Poland but in the 1930s was living in New York City. Asch ran a shop called Radio Laboratories, which worked on electronics and installed public address systems around the city. He also did work for WEVD radio. He started putting out Jewish records on his Asch label in 1939 to serve a local need. In 1941, a lucky break brought him into the folk music field: a theater producer friend introduced him to an amazing musician.

So, you know, when you go to a store and you see RCA Victor in front, Columbia in the back, and Decca down the cellar, to come out with an unknown label called Asch Label, was very interesting. But they needed it because they had calls. So I had immediately an entrance into stores with records. And lucky for me, **Pins and Needles** was playing in New York at that time. And the man that controlled it was Si Rady. Lead Belly, under John Lomax’s guidance, did **The March of Time**. He got national exposure. There he was, made a name, put the prison garbs on the guy and sent him in the streets. Si Rady knew everybody around in the entertainment world, heard that Lead Belly was destitute, needed someone, and introduced Lead Belly to me. And ... immediately, we understood each other. We were friends. We knew exactly where he fitted into my scheme of what a record should be. And I recorded Lead Belly. But I didn’t record murder ballads. I didn’t record hard core songs. I recorded children[’s] play party games with him because he remembered children[’s] play party games from his youth. (Asch 1971)

The commercial labels that recorded Lead Belly didn’t know how to market his music. For better or worse, Lead Belly’s strongest audience turned out to be the music fans involved in the folk revival, mainly in New York City, who appreciated the breadth of his music and wanted to hear everything the Lomaxes promoted. Asch and his label were anchored in this world. Lead Belly’s initial Asch album sold just 566 copies in the first two years—but this was still better than Lead Belly’s other records had done.

Asch also “claimed he was the pen which the artists wrote with.” He wanted artists who had something to say and could express themselves. He released records no one else would because he believed in the value of their music. “I think in the later years he learned whose judgment to trust and that was very important, but to have recognized that Woody and Lead Belly and Sonny and Brownie and Pete early on were worth recording at great length, that to me is amazing” (Yurchenco 1992).

Over the decades of his career Asch would have some titles that sold enough to cover the cost of the rest. He liked to let the singers play what they wanted and did not often try to guide the sessions. Lee Hays, who was later a member of the Weavers, described Asch's recording technique (which held true for other artists as well) working with Woody Guthrie: "Moe Asch, who generally let him have his way, he thought the only way to record is to get a bunch of old boys in the studio and just let them start singing and put a microphone down on the table in the middle of them. As a result, Moe Asch did a lot of recordings that way" (Lee Hays Papers). Said Asch, "With Lead Belly, or with Woody, or anybody like that, you don't tell them anything because they knew exactly what they wanted. All you did with them was, you said it beforehand, ... what do you want to say, what kind of things are we going to work on?" (Asch 1971).

Although Asch would not hold Lead Belly back if he wanted to record for anyone else, Lead Belly recorded mainly for Asch for the rest of his life. Asch respected Lead Belly for who he was. Despite how he had been presented when he first got to the city, Lead Belly was a proud man; he dressed to the nines with perfectly polished shoes. When Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee lived at his apartment, he insisted they dress correctly when going out (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 228). Asch remembered:

This is one of the terrible things. For instance I was recently interviewed by the man that is going to do, may do the script on Lead Belly. And when he spoke to many people about Lead Belly ..., they spoke of Lead Belly more or less as a clown, ... as a sub-human almost, who did it as a kick or something. And to me Lead Belly was the most normal human being that ever existed. His clothing was always the best, the pressed, the best. His shoes were 60 dollar shoes in those days, where you may not have had as much money to come home with. He had to have a cane, ... he treated himself as a noble person, and when he recorded, knowing that this was for people who understand what he stood for, he recorded exactly that same way. He became a human being who expressed himself in a certain fashion. (Asch 1970)

Cisco Houston observed:

Most people who didn't know Lead Belly didn't see this. They really don't permit themselves the luxury of thinking something out or having enough curiosity about an individual. What motivates him, what his own personal feelings may be. They were more than willing to admit that here was a really great artist, a great folk song artist. He was like a proud African king when he picked up that guitar and there was no limit to his stature in that respect. After people used him for whatever they could, what

limits there were financially, as the years went by they sort of all dropped him and Lead Belly found himself in a position of, well, he adopted these attitudes of always thinking and hoping that he would make something really big. After all, he was a man. He had the same hopes and aspirations and dreams that any of us may have in this business, of making something a little bit bigger than we've ever made in our lives. (Lee Hays Papers)

During that time and for years to come Lead Belly's apartment at 414 East 10th Street was a hub of musical activity. His niece Tiny Robinson remembers "it being like a friendly hotel that would receive musical guests like Sonny and Brownie, Bill Broonzy, Burl Ives, Eartha Kitt, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Harry Belafonte" (*Lead Belly Letter* 3, no. 1, Winter 1993). As Ramsey described it:

I would say the people that he felt closest to were people like Sonny Terry and Josh White and Woody Guthrie and the young Pete Seeger. I mean, his whole life was music. The rest, there were two kinds of people; there were the people who listened and the people who made it, and that was it. And I think he felt closest to them. His apartment was a wonderful place because it had people coming in from the South all the time, relatives and Martha, two of her nieces stayed there. And Sonny Terry stayed there quite a while, and you could often find Woody Guthrie there and Josh, and it was a sort of, well, the world's best damn hootenanny that ever took place, I guess, would be the way you'd describe what went on in that apartment on East 10th Street, because everybody was there. All the people who subsequently acquired halos and legends and names and even made a little money were there, and they were playing, and there was no playing for anything but a few beers. The audience was allowed to contribute the beer, but it was a very select audience, I would say. (Ramsey, n.d.)

Lead Belly was still known primarily around New York. At his first two sessions with Asch in March and May 1941 he recorded his children's play party songs. Asch's first Lead Belly album (three 78 rpm records) was called *Play Parties in Song and Dance as Sung by Leadbelly*.

Well, Walter Winchell, everybody else, gave me full publicity on this thing. I got more publicity on that than anything I've ever done since or ever. And so Lead Belly became established as an Asch recording artist, and we had a life together for about 20 years in which he recorded for me over 500 different songs [Author's note: it was 8 years]. So that's how I became nationally known, Asch became a nationally accepted thing. (Asch 1971)

What columnist Walter Winchell had done was publish his outrage at how "anybody could put out a record for children sung by a murderer." Well, any publicity was helpful, especially for a small outfit like Asch Records.

In January 1942, Asch released a Lead Belly album from another session called *Work Songs of the U.S.A.* With Asch, royalties were always an interesting thing. Brownie McGhee remembered, "I would stop by and see Moe, ask him if I could have five or ten bucks. But I didn't know he was putting this money down" (quoted in Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 225). The going rate on a 78 rpm was two cents to the artist per record sold, so it would take a while to make back the advances. Asch's ledger books at the time show a number of \$20 checks written out to Lead Belly, as with



other Asch artists. When accounting was due, it turned out the artist still owed on the advances.

Critic Charles Edward Smith gave *Work Songs of the U.S.A.* a highly favorable review in *Jazz* magazine, calling the record “superbly done.” Alas, it only sold several hundred copies, and that combined with the sales of *Play Parties* earned Lead Belly \$11.58 (Goldsmith 1998, 109).

During World War II, shellac, which was used to make records, was rationed. It also was being used heavily in the war effort, and old 78s were being rounded up and recycled for shellac. A record company’s allotment was based on the quantity of records it had pressed before the war. Asch had just started in 1939, so his allotment was small. His solution was to go into business with Herbert Harris, the owner of Stinson Trading Company at Union Square. Harris and his partner Irving Prosky had run a concession at the 1939 World’s Fair distributing 78s from the Soviet Union. He had his own Stinson label and shellac; Asch had the studio and artists. If not for the role Harris played, Moe would have been unable to continue the business during 1944 and 1945. The label persisted as Asch/Stinson Records and when the war ended, the two partners separated. Each label ended up with copies of some of the masters and continued to put out material from Asch/Stinson. Other copies or unauthorized versions of these recordings have proliferated for years, causing much confusion and dozens of cheap releases of Lead Belly, Guthrie, and other artists.

Lead Belly had always hoped for a career in film, but that ambition was never fulfilled. Thinking he had an offer to play a role in a stage production, he left for Hollywood in May 1944; Mary Elizabeth Barnicle hosted a send-off party. When he got there, he discovered they had hired a younger man for the part. He had always been a fan of cowboy films, especially Gene Autry—he had even met Autry once—and wanted to become a singing cowboy star. While he was in California he encountered Tex Ritter, who helped arrange a recording session and releases for Capitol Records in October 1944. In February, Lead Belly began traveling home to New York through San Francisco, stopping to record a radio show for children and also making a stop in Salt Lake City.

In 1945, Asch Records went out of business. It was followed by Asch’s second label, Disc Recordings of America. Disc put out much of the same music as Asch, with a stronger emphasis on jazz. Lead Belly continued to record for Disc, and his 1943 sessions recorded for the Asch label were then released on 78 by Disc. Asch recorded five sides, all of which were medleys based on themes like work songs, spirituals, cowboy, and play party songs.

At the Disc sessions in 1946, other musicians were frequently in the studio. The first session included Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee and the jazz musicians Willie “The Lion” Smith and Pops Foster. The second included Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston. One session took place on April 18, for which Lead Belly was paid \$120. During the 1940s, most of his income came from live performance. For instance in 1947, his concerts would net him between \$35 and \$100. His travels took him to Montreal, Sarah Lawrence College, Cornell University, Town Hall and Carnegie Hall (*Lead Belly Letter* 1, no. 4, Fall 1991).



One of the technological innovations of the postwar period was the open-reel tape deck. Before that, recordings had been made first to wax cylinders, then to instantaneous discs that held no more than four or five minutes of sound per side. Any longer piece had to be broken up. This was the case with Lead Belly’s recording of “Death Letter Blues” for ARC in 1935, for instance. The shorter discs didn’t allow for all of the wonderful wordplay he used to precede his songs.

During the 1940s, Lead Belly met two individuals who would become important to his final years of life, Frederic Ramsey Jr. (1915–95) and Charles Edward Smith (1904–70). Both men were record collectors and jazz scholars and had recently jointly published a book, *Jazzmen* (1939). They were interested in researching early African American music from the South to search for the roots of jazz. Lead Belly’s repertoire was a perfect resource in this quest. Ramsey felt that Lead Belly’s repertoire had been under-recorded and wanted to get as much of it as he could on tape.

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 is that they were highly unfaithful to the original. The commercial recordings lacked a great deal in quality and gave no idea of the vitality of Lead Belly’s gargantuan voice” (Ramsey 1994).

The idea of recording Lead Belly away from a commercial studio and away from commercial requirements had been brewing in my head almost since the day I’d first heard him, because in performance, there was this wonderful quality which everyone who knew him always refers to. He’s a different man when you hear him, he’s a different man when you let him go, and that is when you just let him ramble from one song to the next. It’s kind of the way anybody [who] has a feeling about music is. When you’re playing music or records, you want your own continuity, and one thing will suggest another. It is that way for some people anyway. Well, Lead Belly was the same way as a record collector with all kinds of wonderful records would not want to hear them the same way from one night to the next. Well, he had all kinds of wonderful songs that happened to be just about all there was about American folk song rambling around in his head, and they would come to him in different ways. Well, the studios couldn’t capture that, they could do one side and then the red light and then that would be the end of a take, and then redo it for a mistake, but

this was a long-ruling thing and he didn't like it very much, and he didn't really expand under those circumstances. I just felt that something should be done about it and I had been waiting and waiting for someone to do it, and I finally purchased a tape machine myself, and got what was then as good equipment as could be had on my modest income and simply asked Lead Belly if he would come up and try out this idea that I had of recording him without any breaks or anything, and letting him go from one thing into the next. (Ramsey, n.d.)

Lead Belly was aging, and it was time to act. "I had just gotten new equipment, and it had always been a dream to record Lead Belly in a non-formal atmosphere, non-studio, and with friends around. There were friends at every one of those sessions who would come and just listen, have a beer" (Ramsey 1990).

Ramsey got to know Lead Belly socially after the war. "Lead Belly used to come up and visit, and people would come and visit, and we would really throw parties, and you couldn't stop that guy from performing. I mean, he did it, you could have paid him nothing, he'd come there and have a good time and he would play" (ibid.). One night Huddie and Martha were invited to the Ramseys for dinner, and Ramsey showed Lead Belly the new machine. Ramsey had hung drapes in his apartment to simulate the sound dampening in a recording studio (Goldsmith 1998, 251). Lead Belly wanted to try it out, although he had not brought his guitar, not planning on playing. Ramsey had only a cheap microphone. With Martha's occasional help he recorded 34 songs that night. Better yet, the tape deck allowed the recording of the introductions and the stories behind the songs. There would be three evening sessions (with the guitar at the other two, along with much better RCA mics borrowed from Moe Asch), and more planned. Lead Belly left for a European tour before additional sessions could be arranged. "Anyway, I think we had maybe three or four gatherings, and I could be wrong about this, it certainly wasn't all done in one evening, but he used to come and once he... he was a guy who got really comfortable, once he got started, he wouldn't stop" (Ramsey 1990).

During the sessions Lead Belly reached back into his past and let the songs come out. "Lead Belly 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" (Ramsey 1994).

In 1949, Lead Belly performed a concert at University of Texas in Austin for 500 fans. Audience member John Bustin wrote, "Lead Belly's plaintive melodies did more to inform last night's audience on the lives of Southern Negroes than a history book could have done in 500 pages" (*Living Blues*, July-August 1988). Fortunately, someone recorded the show on a magnetic wire recording. (This recording technology consisted of a spool of wire with magnetic audio.) In an

LP produced by blues scholar Lawrence Cohn, Playboy Records released the concert in 1973.

In the late 1940s, Lead Belly began to feel something was physically wrong. In 1948, at a show in Paris during his trip to Europe, he found he could not continue playing his guitar. He was taken to a Parisian doctor who diagnosed Lead Belly with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, better known as Lou Gehrig's Disease). ALS is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects the brain and spine. There is no cure. He died in New York at Bellevue Hospital a little over a year later on December 5, 1949.

Over the next few years, a series of memorial LPs honoring Lead Belly were released by both the new Folkways label and Stinson Records, and many of Lead Belly's numerous friends took part in memorial concerts. A large memorial concert was organized at Town Hall on January 28, 1950, by friends who wished to celebrate his life. A group of musicians that Lead Belly had known for years included Pete Seeger and Lee Hays. Both had been members of the Almanac Singers, the first great political folk group in New York. Then they had been involved in People's Artists and People's Songs, an organization that arranged bookings for the left-wing folk singers in New York. Along with Fred Hellerman and Ronnie Gilbert, Seeger and Hays formed their most successful group, the Weavers. The Weavers celebrated Lead Belly's music on stage, recording "Rock Island Line," "Silvy," and "Goodnight Irene" (among others).

Pete Seeger remembered that "Irene" was the surprise hit of 1950. Sadly, Lead Belly's dream of recognition, which had eluded him during his life, came true within a year after his death. Newspapers wrote articles about the man who wrote the song everybody was talking about. Had he lived to take advantage of it, he would have had offers from major record labels, including the giant, Decca, which had released the Weavers' hit.

In an interview by the Weavers' Lee Hays, Lead Belly's friend Cisco Houston revealed that he felt the same way:

I always thought it a shame, you know, that Lead Belly just seemed to have missed all the way around through no fault of his own. I mean after the man was dead, the songs that he had been singing all of his life turned out to be a big thing, and I thought, you know . . . he could have really made the big college circuit in a big way. (Lee Hays Papers)

Woody Guthrie commented that: "The best and loudest singer that I ever run into his name was Huddie Ledbetter and we all called him Lead Belly his arms was like big stove pipes, and his face was powerful and he picked the twelve-string guitar" (quoted in Seeger 1972, 27). Pete Seeger added: "Woody and I first met Huddie when he was in his 50s. He was grey-haired, not tall—perhaps five foot ten—but compactly built, and he moved with the soft grace of an athlete. He had a powerful ringing voice, and his muscular hands moved like a dancer over the strings of his huge

12-string guitar” (Seeger 1972, 28).

A new innovation in the music business also made it possible to release the *Last Session* recordings. In 1948, Columbia Records introduced the “long play record,” which plays at 33 1/3 rpm as opposed to 78. This technology was especially important for classical records (when compact discs were introduced in the 1980s, it was the classical releases that led the way too), but it also would potentially allow for the release of Ramsey’s sessions. He shopped them around to major record companies, but no one wanted to release the whole thing with dialog. Ramsey felt it imperative that it be done that way.

For when “Irene” became a hit, there was a flurry of interest among all the companies who had neglected Lead Belly. Some of them wanted to bring out part or some of the material that Lead Belly had recorded on tape, but none of the companies wanted to preserve the sequence which was so vital a part of the feeling of these recordings. The only person who would go along with this idea was Mr. Moe Asch of Folkways Records (Ramsey 1994).

In order to release the entire sessions (some of the conversation and a few songs were cut), Asch issued two 2-LP sets (Folkways 251 and 252) in 1952. He did not put track breaks between the songs, which allowed him to fit more music on a side. In the coming years of the folk song revival these LPs would stand out as iconic records. At the beginning of the 1950s, only a handful of small record companies produced folk music recordings. Stinson (founded in 1944), Folkways (1948) and Elektra (1950), Riverside (1953), Vanguard (1950) and Prestige (1949) mainly released other types of music but got into the folk market later in the 1950s. Other than the few titles recorded for Musicraft, Stinson and Folkways were the two that had Lead Belly’s material, all coming from Moe Asch’s sessions in the 1940s.

Folkways Records was incorporated on May 1, 1948, by Marian Distler, Moses Asch’s business partner. Because of bankruptcy litigation after the failure of Disc, Asch was not allowed to start another record company, and so he was listed as an employee. As time progressed, he became the acknowledged head of the label, but until her death in 1964 Distler was a major partner in running Folkways.

Asch’s goal in establishing Folkways was to create an encyclopedia of “sounds” of the 20th century. These sounds could include folk music, world ethnic recordings, blues, jazz, children’s songs, but also sound effects and spoken word. Of the musicians he recorded on his earlier labels in the 1940s, three iconic folk singers—Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger—stood out, and he began to immediately reissue their recordings on his new label. In 1950, he put out the first of a 4-LP series as a memorial to Lead Belly called the *Leadbelly’s Legacy* series. The first two volumes, *Take This Hammer* and *Rock Island Line*, reissued some of the great tracks he had recorded of Lead

Belly in the 1940s. Since some of his recordings of Lead Belly had gone to Stinson in the breakup of their partnership, he supplemented those recordings with ones of Lead Belly with Anne Graham and the Oleander Quartet taken from the some of the WNYC acetate discs in his collection.

Volume 3, *Early Recordings* (1951), has an interesting history. Of the 53 tracks the American Recording Corporation had recorded in 1935, only six had ever been released commercially; the rest languished in the vaults. Fred Ramsey acquired copies of those sessions from an unnamed collector and put together a bootleg set. Asch had felt that if a publisher let a record go out of print (or in this case never released it at all), the public had a right to hear it, so he issued it. Columbia (the later owner of ARC) finally issued some of the sessions on LP in 1970. In 1953, *Easy Rider* (Volume 4) was added, taken from mid-’40s acetates still in Asch’s possession. Stinson Records continued to be active in the folk field, and they issued the other key Lead Belly recordings drawn from the 1940s series in the multi-volume *The Lead Belly Memorial Albums* 10-inch LPs (like the Folkways series). Those recordings found their way into many a folk record collection.

Much has been written about the Stinson Records that is incorrect. In the 1950s, Stinson had moved from its storefront offices at Union Square in New York to Southern California. Herbert Harris and his family had opened a second retail business with a store and distributorship on Pico Boulevard in downtown Los Angeles. Harris’ daughter Trudy and her husband Jack Kall lived in an apartment above the store. After establishing the Los Angeles location and living there for a couple of years, the Kalls moved the label operation to the San Fernando Valley town of Granada Hills. The address that would grace all Stinson LPs from then on was P.O. Box 3415, Granada Hills, CA. Trudy and Jack Kall helped run the label. Herbert’s son Bob, never an owner, had worked with his father while in New York but left the family business due to a falling out with his father. He moved to San Francisco and later passed away. Upon Herbert’s death in 1956, the company passed to his widow, Sonia Harris, who owned Stinson until her death in 1988. During the years of her ownership the label continued to be run by Jack and Trudy Kall. The Kalls were in charge during the heyday of the folk movement in the 1950s and 1960s, releasing lovely gatefold LPs of their material, some pressed on vibrant red vinyl. After Sonia’s death, ownership passed to the Kalls, who continued to run Stinson, working with their children. Some of the Stinson LPs were reissued in the late 1980s on compact disc and the full catalog was available on cassette tapes. The label is still owned by the Kall Family; Herbert’s granddaughter Karen Williams is now the sole owner.

# S

ince the 1930s, there had been a revival of folk music going on among the urban intelligentsia. Popular singers such as Burl Ives, Carl Sandburg, Andrew Summers, and groups like the South Africans Marais and Miranda released a few records of folk material. Labels like Asch, Keynote, or Musicraft released other records, but they sold in small numbers. The success of the Weavers and their early hits started changing that. At the same time the increasingly active American right and the House Un-American Activities Committee looked on “folksingers” as generally suspicious. Lead Belly came to the attention of the FBI, but by the time an investigation was launched, he had already passed away. The Weavers, on the other hand, were among the blacklisted artists who could not record or appear on film.

Stinson, Elektra, and Folkways continued to release LPs of folk artists (blacklisted or not). More importantly, many of the American folk songs performed and/or written by these artists began to appear in school music books and summer camp songbooks. Many of the kids who went to the kinds of progressive schools or camps that used these books became the banjo- and guitar-slinging college singing groups that would emerge in the late 1950s singing “This Land Is Your Land” or “Midnight Special.” Pete Seeger toured college campuses promoting the music of his old friend Lead Belly. The 1958 release of “Tom Dooley” made folk music the popular music across the United States.

During the folk song revival, a flood of records and songbooks were released to cater to the demand of the folk fans. Moe Asch and Irwin Silber’s publishing venture, Oak Publications, released the *Leadbelly Songbook* (edited by Asch and Alan Lomax) in 1962. Silber himself was the editor of the important folk song magazine *Sing Out!* (which started in 1950 as an outgrowth of the People’s Songs movement of the ’40s). *Sing Out!* was the place to go for new songs and the guitar chords to learn them.

During the folk revival a few of the musicians took up Lead Belly’s instrument, the 12-string guitar. Players like Bob Gibson, Mark Spoelstra, and Fred Gerlach (and of course Pete Seeger) included Lead Belly songs on their albums. Gerlach stressed, “A discussion of Lead Belly’s music is not complete until people understand the power, raw and total, which Lead Belly unleashed in his 12-string play. Lead Belly’s aura was considerable, it encompasses his song and falls upon one’s ears and being” (*Lead Belly Letter* 3, no. 1, Winter 1993). The Minneapolis folk-blues outfit Koerner, Ray and Glover always included Lead Belly songs on their albums. The group the Highwaymen scored a top-ten hit with “Cotton Fields.” Seeger published a songbook called *The 12-String Guitar by Lead Belly* with Oak Publications and an instructional record to accompany it on Folkways.

Some small labels reissued the Musicraft material on LPs. RCA and Capitol rediscovered the Lead Belly material in their vaults and reissued it to cash in on the “folk boom.” Capitol actually had tried to reissue it in the mid-1950s, but according to producer Dave Dexter, it didn’t sell at all, “so after all these disappointments we have made no attempt to market the Lead Belly masters” (letter to John Reynolds, John Reynolds Collection). RCA had “The Bluebird Series” on which they reissued some of their historical material, such as Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* and Lead Belly’s *Midnight*

*Special*. Records that had not done well for them when first released were now thought worthy. Oddly, Columbia waited until 1970, after the revival was over, to issue their material on LP.

Another phenomenon was also taking place musically. In the United States, some of the young musicians who had been fans of “trad jazz” and were now interested in folk music discovered jug band music. Small groups included guitars, jugs, washboard, and washtub bass, and there was a “do-it-yourself” feel to the music. Some of these musicians went on to become stars in the folk music scene. Simultaneously, in the U.K. skiffle music became a fad. One great source of songs for these groups was Lead Belly. Lonnie Donegan had the first huge hit in the U.K. in a skiffle style—“Rock Island Line.” Donegan would also record “Pick a Bale of Cotton,” “Bring Me a Little Water, Silvy,” “Almost Day,” “Ham and Eggs,” “Stewball,” and “Midnight Special.” It’s not hard to see who his favorite musician was at the time. The Charles McDevitt Skiffle Group with young singer Nancy Whiskey would record “Cotton Fields” and the Chris Barber Skiffle Group, “Linin’ Track.” Many of the big rock stars in the 1960s British music scene were in skiffle groups in their early years, cutting their musical teeth on the music of Lead Belly. In 1956, when John Lennon was 16, Lonnie Donegan made a major impression on him; Donegan’s folk style, which was easy to learn, was often an interpretation of the music of Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie (Coleman 1985, 135). Lennon’s first band, the skiffle group the Quarrymen, was later joined by Paul McCartney. Van Morrison and members of the Rolling Stones and Hollies also started out playing skiffle.

Lee Hays remembers a trip to England in the late ’50s:

Yes, that’s an interesting thing about England.... There was a jazz club where people get together and sing, but there seemed to be a greater, you know, blending in and understanding ... on the part of those people ... who liked jazz. Of the folk music, well, as you say, Woody and Lead Belly, God, their names are just sacred over there among so many people. I’ve met one young English boy over there who was ... a metal-worker, big guy, big husky guy and he just loved Lead Belly, everything he did. He used to play the 12 string guitar, very much like Lead Belly and when he sang, he sounded like Lead Belly and he also almost looked like Lead Belly and he’d pick his guitar to sing and this was the only kind of music that he really liked and then he would say to me, (Cockney accent) “You know, I love everything Lead did and everything he stood for and everything he sang. I’m a Lead Belly fanatic, I admit it.”

(Lee Hays Papers)

One funny piece of Moses Asch lore relates to the skiffle scene. Apparently two gentlemen claiming to represent

Lonnie Donegan happened by the Folkways office and addressed Moe. “So, who is this Lead Belly guy who is trying to steal Lonnie’s music, eh?” Moe told them to come back in a couple of hours; he’d have all of Lead Belly’s records, and he’d break them over their heads!

In 1960, Asch released a tape copy of a radio transcription disc he had from a February 15, 1945, San Francisco Lead Belly radio broadcast sponsored by Standard Oil. The “Standard School Broadcast” was performed in front of a room full of schoolchildren. Lead Belly went through his repertoire that appealed to the children, and the program captured the delight he shared singing for them. Asch released most of the show as *Negro Folk Songs for Children* (Folkways 7533). It became one of the best sellers in his catalog.

An important step in the dissemination of Lead Belly’s music was Jac Holzman’s Elektra Records finally issuing some of the *Library of Congress Sessions* of Lead Belly in 1964, in a box set with three LPs and a booklet. In the following decades Lead Belly’s albums would remain popular. His songs made their way into the rock world. Creedence Clearwater Revival performed “Cotton Fields” and “Midnight Special.” The Beach Boys covered “Cotton Fields,” “Ram Jam,” and “Black Betty,” and Nirvana recorded “Where Did You Sleep Last Night” (“Black Girl”).

In 1987, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., acquired Folkways Records from the estate of Moses Asch. In the spirit of Moses Asch, who was the only person willing to release all of the *Last Sessions*, the Smithsonian agreed to keep all 2,168 albums on the label in print regardless of their sales history. No commercial entity was interested in doing that. The Smithsonian regarded Folkways as a “collection of 20th-century sounds.” Ralph Rinzler, then Smithsonian Assistant Secretary for Public Service, had been involved in folk music when he was younger, as a musician (a member of the Greenbriar Boys), a talent scout (discoverer of Doc Watson), artist manager, and folk festival director. He lobbied hard for the Smithsonian to acquire Folkways. Some of the more conservative curators at the Institution were against it and wondered why the Smithsonian would want a record label and collection of folk music. Rinzler eventually raised the funds needed to acquire the collection. For that, he had a lot of help. Rinzler had known Bob Dylan in Greenwich Village when Dylan came to town in 1961. Bob’s first gigs at Gerde’s Folk City were as a warm-up act for the Greenbriar Boys, and he used a Martin guitar borrowed from Ralph. By happenstance, the two met up again at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. Dylan agreed to be part of a benefit record to raise funds for the acquisition. Columbia Records producer Don DeVito (1939–2011) became involved and rounded up other musicians, including Bruce Springsteen, Emmylou Harris, U2, Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp, and Sweet Honey In The Rock. Filmmaker Jim Brown and Ginger Productions were brought in to make a documentary film they called *Folkways: A Vision Shared: A Tribute to Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly*. The artists selected songs they covered from the work of two of Folkways’ most iconic artists, Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie, and donated the proceeds. Robbie Robertson (of The Band) narrated the film. The associated soundtrack LP on Columbia Records won a Grammy Award.

The collection, including all LPs (and a few cassettes but no CDs), arrived in Washington in fall of 1987, and Folkways was then part of the Smithsonian. In the summer of 1988, the Smithsonian Folkways label was launched to reissue older titles and create new ones in the spirit of the earlier label. The first project chosen was a companion CD to the Columbia tribute LP, with Woody and Lead Belly performing their own songs, with a few added extras. For the label’s first CD issue, *Folkways: The Original Vision*, Grateful Dead

drummer Mickey Hart was consulted to help with the audio restoration of the original acetate discs.

Smithsonian Folkways, working early on with Rounder Records as a distributor, selected key titles to reissue on CD, and one of the initial albums chosen was *Lead Belly Sings Folk Songs* (SFW 40010). Other projects followed. In 1994, Matt Walters and Anthony Seeger produced the 4-CD reissue of the *Last Sessions*. For his Lead Belly biography and discography, Kip Lornell had been doing extensive research in the Smithsonian Folklife Archives and with Fred Ramsey (and after Ramsey’s death, his daughter Alaida Porter). Lornell helped orchestrate the donation of Ramsey’s tape collection to the archive, including the *Last Session* tapes and some WNYC radio material. As the *Last Sessions* reissue project evolved, the original tapes were copied, as many of them were in very bad shape. The 4-CD set was assembled from a combination of these tapes and the 1952 analog master tapes, including some additional material.

During the 1990s all of the original acetate masters in the Folkways collection were copied to digital tape. The acetates Lead Belly recorded in 1941–47 were made of acetate on glass, acetate on metal, or shellac, and were very fragile. Once they were all transferred and digitally cleaned up, I sorted through all the existing takes and copies of songs, creating the 3-CD Smithsonian Folkways *Lead Belly Legacy* series (SFW 40044, 40045, 40105). The children’s material was also released as a CD, *Lead Belly Sings for Children* (SFW 40547).

Other labels also reissued Lead Belly on CD. Columbia, as part of their *Roots ’n’ Blues* series, put out two CDs from the 1935 ARC sessions, Capitol reissued their Lead Belly LP, and RCA released a CD, *Midnight Special*. Between 1991 and 1994, Rounder Records undertook the ambitious project of the restoration of the Library of Congress recordings for a 6-CD series. Rounder also discovered some unreleased radio material of Lead Belly from the BBC as well as from a Salt Lake City radio show, *Bridging Lead Belly* (1999). Never before has so much of Lead Belly’s music been available to the public. Some of his songs, like “Cotton Fields,” “Midnight Special,” and “Irene,” are considered American folk songs and destined to be remembered hundreds of years from now.

This collection is an overview of Lead Belly’s all too brief 15-year recording career. Additionally, it’s a survey of American popular songs spanning two hundred years, each one interpreted by Lead Belly in his unique genius and style. If you like what you hear on this anthology, investigate more of his music. He is always full of surprises. **JP**

**DISC  
ONE**

Note: The quotes at the beginning of various track annotations are transcriptions of spoken introductions by Lead Belly. These introductions were recorded along with his performances of the songs. The original recordings are part of the Moses and Frances Asch Collection in the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives in the Smithsonian Institution.

# 1

## IRENE (GOODNIGHT IRENE)

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, harmonica  
(also known as "Irene, Goodnight"; from Folkways 2004, 1950/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; recorded possibly August 1943)

This is undoubtedly Lead Belly's most famous song. According to Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, the song could be of Tin Pan Alley or minstrel show origins. Lead Belly apparently learned it from his uncle, Terrell, while a child and was performing it as early as 1909. When Lomax asked Lead Belly's other uncle, Bob, if he made up the song, he answered, "No sir, it came from my brother, I don't know who made it up. Huddie got it from us" (quoted in Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 52–53). Wolfe and Lornell's research cites a sheet music folio on a minstrel piece published in 1888 that was called "Irene, Goodnight" and was performed by a traveling group called Haverly's Colored Minstrels. Further, they found that the composer was African American Gussie Davis (1863–99), who is also credited with "Maple on the Hill" and "Footprints in the Snow." Davis' words are different than Lead Belly's, but the imagery and themes are the same (*ibid.*, 54–55).

"Irene" became Lead Belly's theme song, sung at the beginning and end of many of his radio programs. He died a year before the Weavers' version became a nationwide hit in 1950; the fame he had so long worked for had eluded him.

# 2

## THE BOURGEOIS BLUES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 2034, 1953/ Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; recorded May 1944)

This is among Lead Belly's best-known songs. Apparently Lead Belly arrived in Washington, D.C., in 1937, with Mary Elizabeth Barnicle and a white man, to record a session with the Library of Congress. They tried to stay at Alan Lomax's apartment, but Lead Belly was kicked out by the landlord because of his race. They found they couldn't even find him a place to eat or stay in the black areas because he was with white people. In exasperation, someone in the group commented that Washington was a "bourgeois" town. Lead Belly loved the word and crafted the song based on this experience. He first recorded the song in December 1938 in New York. The original recording is now part of the Library of Congress collection.

# 3

## FANNIN STREET (MISTER TOM HUGHES TOWN)

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also known as "Cry to Me"; from Folkways 2942, 1953/ Smithsonian Folkways 40068, 1994; recorded 1949 by Frederic Ramsey)

"But anyhow when I got to Shreveport I never did forget how to go down on Fannin Street. 'Cause there's a little hill you drop off. I knew exactly where that big place was on Texas Avenue, guess it was a church, I don't know what it was. I never did pay it much mind. When I get ready to go down the little hill I wasn't studying about no church, but I knowed how to go down there. So I went down on Fannin Street, that's where I'd go every time I'd leave home. So I learned how to play a guitar by a piano. I'd sit by the bass side with my guitar—a six-string guitar at that time."

As a youth, Huddie traveled into Shreveport with his father, and he always felt that when he was older he wanted to come back to Fannin Street. It certainly was forbidden fruit, a long street with bordellos and free-flowing alcohol. More importantly, some of the best musicians in the area—guitar players and barrelhouse piano players—gravitated there. Eventually, Huddie went to live in Shreveport, honing his musical skills.

In an historical footnote, Tom Hughes was the sheriff of Caddo Parish, elected in 1915 and still in office in the 1920s when bootleg liquor and gangsters were at their height in Shreveport. He was the man who set up and organized the ambush that killed the notorious outlaws Bonnie and Clyde.

# 4

## THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from archive reel #3613/ Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; recording date unknown)

Strongly associated with Huddie Ledbetter, “The Midnight Special” is an old American folk song. It was considered a railroad song. Folk song scholar Howard Odum first printed some of the lyrics in an article in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1911. It was recorded by Otto Gray’s Oklahoma Cowboy Band as “Midnight Special” in 1929 and as a blues by Sam Collins for Gennett Records in 1927 called “Midnight Special Blues.” It became a popular prison song, recorded by the Library of Congress in a number of prisons in the 1930s. If the lights of the midnight train were to shine through the bars, the inmates felt, the warden would set you free.

Lead Belly’s arrangement of the song became the standard. Both Johnny Rivers and Creedence Clearwater Revival later recorded it as a rock and roll song using Huddie’s arrangement.

# 5

## JOHN HENRY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Brownie McGhee, guitar;  
Sonny Terry, harmonica

(from Folkways 31030, 1971/ Smithsonian 40105, 1998; recorded October 1948)

“Now ‘John Henry’ is made up by the hardworking man, folks. Don’t forget it. Anytime you hear anybody singing ‘John Henry’ it’s a dance tune if they play it right. John Henry come from Newport News. Mr. Lomax and myself we drove all around the spot John Henry was born at. That’s the reason why they say that C&O road, that runs from Newport News to Cincinnati, Ohio. John Henry’s the man drove steel, he drove spikes around all the steel was laid from Newport News to Cincinnati. Now that’s true.... Now this is ‘John Henry’ and it’s a dance tune, and we dance to it down home and I’m gonna play it for you.”

“John Henry,” about the legendary steel-driver John Henry and the digging of the Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia, is probably the most famous and frequently performed folk song in the United States.

# 6

## BLACK GIRL (WHERE DID YOU SLEEP LAST NIGHT)

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(also known as “In the Pines”; from Folkways 2014, 1950/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; recorded possibly Summer 1947)

“In the Pines” is an old American folk song found in both black and white tradition. Cecil Sharp collected it in the Appalachians in 1917. Over time the verses about the train and a decapitation were added, making it a railroad song. Country string bands recorded it in the 1920s, starting with Dock Walsh in 1926 for Columbia. Bill Monroe’s 1941 recording made it a staple in bluegrass music. Dozens of recorded versions include one by the Seattle rock group Nirvana during their *MTV Unplugged* show, which introduced the song to a new audience.

# 7

## PICK A BALE OF COTTON

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; The Oleander Quartet (George Boyd, Cecil Murray, Howard Scott, George Hall), vocals

(from Folkways 2004, 1950/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; from *Folk Songs of America*, WNYC; recorded Fall 1941)

“Now this is when I was around Dallas, Texas, pickin’ cotton. I was pickin’ a thousand pounds of cotton a day. And the way you get a thousand pounds of cotton a day, you’ve got to jump around to get it. You can’t fool around and pick a thousand pounds of cotton a day.”

A song Lead Belly very likely learned in prison, this tune about picking cotton was recorded a number of times by the Lomaxes for the Library of Congress at prisons in both Sugarland and Huntsville, Texas. Two of the other convicts at Sugarland with Lead Belly were James Baker (“Iron Head”) and Moses Platt (“Clear Rock”), and they also recorded for the Lomaxes. Bruce Jackson still found the song “well known” in Texas prisons when he went there in the 1960s (Jackson 1972, 99).

The Oleander Quartet often performed with Lead Belly on the radio show *Folk Songs of America* on WNYC.



## TAKE THIS HAMMER

# 8

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also known as “This Old Hammer Killed John Henry”; from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; matrix SC-101; Smithsonian acetate 1431; recorded January 1942)

“Take this hammer. This is the way the hammers fall when they sing.”

A “hammer” is a name for an ax. The exclamation after each line of the song is timed to help coordinate the work. A logging song, it is found all over the South.

# 9

## COTTON FIELDS

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also known as “The Cotton Song”; from Folkways 2014, 1950/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; recorded Summer 1947)

“When I was a little baby my mother used to tell me about how she used to take me to the field and rock me in the cradle. She was pickin’ cotton for 25 cents a 100 pounds. When I got to be a boy she was telling me all about [it] and I got to pickin’ cotton in Louisiana, and I was pickin’ 250 pounds of cotton a day and I was thinkin’ about what my mother told me.”

“Cotton Fields” became a popular song during the folk song revival of the 1950s and was standard fare at sing-alongs. It was recorded in 1962 by the folk group the Highwaymen and became a top 20 hit. The Beach Boys recorded it six years later and Creedence Clearwater Revival the year after.

Lead Belly composed the song about growing up in northwest Louisiana near the Texas and Arkansas borders.

# 10

## OLD RILEY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also known as “In Dem Long Hot Summer Days,” “Hey Rattler,” “Old Rattler”; from Folkways 2014; recorded Summer 1947)

“Old Riley” is a prison song from Lead Belly’s days at Sugarland Prison that tells of the miraculous escape of one prisoner who outran the dogs and swam to freedom. It was performed for and recorded by the Library of Congress with other prisoners in Texas. Lead Belly combines “Riley” with another prison song, “In Dem Long Hot Summer Days.”

## ROCK ISLAND LINE

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 2014, 1956/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; recorded January 1942)

# 11

“The Rock Island line. These boys cuttin’ with poleaxes. One man’s cutting right-handed. He’s standing on the opposite side of the other man. The other man cut left-handed. He’s standing the other side. And these boys gonna sing about the Rock Island line, which is a mighty good road to ride. And in that road the man gonna talk to the depot agent when he’s comin’ out of the cut with that Rock Island line train freight coming back from Mullaine (sic) this a way. That man blows his whistle down there different than people blow whistles here. He’s gonna talk to that depot agent and he’s gonna tell him something. When that switch falls over the line, means for that freight train to go into the hole. Man’s gonna talk to him.”

In October 1934, Lead Belly was traveling with John Lomax and his son Alan, acting as their driver. During a trip to record convicts at Cummins State Farm in Gould, Arkansas, Lead Belly first heard “Rock Island Line,” a song later closely associated with him. Kelly Pace and a group of prisoners performed it as a work song; that recording is in the Library of Congress. After Lead Belly learned the song, he added the narrative about depot agents and the train, turning it back into a railroad song, as it originally dealt with the railroad line running across Arkansas.

It became a hit in 1955 for British musician Lonnie Donegan, kicking off the skiffle craze. Donegan had recorded it with the Chris Barber Band in 1954 after hearing the Library of Congress recording borrowed from the American Embassy in London. Comedian Stan Freberg also recorded a takeoff on the song in an effort to make fun of the whole folk singing phenomenon.

# 12

## THE GALLIS POLE

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(also known as “Maid Freed from the Gallows,” “Hangman,” “Gallows Pole,” “Gallows Tree”; from Folkways 31030, 1971/ Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; recorded October 1948)

From Lead Belly to Led Zeppelin, the song “Gallows Pole” has had many lives. Descending from the old British ballad “Maid Freed from the Gallows,” the song took its most frequent current form from Lead Belly. Fred Gerlach’s later folk version shows Lead Belly’s influence, and it became a well-known song in the rock canon when Led Zeppelin recorded it in 1970. In an interview, Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page cited Fred Gerlach’s version as the source for their version “Hangman”: “I first heard it [‘Gallows Pole’] on an old Folkways LP by Fred Gerlach, a 12-string player who was, I believe, the first white to play the instrument. I used his version as a basis and completely changed the arrangement” ([www.wirz.de/music/gerlafrm.htm](http://www.wirz.de/music/gerlafrm.htm)).

# 13

## HA-HA THIS A WAY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; possibly matrix SC26; Smithsonian acetate 270; recorded January 9, 1942)

“This is a children’s play song. Now the children when they play back in my home, they put one in the ring and they all go round the ring and they sing. Now this is gonna be Ha-Ha This a Way and Ha-Ha That a Way, and when the boy’s in the ring or a girl they say “Ha-Ha This a Way” he has to jump That a Way. We... he says “Ha-Ha That a Way” he has to jump that a way. And the others going round the ring they gonna sing.”

This is perhaps Lead Belly’s best-known children’s song. During recess time in school the children did ring games and play parties. Lead Belly learned the song as a child in Louisiana, and it is one of his favorites from the time (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 12).

# 14

## SUKEY JUMP

Lead Belly, vocal and accordion

(from Folkways 2014, 1950/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; recorded possibly Summer 1947)

Lead Belly plays this country dance tune he learned early on in Louisiana on his small accordion.

# 15

## BOLL WEEVIL

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Folkways 2492, 1953/ Smithsonian Folkways 40068, 1994; recorded October 1948 by Frederic Ramsey)

The boll weevil is a small insect pest that migrated north from Central America to the American South around 1892. It took a particular liking to the cotton crop and did devastating damage. Needless to say, with such a profound effect on farmers and farmworkers, the plague became an obvious subject for songs. There are a number of songs about the little bug: “Dixie Boll Weevil” (John Carson, 1924); “The Boll Weevil” (Jaybird Coleman, 1927); “Boll Weevil” (Lindsay and Connor, 1928); “Boll Weevil Rag” (Charles Griffin, 1934); “Boll Weevil Been Here” (Willie Williams, 1936); “Boll Weevil Blues” (Oscar Woods, 1940). Blues legend Charlie Patton recorded his “Mississippi Boweavil Blues” in 1929.

Many songs have been written about the weevil, but over the years a standard version has emerged where there is a dialog between the farmer and the weevil. It is now considered an American folk song. Carl Sandburg remembered first hearing John Lomax singing that version around 1920 (Sandburg 1927, 8). Lead Belly performs a version similar to the one Lomax sang to Sandburg, with some additional verses. It was recorded many times during the folk song revival, including in a popular version by Burl Ives in 1956. Brook Benton’s pop single “Boll Weevil” in 1961 went to #2 on the charts.

# 16

## SCOTTSBORO BOYS

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Library of Congress disc 4473A3; recorded August 23, 1940, in Washington, D.C.)

This song concerns a celebrated case in American civil rights history. In 1931, nine black youths were arrested for allegedly raping two young white women while all of them were hoboing on a train in Alabama. The news story went national, with various organizations raising funds and rallying people to the defense of the boys. They were originally all convicted and sentenced to death; the furor rose, and a subsequent trial saw four of them freed but the others sentenced to prison. Others around Lead Belly were impressed with the song. In August 1937, Lead Belly premiered it publicly at a Federal Worker's Project event. Two of the boys' mothers were invited to the event to hear the new song (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 208).

# 17

## GOVERNOR O.K. ALLEN

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(also known as "Angola Blues" from LOC-124-B2; recorded July 1, 1934, at Angola Prison)

This is Lead Belly's second "pardon" song. Governor Allen never visited Angola prison, so John Lomax hand-carried the disc to the governor's office; on the back side Lead Belly recorded a version of "Irene." It is unknown if Allen listened to it. Officially Lead Belly was released on August 1, 1934, by the governor after having his sentence commuted for "double good time."

# 18

## GOVERNOR PAT NEFF

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(also known as "Sweet Mary," "Oh Mary," "Going Back Home to Mary," "If I Had You Governor"; from Folkways 31010, 1971 / Smithsonian Folkways 40105, 1998; recorded from WNYC, October 1948)

Pat Neff, a Waco, Texas, businessman and politician, was the governor of Texas from 1920 through 1924. As a self-described reformer, Neff sometimes visited the notorious Texas prisons and encountered Huddie Ledbetter, who was incarcerated in Sugarland (near Houston). Lead Belly was chosen by the warden to perform for Gov. Neff, who was quite taken by Huddie's talent. Huddie sang with great fervor. On a subsequent visit, Neff asked for Lead Belly. It was during this second visit that Neff told Huddie he would grant him a pardon. His predecessor, "Big Jim" Ferguson, was legendary for granting pardons by the hundreds, and part of Neff's reform platform was stopping this practice. And this is one campaign promise he largely adhered to; during his tenure Neff pardoned only five prisoners, including Huddie Ledbetter on Neff's final day in office! The melody here is similar to the one he used for the song "Blind Lemon" (Place 1998).

# 19

## THERE'S A MAN GOING AROUND TAKING NAMES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Folkways 2488, 1962 / Smithsonian Folkways 40010, 1989; recording date unknown)

"Now this is an old spiritual, one of the first spiritual songs ever was sung. Before the people could sing it they'd moan, and now they'd sing it and that spiritual is, 'There's a man going round taking names,' and that man he's goin' round takin' names ever since there was a world."

Carl Sandburg published this old African American spiritual in his 1927 *American Songbag*; he had heard it sung by an elderly black woman, Rebecca, at a home in Columbia, South Carolina. It has also been collected under the name "Angel of Death." Fellow New York folk singer Josh White recorded it in 1933 on his *Singing Christian* album. Other versions that exist are a secular spin on the song recorded by the Carolina Tar Heels, a white string band, in 1928 and a variant put to the tune of a blues shuffle by Peter, Paul and Mary called "King of Names."

# 20

## ON A MONDAY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, harmonica  
(also known as "Almost Done," "I Got Stripes"; from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; Smithsonian acetate 133; matrix 258; shellac disc; recorded August 1943)

"Now this is a cross-cut saw. Boys are sawin'. Yow. Yow. The saw is walkin', the boys are talkin'. Yow. Yow. Yow. The saw sing, it swing, here's what they sing."

This is apparently a prison song from the South. The Lomaxes recorded a prisoner in Alabama singing a version called "Lord It's Almost Done" in 1934 (Lomax 1941, 386–88). Lawrence Gellert recorded convicts singing it in the Southeast in the 1930s. The white string band group Darby and Tarlton recorded it as "New Birmingham Jail" in 1930, starting it as "On a Monday I was arrested." It appeared again as "I Got Stripes" by Johnny Cash in the 1960s.

# 21

## YOU CAN'T LOSE ME, CHOLLY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; Smithsonian acetate 1432; matrix MA-80; shellac disc; recorded July 1941)

"You can't lose-a me Cholly' is about a boy that's going places. An' they gonna see things; and the little children is all gonna' follow. And here's what they sing."

This is a dance tune Lead Belly learned in his youth. It borrows some of the verses from an old folk song found all over the South, "Down at Widow Johnson's."

# 22

## KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF HER

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 2488, 1962 / Smithsonian Folkways 40010, 1989; recorded ca. May 1944)

Big Bill Broonzy (1893–1958) was one of the top-selling blues artists from the 1920s to the 1940s. This song comes from Broonzy's 1935 recording for Bluebird Records. In typical fashion, Lead Belly has kept Broonzy's melody and chorus but replaced the verses. Broonzy would later change his style in the 1950s to cater to the folk music audiences, gaining many of the same fans who bought Lead Belly's records.

# 23

## WE SHALL BE FREE

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Woody Guthrie, vocal; Sonny Terry, harmonica  
(from Folkways 2488, 1962 / Smithsonian Folkways 40010, 1989; recorded ca. May 1944)

"We Shall Be Free" is a "talking blues." The talking blues has roots in African American folk song, but it also emerged as a white comedic country music form. South Carolinian Chris Bouchillion first recorded "The Original Talking Blues" in 1926; the producer of the session had disliked his singing and suggested he talk his way through the lyrics. A number of other talking blues were based on Bouchillion's. Woody Guthrie was a huge fan of talking blues, having learned it from the recordings of the country singer Robert Lunn. Later, others would follow Guthrie in using it as a perfect vehicle for political commentary. Bob Dylan borrowed the idea for his "I Shall Be Free" and "I Shall Be Free No. 10."

Some of the lyrics here seem improvised, but others come from Bouchillion's song. This recording was made at one of the free-form sessions in Moe Asch's studio, with Lead Belly taking the lead on singing the verses. It also owes much to the old song "Mona" ("We Shall Be Free").

**DISC  
TWO**

# 1

## ALABAMA BOUND

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Woody Guthrie, vocal and mandolin; Cisco Houston, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 31019, 1968/ Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; Disc 6045; Smithsonian acetate 132; matrix D669; recorded ca. October 1946)

The Lomaxes refer to this song as a traditional levee-camp song (Lomax 1940). It was found all over the South. One well-known recording was by New Orleans pianist Jelly Roll Morton (1885–1941), but the song is far older. “Ragtime” Henry Thomas, a blues singer who was working the area around Texas the same time as Lead Belly, recorded a very similar version, entitled “Don’t You Leave Me Here” (Place 1997).

# 2

## ALMOST DAY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also known as “Chicken Crowing for Midnight,” “Christmas Song,” “Christmas Is a Coming,” from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; Smithsonian acetate 259; aluminum-based acetate disc; recording date unknown)

“This is a children’s play song on a Christmas night when they’re looking for the Santa Claus to come. When they’re looking for the Santa Claus to come, well, you know, children stay up all day and all night, and at midnight they get out in the yard and play ‘Moonshine Tonight’ and the chickens be crowing for midnight, and the children gonna’ make a ring and play, and here’s what they sing while they play. Waiting for the Santa Claus to come.”

# 3

## FIDDLER’S DRAM

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Woody Guthrie, vocal and mandolin; Cisco Houston, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 2488, 1962/ Smithsonian Folkways 40010, 1989; Smithsonian acetate 385; matrix D674; recorded ca. October 1946)

This is an old fiddle and dance tune whose title refers to giving the fiddler a dram glass of whiskey. Usually it is associated with the tune “Dance All Night with a Bottle in My Hand.” Lead Belly’s version was called “Gwine Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In” when he recorded it for the Library of Congress in Connecticut, in 1935. This version is from the lively session with Cisco Houston and Woody Guthrie in 1946.

# 4

## GREEN CORN

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; matrix D674; Smithsonian acetate 276; recorded possibly in June 1946)

“Green Corn” is a country dance tune Lead Belly learned from some Louisiana neighbors, Bud Coleman and Jim Fagin. It is an old dance song referring to newly made moonshine carried in a “jiffy-john” (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 17) and is similar to the fiddle tune “Black Eyed Susie.”

# 5

## SALLY WALKER

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also known as “Little Sally Walker”; from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; Smithsonian acetate 1430; matrix SC 27; shellac disc; recorded January 9, 1942)

“Now this is another little children’s play song. They gonna play and they gonna put one inside the ring and they all gonna be going around and they all gonna sing. And this one in the ring is sitting down in a chair. They gonna give this one in the chair a hankie. And when they holler ‘Rise Sally rise, wipe your weeping eyes,’ she’s gonna rise out of the chair. And when they say, ‘Fly to the east, fly to the west, fly to the one you love the best,’ she gonna fly and catch one that’s going around the ring and catch him by the hand, gonna put him in the ring, and he’s gonna sit down in the chair what Sally got out of. Anyone who gets out of the chair last name’s gotta be Walker. Now here’s what they gonna sing while they all go round the ring.”

“Sally Walker” is a popular children’s play song where they dance in a ring. The child in the center gets to be “Sally Walker” until all take their turn. Its roots are in the British Isles as a “traditional marriage play” called “Sally Water” ([www.alabamafolklife.org/content/history-behind-songs](http://www.alabamafolklife.org/content/history-behind-songs)), but it exists all over the United States and Caribbean.

# 6

## BRING ME A LITTLE WATER, SILVY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Anne Graham, vocal  
(also known as “Sylvie”; from Folkways 2004, 1950/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; from *Folk Songs of America*, WNYC: March 20, 1941)

“July and August is hot and this man’s wife—he call her Silvy—and the only way he gets his cool water, he’s got to call Silvy to get his water down there ‘cause he’s burning up.”

Lead Belly’s aunt was named Sylvie, and one of his two singing uncles, Bob, would holler at her to bring water while he was plowing. Lead Belly based his song on this memory (Lomax 1960).

# 7

## JULIE ANN JOHNSON

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; Asch 561-1; Smithsonian acetate 387; matrix SC275; recorded October 1943)

“Now this is ‘Julie Ann Johnson.’ Twenty men on one log and they cuttin’ four foot apart—they using double-handled axes and the man in the lead, he’s going to sing ‘Julie Ann Johnson’ and the boys are going to answer. But every time the ax comes down, all 20 of them axes falling at the same time. Not one ax falls and you hold yours back—drop them axes at the log at one time—we talk about Julie Ann Johnson, which is a good-lookin’ girl.”

Lead Belly refers to this as an “ax-cutting song,” but it seems to have been used for other work as well. The timed grunts in the song simulate a man working. Bruce Jackson collected a variant in North Carolina in 1965 called “Julie” and refers to it as a logging song (Jackson 1972, 231). The worker is pining for his “lady love”; any name could be substituted for “Julie.”

# 8

## LININ’ TRACK

Lead Belly, vocal  
(also known as “Line ‘Em””; from Folkways 2488, 1962; recorded May 1944)

This is one of the better known track-lining songs, which were sung in unison by the workmen, or “gandy dancers,” to regulate the tempo of lining the rails on a railroad track; the track would be moved in time with the response line. Moses Asch recorded this song and released it along with “Bring Me a Little Water, Silvy,” “Julie Ann Johnson,” and “Whoa, Back, Buck” as a medley of work songs. The song was later recorded by a number a folk groups including the Minneapolis group Koerner, Ray and Glover (Place 1997).

# 9

## WHOA, BACK, BUCK

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 31030, 1971/ Smithsonian Folkways 40105, 1998;  
recorded October 1948)

“There was a man that was tryin’ to get home. He was talkin’ to his oxens. Every once in a while he’d pop his whip—ti-yow!”

Lead Belly refers to this work song as an “ox-driving song.” The Lomaxes also recorded a group of convicts singing it at the prison in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, in 1934.

When the American Recording Company (ARC) recorded it in 1935, they objected to the use of the word “damn” and would not release it. Lead Belly later substituted the phrase “oh, Cunningham” when performing for certain audiences. He possibly picked up that idea in Texas in prison, as J.P. Cunningham was legendary transfer agent there, and the name appears in various songs.

# 10

## SHORTY GEORGE

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 2014, 1950/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; *Folk Songs of America*, WNYC: February 27, 1941; Smithsonian acetate 381)

This is a prison song about “Shorty George,” a short train that ran out of the farm in Houston taking visiting families of prisoners at Sugarland Prison back home again (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 82). It was one of the songs Lead Belly recorded commercially for ARC. Other prisoners in Texas recorded it as well. Bruce Jackson quotes inmate Johnny Jackson as saying, “When I first came to the penitentiary, first day I was on the farm, I was working and all of a sudden everybody hollered, saying ‘Shorty George just passed.’ ‘Who is Shorty George?’ They knew when Shorty George passed it was 3:35” (Jackson 1972, 119).

# 11

## HAM AND EGGS

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also known as “Make It on the Side of the Road”; from *Folk Songs of America*, WNYC: March 20, 1940; Smithsonian acetate 382)

“That’s the way the hammer falls when they sing about ham and eggs.”

This is another prison work song performed by Lead Belly. Josh White also recorded it as “I’ve Got to Roll.”

# 12

## MOANIN’

Lead Belly, vocal  
(from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; acetate 270; recorded January 11, 1941)

# 13

## OUT ON THE WESTERN PLAINS

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Disc 3002; matrix SC-270; recorded October 1943)

This is one of Lead Belly’s cowboy songs. “Out on the Western Plains” has been one of his popular songs since he composed it. In fall 1943, Moses Asch had Lead Belly record a group of medleys based on various themes for a 78 rpm set, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly* (Disc 660). This song comes from that project.



## NOTED RIDER

# 14

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(also known as "Noted Rider Blues," "No Good Rider"; matrix SC-271; Smithsonian acetate 217; aluminum-based acetate disc; recorded October 1943)

"This is a blues...and the title of this number she's a 'Noted Rider.' That means the drunk woman been drinkin' all night long and ain't had no sleep. She been disturbin' peace all 'round in the neighborhood."

This is another in his group of "rider" blues, along with "Easy Rider" and "See See Rider."

# 15

## MEETING AT THE BUILDING

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(also known as "All Over This World"; from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; matrix SC-273; Smithsonian acetate 684; recorded September 1, 1943)

"This is meetin' at the building. What it means by 'at the building' it will soon be over, when the Baptist people get together in the church down South they just sing, they don't swing, but they rock church."

Asch used this song in one of his medleys on the *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly* album. One side consisted of spirituals and also included "Meeting at the Building" with "Talking, Preaching" and "We Shall Walk Through the Valley."

This religious piece has been printed in books going back to the late 19th century. The famous Fisk Jubilee Quartet was the first to record it in 1912 on wax cylinder as "All Over This World."

# 16

## GOOD, GOOD, GOOD (TALKING, PREACHING)/ WE SHALL WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Folkways 2488, 1962/ Smithsonian Folkways 40010, 1989; matrix SC-273; recorded October 1943)

# 17

## AIN'T YOU GLAD (THE BLOOD DONE SIGNED MY NAME)

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Folkways 2488, 1962/ Smithsonian Folkways 40010, 1989/ Asch 343-2; matrix SC-262; recorded ca. August 1943)

Huddie's parents were members of the Shiloh Baptist Church in Mooringsport. Huddie attended church with them, straying from the flock as a teenager but going back for brief periods as an adult. This is one of the songs he learned in church.

# 18

## I'M SO GLAD, I DONE GOT OVER

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(previously unreleased; from Smithsonian acetate 387; recorded possibly October 1943)

This is an old African American gospel piece possibly recorded at the same time as the previous three sacred songs. Various gospel choirs have recorded it.

# 19

## THE HINDENBURG DISASTER

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from the Library of Congress Collection discs 998-B1 and 2; recorded June 22, 1937)

This topical song was recorded over two discs because of its length. As frequently happened in the years before television, a major disaster would produce a quick response from the songwriting community, and the songs often proved quite popular. The flaming crash of the giant airship *Hindenburg* at Lakehurst, New Jersey, on May 6, 1937, was captured in one of the most famous short newsreels in history. Huddie tried his hand at telling the story of the disaster and recorded his new composition for the Library of Congress less than two months later.

# 20

## ELLA SPEED

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Library of Congress 125B2; recorded July 1, 1934, at Angola Prison)

“Ella Speed” is one of the best-known African American ballads in Texas. Folk song scholar John Cowley’s research has turned up information on the crime that inspired the song. Ella Speed was a mixed-race prostitute working out of a house on Customhouse Street in New Orleans. She was involved with Louis “Bull” Martin, a local bartender and street tough. He was awaiting trial for severely beating an older black man. On the morning of September 3, 1894, Martin shot Ella Speed to death after a night of heavy drinking. Martin was captured, tried, and sentenced to 20 years in prison, although he claimed the gun had gone off by accident (Cowley and Garst 2001, 69).

The Lomaxes recorded Lead Belly singing this version at Angola and found a number of other versions sung by prisoners in Texas, including Clear Rock at Sugarland, Wallace Chains and Sylvester Jones at Ramsey, and Tricky Sam at Huntsville Prison. Lead Belly later recorded the song again for Capitol Records, and that became a well-known version of the song.

# 21

## HAUL AWAY JOE

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Folkways 7027, 1951/ Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; Smithsonian acetate 170; recording date unknown)

“Before you sail on a boat, the **Big Chief Adams**, you got to load it first and then you sail and when you load the boat, you gonna sail and you gonna sing.”

The *Big Chief Adams* was one of the steamboats operating on the Mississippi River. Instead of singing the traditional Atlantic sea chantey, Lead Belly’s version of “Haul Away Joe” is about the “roustabouts” working on the river on these ships.

## OLD MAN

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(also known as “Old Man, Will Your Dog Catch a Rabbit”; from Folkways 7027, 1951/ Smithsonian Folkways 40105, 1998; matrix SC-106; recorded January 1942)

# 22

“Here come that **Big Bella Lee** sailing down the Mississippi. You got to load it before you ride and sail. And the boys gonna load it this a way.”

“Old Man” is another Mississippi riverboat song. On the river, the roustabouts (who were mainly black) loaded and unloaded the boats. Archie Green thought that Lead Belly combined a reference he heard about the Mississippi riverboat, the *Bella Lee*, with an old fiddle tune, “Granny, Will Your Dog Bite” or “That’s My Rabbit My Dog Caught It” (Green 1997).

# 23

## SWEET JENNY LEE

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Folkways 2492, 1953/ Smithsonian Folkways 40068, 1994; recorded October 1948 by Frederic Ramsey)

This song came from Cab Calloway, one of the stars of the Harlem stage. Calloway and his Orchestra were famous for songs like “Minnie the Moocher.” Lead Belly went to see him perform when he first got to New York. “Sweet Jenny Lee” which has Tin Pan Alley origins, was composed by Walter Donaldson (1893–1947) and published in 1930. Other composing credits of Donaldson’s are “My Blue Heaven” and “Makin’ Whoopee.”

# 24

## JEAN HARLOW

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Folkways 2488, 1962/ Smithsonian Folkways 40010; recorded ca. May 1944)

According to Moses Asch, Lead Belly told him he composed this song in prison at night, when his thoughts turned to women. Since guitars were forbidden, he played it on the concertina (Asch 1962, 87). This version, however, is with the 12-string. Jean Harlow (1911–37) was one of the first movie sex symbols in the 1920s and ’30s and acted alongside such stars as Clark Gable. She made 21 films between 1928 and her death at age 26 from kidney failure. This song about Harlow’s death is one of many topical songs Lead Belly composed or performed about important figures (such as the Scottsboro Boys) or historical events (the *Titanic*) (Place 1998).

# 25

## LAURA

Lead Belly, vocal and accordion

(from Folkways 2004, 1950/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; recorded 1947)

This is a “sukey jump” tune he learned early on to play on his “windjammer” (button accordion).

# 26

## QUEEN MARY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Library of Congress recording 997-B; recorded June 22, 1937 in Washington, D.C.)

This is another one of Lead Belly’s topical ballads. The RMS *Queen Mary* was a famous ocean liner that took her maiden voyage in May 1936. Lead Belly seems to have reworked his 1912 ballad about the sinking of the *Titanic* into this song about the newer ship. In “Queen Mary,” boxer Jack Johnson, who is mentioned in Lead Belly’s song “The Titanic,” makes another appearance trying to get on the *Queen Mary*.

Lead Belly also reworked the melody into a World War II-era song called “Move On, Soldier Boy, Move On.” Only a snippet of the war song survives in the Smithsonian Archives.

**DISC  
THREE**

# 1

## GOOD MORNING BLUES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, harmonica  
(from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; Smithsonian acetate 1617; matrix SC-263; recorded August 1943)

“Now I tell ya about the blues. All Negroes like blues. Why? Because they was born with the blues. And now everybody have the blues. Sometimes, they don’t know what it is. But when you lay down at night, turn from one side of the bed all night to the other and you can’t sleep, what’s the matter? Blues has got you. Or when you get up in the mornin’, sit on the side of the bed, may have a mother or father, sister or brother, boyfriend or girlfriend, husband or wife around. You don’t want no talk out of ’em. They ain’t done you nothin’, you ain’t done them nothin’. What’s the matter, blues got you. Well, you get up and shove your feet down under the table and look down in your place, may have chicken and rice, take my advice, you walk away and shake your head, you say, ‘Lord have mercy. I can’t eat. I can’t sleep.’ What’s the matter? Why, the blues got you. They want to talk to you. You got to tell ’em something.”

Lead Belly especially liked to perform this song, and he sang it on his radio shows frequently. This performance is a duet with Sonny Terry (Saunders Terrell, 1911–86). Asch often used Terry to great advantage to accompany the singers he recorded in his studio. Terry also recorded solo for Asch and with his longtime partner, Brownie McGhee.

# 2

## SAIL ON, LITTLE GIRL

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also known as “You Can’t Mistreat Me”; from Folkways 31046, 1976/ Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; recording date unknown)

This blues is an example of Lead Belly drawing lyrics from various blues songs. The basis of the song is Tommy McClennan’s 1939 recording, “You Can’t Mistreat Me.” The first two verses are from that song. It also draws from Bumble Bee Slims’ “Sail On, Little Girl.” Many elements of that song later appeared in Muddy Waters’ 1951 “Honey Bee.” The final verse about “laying down across my bed” comes from Blind Boy Fuller’s “Pistol Slapper Blues.” Lead Belly’s friends Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee had previously played with Fuller and knew him from back home. It’s possible Lead Belly learned that verse from them. Lead Belly recorded the song both for RCA (Bluebird) and the Library of Congress (4470A-1) in 1940.

# 3

## EASY RIDER

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar; Pops Foster, bass  
(from Folkways 2034, 1953/ Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; recorded June 1946)

This is a modification of the song “See See Rider.” An “easy rider” referred to the shape of a woman or guitar (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 46); it is also a reference to a lover. Lead Belly first performed this with Blind Lemon, from whom he may have learned it. Texas Alexander recorded this song as well.

# 4

## POOR HOWARD

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from *A Lead Belly Memorial, Vol. 4*; Stinson 51, 1962)

According to the Lomaxes, Huddie learned this song “at the age of 14” (*Sing Out!* 10 [Oct. 1960], 11).

# 5

## DUNCAN AND BRADY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also known as “Brady”; from Folkways 2014, 1950/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; Smithsonian acetate 258; recording date unknown)

“Duncan and Brady,” a popular folk song in both black and white traditions, was based on a historical incident. James Brady, a St. Louis policeman, was shot by a bartender, Harry Duncan, in a bar fight, on October 6, 1890. Duncan was later executed for his crime.

Better known as “Brady,” the song was found by the Library of Congress fieldworkers at various places. The Lomaxes recorded convicts singing it at Parchman Farm in Mississippi in 1933 and Blind Jessie Harris in Alabama in 1937. Lead Belly’s version was picked up during the folk revival by singers like Dave Van Ronk, Tom Rush, and Paul Clayton and is now considered a standard.

# 6

## HOW LONG, HOW LONG

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, harmonica  
(also known as “How Long Blues”; from Asch 343-1; from Smithsonian Folkways 40105, 1998; Smithsonian acetate 1615; matrix SC-260; recorded August 1943)

“How Long, How Long” is one of the best-selling blues of the 1920s. Leroy Carr (1905–35) and Scrapper Blackwell (1903–62) recorded it in 1928 for Vocalion Records.

Kip Lornell’s research on Lead Belly turned up an interesting document in the Asch Collection. An accounting document dated April 25, 1944, shows that Huddie was paid \$250 for sales of 10,000 copies of his “How Long” 78. That is an almost unimaginable number of records sold for any title Asch ever produced (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 226).

# 7

## T.B. BLUES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 2034, 1953/ Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; recorded May 1944)

Tuberculosis (T.B.) killed large numbers of people in the early 20th century. Since it is communicable by coughing, sufferers were often isolated in hospital wards. Growing up when Lead Belly did, he would have undoubtedly known individuals who came down with the disease. “T.B. Blues” was first recorded by blues singer Victoria Spivey.

# 8

## JIM CROW BLUES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 2034, 1953/ Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; Smithsonian acetate 384; recording date unknown)

“When I come in a train, I stop in Las Vegas. This white fellow was with me. He sat down and I thought it was all right. Man taps me on the shoulder and says, ‘I’m sorry, we don’t serve colored.’ And I says ‘Oh, no you don’t?’ and he says, ‘No.’ And that white fellow got up too. We ain’t got to eat in Las Vegas. So many places like that. I just feel sorry for them people. They ain’t woke up yet.”

Jim Crow laws were state and local laws passed after the Civil War to mandate segregation in public facilities. After the U.S. Supreme Court justified the legality of the “separate but equal” principle, the laws became institutionalized (and, as Lead Belly tells it, not only in the South). Many African Americans returned from fighting fascism in Europe during World War II upset that none of this had changed. Lead Belly recounted his own Jim Crow experiences from when he had been in Hollywood, California, in 1945.

# 9

## PIGMEAT

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Brownie McGhee, guitar; unknown bass player (also known as "Pigmeat Papa"; from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; Smithsonian acetate 291; matrix D308; recorded possibly Summer 1947)

The word *pigmeat*, which usually referred to an attractive young (sometimes under-aged) female, appeared in many "hokum" (double-entendre blues) songs. There are a number of blues songs with the word in the title: "Pig Meat Blues," "Pig Meat Is All I Crave," "Pig Meat on the Line." Lead Belly's friend Lemon Jefferson used it in three of his songs. Listening to Lead Belly's lyrics, it seems the word refers to the narrator in the song.

# 10

## JOHN HARDY

Lead Belly, vocal and accordion  
(from Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; Smithsonian acetate 2939; recording date unknown)

"This is John Hardy. John Hardy was a negro and he was a desperate man and he carried two six-shooters. Now I'm gonna sing this song and hear the accordion. This is the first instrument I started to play when I was two years old. My papa bought it for me, you gonna hear it now."

"John Hardy" is a ballad of African American origin that was popular around the turn of the century and has become one of the most frequently performed American folk songs in both black and white traditions. It is based on the story of an actual murder case from West Virginia: Hardy was tried for murder, found guilty, and hanged in Welch, McDowell County, on Friday, January 19, 1894 (Logsdson, notes to SFW40101, 1997). Lead Belly worked this song up on his first instrument, the button accordion.

# 11

## OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, harmonica  
(from Folkways 2488, 1962/ Smithsonian Folkways 40010, 1989; Smithsonian acetate 546; matrix 97; recorded April 25, 1944)

The "outskirts of town" theme occurs in other blues songs. It was originally in Casey Bill Weldon's 1936 recording, "We're Gonna Move (To the Outskirts of Town)"; then Blind Boy Fuller recorded a blues, "I'm Gonna Move to the Edge of Town," for ARC in 1937. Bandleader Louis Jordan's version, "I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town," was one of the top-selling blues songs of 1942. Comparing Huddie's and Jordan's lyrics shows them to be almost identical, so this is apparently an example of Lead Belly and Sonny playing a current blues hit in the Asch studio.

# 12

## 4, 5, AND 9

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar; Pops Foster, bass; Willie "The Lion" Smith, piano  
(also known as "Hollywood and Vine"; from Smithsonian Folkways 40001, 1989; Smithsonian acetate 293; matrix D384; recorded ca. June 1946)

This is an outtake from the session Asch held in his studio in June 1946, bringing together Lead Belly, Sonny and Brownie, and two jazz musicians, Willie "The Lion" Smith and Pops Foster. It has the feel of a loose jam. Asch released four of the songs from this session as two 78s ("Diggin' My Potatoes" b/w "National Defense Blues," and "Easy Rider" paired with "Pigmeat"; see tracks 15, 20, 3, and 9 of this disc).

This new Lead Belly song, "4, 5, and 9," reflects an experience he had in California; he wrote Moe Asch about it from the road. Lead Belly had been in Los Angeles, hoping to get into the movie business. Apparently, he had attended a Hollywood party and been introduced to a Hollywood agent. A mutual friend encouraged the agent to talk to Lead Belly. The agent said "sure," gave Lead Belly his card, and said "call me at tomorrow at 45 to 9." Lead Belly dutifully called in at 8:15 the next morning to the laughter of the receptionist. Apparently the line was a standard Hollywood brush-off.

# 13

## IN THE EVENING (WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN)

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also called "When the Sun Goes Down"; from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; Smithsonian acetate 638; recording date unknown)

"Down in my home late in the evening you look out into the woods, trees, all the leaves of the trees, sun's going down, you began to worry. You may have a girlfriend, she done left you. Then you sit down and begin to sing, and the blues has got ya."

This piano blues by Leroy Carr was one of Carr's best-known blues. He recorded it February 25, 1935, for Bluebird Records; it has become a blues standard recorded and performed by many. Pete Seeger sang it at many of his shows, as did other artists during the folk song revival. Seeger, a friend of Lead Belly, likely learned it from him.

# 14

## RED CROSS STORE BLUES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from *A Leadbelly Memorial*; Stinson 48, 1952)

The Red Cross was founded just prior to World War I; the need for the organization grew exponentially during the war, and the organization has grown even larger since. Kenneth Goldstein points out that in the song Huddie reflects the attitude of "a large part of the Negro population concerning World War I and how it was no benefit to them" (notes to Stinson 48). The Red Cross store was being used as a recruiting center.

Walter Roland also recorded a blues called "Red Cross Store" in 1933, but it is a different song.

# 15

## DIGGIN' MY POTATOES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Brownie McGhee, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, harmonica; Pops Foster, bass; Willie "The Lion" Smith, piano  
(from Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; Smithsonian acetate 294; matrix D385; 10" shellac disc; recorded ca. June 1946)

"Man, I played that for them folk and they say, 'Looky here, Ledbetter, play that again,' and I say 'No man, no more tonight.' 'Looky here, we give you a hundred dollars if you play it just one more time.'"

"Diggin' My Potatoes" is a blues originally recorded by Washboard Sam (Robert Brown, 1910–66) and his cousin, Big Bill Broonzy, on May 15, 1939, for Bluebird. It's another in a line of "there's another mule kicking in my style" kind of blues, a jealous man thinking his partner may be getting some outside attention. At the time of this studio session and jam, the record was a popular song only a few years old, and the song was perfect for a "loose" blues jam.

# 16

## BLIND LEMON

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 2014, 1950/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; Smithsonian acetate 317; recorded possibly Summer 1947)

"Now this is about Blind Lemon. Blind Lemon and I run together for about 18 years around Dallas, Texas, and he was a blind man and I used to lead him around. When him and I would go ... we'd sit down and we'd talk to one another."

Blind Lemon Jefferson (1897–1929) was a well-known blues singer from Texas. He recorded frequently during the 1920s, and his recordings were some of the best-selling blues in the Paramount catalog. Lead Belly knew Jefferson and began traveling with him in 1912. For a few years, they played music together and Lead Belly acted as his guide. Five years Lemon's elder, Lead Belly learned songs from Lemon and vice versa. He learned to play the bottleneck guitar from Lemon and used it on occasion.

Jefferson died tragically in Chicago in 1929. This is Lead Belly's tribute to Lemon.



# 17

## WHEN A MAN'S A LONG WAY FROM HOME

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 7533, 1960/ Smithsonian Folkways 45047, 1999; recorded February 15, 1945 in San Francisco)

While on the West Coast in 1945, Lead Belly recorded a program for children as part of the *Standard [Oil] School Broadcast*. He included this blues. He repurposed some of his guitar parts from “Fannin Street” for this performance.

# ALBERTA 18

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from *A Leadbelly Memorial, Vol. 3*; Stinson 48, 1952)

An original blues by Lead Belly.

# 19

## EXCERPT FROM THE LONESOME TRAIN

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(also known as “Abraham Lincoln”; from Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997; Smithsonian acetate 282; recording date unknown)

When this recording was first discovered in the Smithsonian Archives in 1995, it was thought to be an unknown topical composition of Lead Belly's. But it turns out to be a segment of the theatrical piece, *The Lonesome Train: A Musical Legend about Abraham Lincoln*, composed by Earl Robinson and Millard Lampell. Both Robinson and Lampell (the latter a member of the Almanac Singers; Pete Seeger was a member of an early cast) were part of the group of left-wing folksingers Lead Belly associated with. Robinson was a composer and music teacher whose compositions include “Joe Hill,” “Black and White,” and “Free and Equal Blues.” Moses Asch remembered: “Here in New York, Yip Harburg had written a musical. Lead Belly was in it. It had Woody, Brownie McGhee, and others and lasted only something like four performances. It was *Lonesome Train* and Decca wanted to record this” (Asch 1971). Asch had the composer wrong, but the history is there.

## NATIONAL DEFENSE BLUES

# 20

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar; Willie “The Lion” Smith, piano; Pops Foster, bass  
(from Smithsonian Folkways 40021, 1996; Smithsonian acetate 292; matrix D386; recorded ca. 1946)

“When I was out in California the boys told me, ‘Ledbetter, the women are working on that defense and they’s making lots of money, just quitting their husbands.’ So a lot of the boys knowed I come from Louisiana. I met a man out there who says, ‘Ledbetter, you know one thing, I come out here with my wife and you know she done quit me.’ I say, ‘Well.’ He says, ‘Well look, every payday come her check’s as big as mine.’ I say, ‘Well.’ He says, ‘Well look, every Saturday she’s putting her money in the bank.’ I say, ‘What then?’ He says, ‘Well look, can’t you make up a song.’ I say, ‘Well, I don’t know. I’ll think it over.’ And she was working on the defense, so here goes.”

Because a good percentage of the men in the work force were fighting during World War II, women were brought into jobs in the defense industry that men had previously occupied (Rosie the Riveter was a symbol of wartime women factory workers). In the song, the narrator is bemoaning the fact that “his woman” is making as much as he does, and is thinking about a future when she will be back doing “women’s work.” The song is a document of a time when racial divisions were on his mind but sensitivity to gender issues had not surfaced. A later version on *Last Sessions* adds verses describing what happened when things returned to pre-war status. At one point Lead Belly himself worked at a defense plant.

# 21

## HITLER SONG (MR. HITLER)

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Folkways 2034, 1953/ Smithsonian Folkways 40021, 1996;  
Smithsonian acetate 258; recorded May 1944)

“Hitler Song” is among the songs Huddie wrote during World War II, and it’s about defeating Hitler. It has a barrel-house rhythm. According to Wolfe and Lornell the melody is taken from an old “sukey jump” tune. It also echoes the old blues song “I’m Going to Tear Your Playhouse Down,” recorded by Clara Smith in 1924. The line has been used over and over, even in recent pop songs and Ann Peebles’ 1972 soul hit, “I’m Gonna Tear Your Playhouse Down.”

# 22

## BIG FAT WOMAN

Lead Belly, vocal and piano  
(also known as “Big Fat Mama”; from Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996;  
matrix SC-271; from Disc 660; recorded 1944)

John and Alan Lomax recorded a black quartet singing this song at Bellwood Farms in Atlanta in 1936. Lead Belly was also along on that trip and may have learned the song from the inmates. According to the notes for the 1950 LP release of the song by Alan Lomax, Lead Belly just sat down at the piano in Asch’s studio and started pounding out this song. Asch used it on his *Negro Folk Songs* collection as part of his theme, “Bad Women” (Place, notes to SFW 40044, 1996).

# 23

## BEEN SO LONG (BELLEVUE HOSPITAL BLUES)

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(previously unreleased; Smithsonian acetate 185; recording date unknown)

This is from an acetate recording in Moses Asch’s collection. Its provenance is unknown. Although Lead Belly died in Bellevue Hospital in 1949, the piece was undoubtedly recorded by Asch after an earlier hospital stay because there are no discs recorded by Asch of Lead Belly from 1948 onward. It’s a funny song he made up about the hospital and the nurses who took care of him.

# DISC FOUR

LEAD BELLY ON RADIO

**L**ead Belly had various radio shows in New York City in the 1940s. In late 1940, he started appearing weekly on the WNYC program *Folk Songs of America*, produced by anthropologist Henrietta Yurchenco. She had been hired by the station and was asked to host programs on classical music and folk music. She had become part of the folk crowd in New York in the late 1930s and began to do a folk music show. She remembered:

I fell in with somebody or other and they said why don't we do a broadcast in folk music, of which we know nothing, and I really frankly knew nothing of the subject at that time either. But, they were receptive, and I started out, and I had a professor by the name of Professor Mitchell at NYU and he had a group called a consort, and they came to the station and that really broke the ice, and pretty soon Pete Seeger called. I initiated Lead Belly's weekly show, but Lead Belly continued at the station for some time. I don't remember now exactly how much time he spent.... And as for Woody, Woody never did have his own series. He would sometimes come look at—by this time, when he came here from California, you see he ... had been on the air for a number of years. (Yurchenco 1992)

“Lead Belly was the best musician of the group—and everyone's teacher. He was a walking encyclopedia of Southern music” (Yurchenco 2002, 47). It was Woody Guthrie who had pleaded with her to put Huddie on the air. Yurchenco remembered receiving a letter one day from Woody that said, “I honestly believe of all the living folk singers that I've ever seen that Lead Belly is ahead of them all. I am lucky enough to study under Huddie which to me is one of New York's greatest pleasures. I argue that it is a mistake for people in the radio world to leave Lead Belly out of the picture. It's like leaving alcohol out of wine” (quoted in Yurchenco 2002, 48).

In late 1940, Yurchenco started doing a weekly 15-minute program called *Folk Songs of America* with Lead Belly as the musical guest. Yurchenco remembers that the show always started on time. Lead Belly would come in, sit in the office, work on the script, help decide each program's theme, and make copies of the lyrics to send to the audience on request (ibid.). The WNYC show attempted to simulate recordings Lead Belly had made in June 1940 for RCA/Victor, when he was paired with the popular and polished gospel group, the Golden Gate Quartet. They had recorded some of Lead Belly's work songs and play parties: “Ham and Eggs,” “Julie Ann Johnson,” “Pick a Bale of Cotton,” “Grey Goose,” and others. WNYC hired another gospel group, the Oleander Quartet, and gospel singer Anne Graham. Many of the songs on the 1940–42 shows were newly recorded material from the RCA releases. He returned to the show in the late 1940s.

# 1

## **FOLK SONGS OF AMERICA, WNYC: MARCH 13, 1941** GREY GOOSE; BOLL WEEVIL; YELLOW GAL; HA-HA THIS A WAY; LEAVING BLUES; IRENE (OUTRO)

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar  
(from Smithsonian acetate 381-102)

This March 1941 program features Lead Belly alone and includes some of his work and play party songs. “Grey Goose” was also a song known to convicts in the Texas prison system. Versions were recorded by John and Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress in three separate prisons in Texas: Sugarland (“Iron Head” in 1933), Huntsville (Augustus Haggerty “Track Horse” in 1934), and the Barrington State Farm (Washington Lightnin’ in 1933). “Yellow Gal” is a song folklorist Bruce Jackson referred to as a “flat weeding song” (Lead Belly called it a “sukey jump” tune), but it has been recorded many times in Texas prisons so is likely a work song. Jackson said, “Every good group leader in the Texas prisons led this song on at least one occasion” (Jackson 1972, 285). A yellow gal is a mixed-race woman, the color being an indicator of her light skin pigment. The other songs are discussed elsewhere in this book.

# 2

## **FOLK SONGS OF AMERICA, WNYC: FEBRUARY 6, 1941**

ALMOST DAY; BLUES IN MY KITCHEN, BLUES IN MY DINING ROOM; I WENT UP ON THE MOUNTAIN; GOOD MORNING BLUES; BABY, DON'T YOU LOVE ME NO MORE; T.B. BLUES; IRENE (OUTRO)

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(Lead Belly and the Oleander Quartet [George Boyd, Cecil Murray, Howard Scott, George Hall]; from Smithsonian acetate 377-101)

This program, in which Lead Belly is teamed with the Oleander Quartet, is a mixture of the types of material Lead Belly performed. The second song is introduced as “Blues in My Kitchen, Blues in My Dining Room.” It has not been recorded elsewhere but is very similar to his song “Don’t Sleep Too Long.” A favorite piece for Lead Belly to use on his radio programs, it was published in the *Leadbelly Songbook*. He and the Quartet sing a gospel song “I Went Up on the Mountain, Looked Down at the Rising Sun.” Records show that in October 1934, Lead Belly visited the Cummins State Farm in Gould, Arkansas, while traveling with the Lomaxes. He learned “Rock Island Line” there. John Lomax also recorded the convicts singing “I Went Up on the Mountain,” which is listed as being an ax-cutting song (LOC file card, AFS 00248 A02). “Baby, Don’t You Love Me No More” was previously recorded for ARC in 1935 and finally issued by Columbia in 1970. It is a cover of Leroy Carr’s song from 1928. Lead Belly recorded it in 1940 under the title “Don’t You Love Your Daddy No More.” So at the time of this show it could be considered one of his “new releases.” The other songs are discussed elsewhere.

# 3

## **IF IT WASN'T FOR DICKY**

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from *America Tells Its Stories*, WNYC: February 18, 1941; Smithsonian acetate 398)

This song offers a fascinating insight into Huddie’s song-writing process. He was once at a Greenwich Village party and heard the Irish traditional singer, Sam Kennedy, singing a song in Irish about a milk cow, “Drimmin Down (An droimfhionn donn dilís).” Unable to understand the language, he asked Kennedy to write down a translation. He took it and created “If It Wasn’t for Dicky,” fashioning a catchy new melody on his 12-string guitar. His friends in the Weavers, Pete Seeger and Lee Hays, took it and put brand new lyrics to it, with no mention of a cow anywhere. It became one of their most popular songs, “Kisses Sweeter than Wine.”

# 4

## **WHAT'S YOU GONNA DO WHEN THE WORLD'S ON FIRE**

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal; Anne Graham, vocal

(from *America Tells Its Stories*, WNYC: February 18, 1941; Smithsonian acetate 398)

# 5

## **ROCK ME (HIDE ME IN THY BOSOM)**

Lead Belly, guitar; Anne Graham, vocal

(from *America Tells Its Stories*, WNYC: February 18, 1941; Smithsonian acetate 398)

This piece comes from the pen of the famous gospel composer Thomas A. Dorsey. It had been performed by singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe at John Hammond’s 1938 “From Spirituals to Swing” concert. She had impressed the audience with her performance, and Cab Calloway hired her as a singer (Darden 2004, 198).

# 6

## PACKIN' TRUNK BLUES

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

(from *Folk Songs of America*, WNYC: February 27, 1941; Smithsonian acetate 381-101)

This is a blues he learned from Blind Lemon Jefferson, whose version of "Matchbox Blues" he adapted. The American Record Corporation recorded this song, and it was one side of the first commercial Lead Belly 78 rpm record they released. It is similar to his "Leaving Blues."

# 7

## LEAVING BLUES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(from Folkways 31046; recorded March 13, 1941)

"Now this is the leavin' blues. What I mean [is] it was leavin' time. This man had lived with a woman 20 years and he was working for the T.P.S. shop. And when he come home that evenin'... his time to come home was five o'clock, she got behind the door and just as he walked to the yard gate to come in, she jumped out from behind the door and threw up both hands. She say, 'You can't come in here no more.' He say, 'What's the matter?' She say, 'I don't want you.' He say, 'Can I get my clothes?' She says, 'Naw, you can't come.' He turned around and that gave him the blues."

"Leaving Blues" was one of Huddie's favorite blues to incorporate into his radio programs. In this version he includes some of the lyrics of his earlier blues, "Grasshoppers in My Pillow." This song was also recorded by Lead Belly and released by Asch as an unaccompanied vocal.

# 8

## HOW COME YOU DO ME LIKE YOU DO?

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

(from *Folk Songs and Work Songs*, WNYC: undated; from Smithsonian acetate 376)

"How Come You Do Me Like You Do?" is a show tune written in 1924 by Gene Austin and Roy Bergere. A hit song in the 1920s, it has been covered many times by jazz artists including Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman.

# 9

## ONE DIME BLUES

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

(also known as "Fore-Day Blues"; from *Folk Songs and Work Songs*, WNYC: undated; from Smithsonian acetate 376)

This comes from Blind Lemon Jefferson. He recorded it in 1927, and it was one his most known songs. Lead Belly likely played it with Jefferson during their time together. Huddie's friend Woody Guthrie took the melody for his song, "New York Town."

Lead Belly recorded it twice for the Library of Congress, in January (16689-2) and February 1935 (140-B), in Wilton, Connecticut.

# 10

## I'M GOING TO BUY YOU A BRAND NEW FORD

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

(from *Folk Songs and Work Songs*, WNYC: recorded 1942; from Smithsonian acetate 376)

## JAIL-HOUSE BLUES

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

(also known as "It Was Early One Morning"; from Folkways 31030/ Frederic Ramsey tape 448; from WNYC: recorded October 1948)

This is a blues he sometimes called "Jailhouse Bound." The lyrics are written from the perspective of a prisoner stuck in jail.

# 11

# 12

## SHOUT ON

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(also known as "Honey, I'm All Out and Down"; from Folkways 31030; from WNYC: recorded October 1948)

This is a blues of floating lyrics Lead Belly cobbled together from older blues songs. It includes lyrics from Lemon Jefferson's "One Dime Blues" and from the work song "Whoa, Back, Buck" (see disc 2, track 9). He learned it from a group of levee camp workers before 1900 (Wolfe and Lornell 1992, 2) and had recorded it for ARC in January 1935.

# 13

## COME AND SIT DOWN BESIDE ME

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

(also known as "All for You"; from Folkways 31030; from Folkways 31030/Frederic Ramsey tape 453; from WNYC: recorded October 1948)

# 14

## RED RIVER

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

(also known as "Red River Blues," "Blood Red River"; from WNYC: recorded November, 7, 1940; Smithsonian acetate 266)

Blues lyrics were interchangeable for the musicians in the South. One might hear a song, commit a verse to memory, and then fashion a new song from it. "Ragtime" Henry Thomas (born ca. 1870), a traveling hobo musician active in the Texas area, recorded his "Red River Blues" in October 1927. Thomas includes the same first verse as Lead Belly (but later in the song) and the verse about the river running north, but also includes a verse "Poor boy long way from home" and a verse "Honey I'm all out an' down" (see Lead Belly's "Shout On"). A blues standard, "Red River Blues" was widespread. It was also played by East Coast bluesmen. Lead Belly's future friend Josh White recorded it in 1932. Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee later created their own version.

# DISC FIVE

FROM LAST SESSIONS



The first six songs of this disc are unaccompanied.

# 1

## YES, I WAS STANDING IN THE BOTTOM

# 2

## AIN'T GOING DOWN TO THE WELL NO MORE (VERSION 2)

Once when Lead Belly and Martha were invited to dinner at Frederic Ramsey's apartment in September 1948, Ramsey showed them his new reel-to-reel machine. Lead Belly had not brought his guitar, but he was interested in how the machine worked. Ramsey fired up his tape deck and recorded a session of Huddie singing unaccompanied. He started with two field hollers that he claimed to have "made." Field hollers were used to accompany work and were highly improvisational. A basic field holler could be sung, and various workers could make up verses about what was on their mind. References to their current situation were often hidden in metaphor. Kip Lornell believes that Lead Belly may have known "Ain't Going Down to the Well No More" from his youth (Lornell, notes to 40105). Lead Belly scholar Sean Killeen reported that Huddie learned it from Will Darling while picking cotton in 1910 on a farm near Dallas (*Lead Belly Letter* 4, no. 1, Winter 1994). Lead Belly recorded two separate versions of "Ain't Going Down to the Well No More" for Ramsey, different in length and other ways. The longer version (48-B), recorded during his 1935 Wilton, Connecticut, sessions, is a haunting version of a prisoner crying out about his crime, his predicament, and his overwhelming longing to be free—different from what he provided Ramsey.

# 3

## EVERY TIME I GO OUT

# 4

## GO DOWN, OLD HANNAH

"They called the sun Old Hannah because it was hot and they just give it a name. That's what the boys called it when I was down in prison. I didn't hear it before I went down there. The boys were talking about Old Hannah. I kept looking and I didn't see no Hannah, but they looked up and said 'That's the sun.'"

During his fieldwork among prisoners in Texas, John Lomax recorded many versions of this song, one of the best-known work songs in Texas. The Library of Congress collections include versions by prisoners in addition to Lead Belly, including Clear Rock, Iron Head, and Lightnin', all recorded during the same time period.

In African American music in the South dating back to slavery, metaphors were couched in songs that resembled hymns. The words would not be picked up by the overseer but would be clear to the inmates. As the "Big Dipper" became the "drinking gourd," the blazing Texas sun became "Old Hannah." Workers would die in the heat, and their bodies would be thrown in the ravine. As the prisoners worked, they would wish for the time when "Old Hannah" would "go down."

# 5

## BLACK BETTY

(also known as “Hammer Ring”)

“Black Betty” is another Texas work song the Lomaxes recorded multiple times by multiple prisoners. The first recording they made in 1933 was by Iron Head. In this song, the “bam da lam” is meant to simulate the sound of the ax hitting wood. There are as many explanations of the meaning of “Black Betty” as prisoners who were interviewed. According to the Lomaxes, “She was the whip used in Southern prisons” (Lomax 1940, 60–61). However, in his later work with Texas prisoners, Bruce Jackson found that none of the prisoners had ever heard of a whip named Black Betty. Instead they said it referred to the transfer wagon that moved men from town to jail or from unit to unit (Jackson 1972, 194).

The song was later recorded by the rock group Ram Jam. Oddly enough, the rock version has been used many times as background music in movies and television shows. Singer Tom Jones recorded it as a disco song with a group of female singers singing the “bam da lam” part. It has also been sung as a celebratory song at sporting events, a far cry from its origin.

# 6

## NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU’RE DOWN AND OUT with Bessie Smith

(Bessie Smith recording under license from Sony Music Commercial Music Group, a division of Sony Music Entertainment)

This is a blues written in 1923 by Billy Cox and popularized by Bessie Smith. The track comes from a fascinating tape from the *Last Sessions* in the Frederic Ramsey collection. Ramsey and Huddie are discussing music as you or I might at a party. Ramsey is playing 78s from his collection and asking Huddie’s opinion. Huddie remembers meeting Bessie Smith and talks about her music. He sings an unaccompanied part of “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out,” then Ramsey starts up the Bessie Smith 78. Lead Belly sings right along, word for word, making for an amazing duet.

# 7

## STEWBALL

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

The song “Stewball” or “Skewball” has a long history, and it exists as a ballad and a work song in white and black music, respectively.

The story of the racehorse Skewball was put into a British broadside ballad in the 18th century. Born in 1741, Skewball won many races in England and Ireland during his career; in stature he was the equivalent of a Triple Crown winner today. The race in question here is between Skewball and Molly on the plains of Kildare, where Skewball came into the race as the underdog but won anyway. It became a popular sporting ballad.

The British song was adapted into a work song by African Americans in the South. In the American version of the song, Skewball (now Stewball), the horserace is based in the United States, in Lead Belly’s case, California. It was popular in prisons in the South; Library of Congress field recordings from the 1930s include performances at prisons in Texas, Mississippi, Florida, and North Carolina. Bruce Jackson identifies it as a group song for work in the cotton and cane fields (Jackson 1972, 103). The African American version was included in Howard Odum’s 1926 book of African American work songs, where he referred to the ballad as “almost having been an epic among the Negroes” (Odum and Johnson, 33). The white ballad version became popular during the folk song revival of the 1950 and ’60s, recorded by the Greenbriar Boys and Peter, Paul and Mary, among others.

# 8

## AIN'T IT A SHAME TO GO FISHIN' ON A SUNDAY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

This song, with an interesting combination of lyrics and a curious history, seems to have been based on a Christian hymn. The 12-string guitarist Blind Willie McTell recorded his “Ain’t It Grand to Be a Christian” in 1935. The melody is the same as Lead Belly’s, and the chorus uses only slightly modified words. The melody and the chorus pop up before this, though. An earlier white string band recording (1927) by Georgian Fiddlin’ John Carson uses the same verse, “Ain’t it a shame to beat your wife on Sunday,” as the basis of his song. (McTell was also from Georgia.) The old gospel song was used in the popular 1922 African American musical *Shuffle Along*, performed by the Four Harmony Kings, who apparently learned it “at a Negro meeting in St. Louis from a group of jubilee singers.” It has the refrain, “Ain’t it a shame to steal on Sunday, when you got, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, ...” (Parsons 1922). It was one their most popular songs and performed by a number of the gospel quartets in the 1920s and ’30s. On his WNYC radio shows Lead Belly is joined by the gospel group the Oleander Quartet, who also performed “Ain’t It a Shame to Sin on Sunday” on a separate program.

## RELAX YOUR MIND

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

# 9

Lead Belly composed this fun song. According to Fred Ramsey, he had been prompted by the National Automobile Safety Council to write the song as an advertisement for the organization. They ultimately turned down his offering (*Lead Belly Letter* 5, no. 2, Winter 1995). His spoken comments from 1948 still ring true in the modern world of “distracted driving.”

# 10

## PRINCESS ELIZABETH

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

Princess Elizabeth (since 1953 the Queen of England) is the subject of this little ditty Lead Belly composed on the occasion of her 1947 wedding to Prince Philip. It was not used on either of the *Last Sessions* releases and has remained unreleased until this time. Lead Belly told Ramsey, “I took the melody of Bessie Smith’s ‘Aggravating Papa’ and put new words to it” (Ramsey tape RA-468).

## SILVER CITY BOUND

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

# 11

In 1912–17, Lead Belly traveled with Blind Lemon Jefferson around the Southwest, entertaining for tips on trains. Musicians could get away with traveling free as long as they provided entertainment. Based in Dallas, they used to ride the train to Silver City, a suburb. “Silver City Bound” is a memory of these times. It then moves into another song, Huddie’s musical tribute to his friend Blind Lemon.

# 12

## THE TITANIC

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

Lead Belly began to play this song with Lemon Jefferson in 1912, not long after the *Titanic's* demise. The RMS *Titanic*, billed as the best built ship ever made, sailed for New York from England on its maiden voyage. On April 15, 1912, it collided with an iceberg in the North Atlantic, and 1,502 passengers perished. The less wealthy passengers were staying in the lower cabins and were more likely not to have survived. For Lead Belly and many other African Americans who heard the news, there was a sense of irony in the disaster because the *Titanic* had refused to carry black passengers. Lead Belly's song attributes a quote to the captain, "We don't haul no coal." Boxer Jack Johnson was a hero among the African American population for having defeated a white boxer to win the heavyweight championship. As a symbol of racial pride, he was perfect for Lead Belly to use as an example of a black person being denied passage. There is no evidence Johnson actually tried to book passage on the ship.

Both white and black musicians wrote songs and ballads about the tragedy. String band musician Pop Stoneman had a hit in 1924 with his "The Titanic" (later covered by Roy Acuff). Black singer Blind Willie Johnson had his song, "God Moves on the Water," and husband and wife William and Versey Smith recorded "When That Great Ship Went Down."

# 13

## HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

This is a popular folk and jazz song in the United States. In England, the image of a rising sun on a door was synonymous with houses of ill repute and became the topic of a ballad that was adapted into this blues (Logsdon 2003) about a young girl who finds herself in a life of prostitution. The Lomaxes collected a version from Georgia Turner, in Middlesboro, Kentucky, in 1937 (Lomax 1941). The Lomaxes based their arrangement of the song on the one they learned from Turner. It was first recorded by Texas Alexander in 1927 (ibid.). Old-time musicians Clarence Ashley and Gwen Foster recorded it for Vocalion in 1934 (Meade et al. 2002, 61). In 1964, the British rock group the Animals recorded it, reaching #1 on the Billboard chart.

# 14

## IT'S TIGHT LIKE THAT

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

"It's Tight Like That" was a popular song recorded by Tampa Red and Georgia Tom in 1928 (Georgia Tom was actually the famous gospel composer Thomas A. Dorsey, who found religion and changed his style of music). It was a bawdy double-entendre piece in the style called "hokum" songs. In 1942, Tampa Red recorded an electric guitar song, "Let Me Play with Your Poodle," which Lead Belly also recorded.

Tampa Red moved to Chicago and became the "gate keeper" and initial host to many of the blues performers migrating to the city from the South.

Given the popularity Lead Belly assigns to this song, it is possible that he included some of Red's more bawdy verses in his early performances. However, he did not sing them in this session with Ramsey. For this version, he used the chorus but substituted his own verses.

# 15

## DIGGIN' MY POTATOES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

## SPRINGTIME IN THE ROCKIES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

# 16

In true "songster" fashion, Lead Belly had a wide repertoire of songs of different styles. He loved cowboy songs. He traveled out to Los Angeles in 1945, hoping to get into films, specifically singing cowboy movies. He met Gene Autry, who was one of his heroes, and remembered showing Autry the 12-string guitar. When asked in 1990, Autry remembered "Mr. Ledbetter as a casual acquaintance" (Autry letter to Sean Killeen, November 15, 1990).

Next to Roy Rogers, Gene Autry (1907–98) was one of the greatest of the singing cowboy stars who popularized that particular genre of film in the 1930s to the 1950s. He appeared in almost 100 films. "Springtime in the Rockies" was the featured song in the 1937 film of the same name. Autry is a huge star in country music history.

# 17

## BACKWATER BLUES

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar

Lead Belly commented, “When Bessie Smith went around Mississippi and saw what happened with the flood she wrote this song” (intro from his 1949 University of Texas concert, Playboy Records). “Backwater Blues” is Bessie Smith’s classic song about the great 1927 flood, which affected most of the American south-central states. It killed 246 people, and in some places the water was 30 feet deep. The song has been performed by dozens of singers over the years.

## DIDN'T OLD JOHN CROSS THE WATER

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

(also known as “Didn’t Old John Cross the Water on His Knees”)

In 1934, on their trip through the South, the Lomaxes collected a version of this old gospel song from prisoners at Reed Camp, South Carolina. The prisoners used it as a work song. Lead Belly was along on that trip as the Lomaxes’ driver, so it is possible that is where he first heard it. Pete Seeger used to perform the song as an “ax-cutting” song (Lomax 1941).

# 19

## DE KALB BLUES

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

(also known as “Ain’t Gonna Drink No More”)

Lead Belly first recorded this blues for the Library of Congress in Connecticut in 1935. In 1915, after he escaped from a Louisiana chain gang, he fled to DeKalb, Texas, and assumed the name Walter Boyd.

# 20

## THEY HUNG HIM ON THE CROSS (VERSION 1)

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

(also known as “He Never Said a Mumblin’ Word”)

# 21

## THEY HUNG HIM ON THE CROSS (VERSION 2)

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

(also known as “He Never Said a Mumblin’ Word”)

This is an old spiritual. According to the Lomaxes, “The song is known throughout Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, and Tennessee as ‘Never Said a Mumblin’ Word’” (Lomax 1940, 577–78). The Lomaxes recorded a group of prisoners singing the song at Angola Prison in 1933, the same time Lead Belly was there. The Golden Gate Quartet recorded it for Okeh in 1941 (Dixon 1997, 310).

## IN THE WORLD

Lead Belly, guitar and vocal

# 22

In Ramsey’s living room with the reel-to-reel tape recorder, Lead Belly was able to record some of his extemporaneous wordplay that the limits of a 78 rpm format would not permit. Here, as in his rhyming introductions to many of his songs, his rhymes came out of an African American tradition such as the “Dozens” or “Signifying Monkey.” It would be easy to see Lead Belly as a rapper if he had lived in modern times.

# WHY HE SANG CERTAIN SONGS

Written by Tiny Robinson

Transcribed by the Lead Belly Estate

This is my theory I gather from Leadbelly after spending six years having breakfast together. Some time he and Martha ate at my place, some morning I ate at their place. We would spend hours and has having long talk every day. I am sure I ask him everything about himself there was worth knowing. It may have been a very, very small percentage of prison life I miss, but I am sure it want... I felt very free asking him anything about himself. Some was pleasant, unpleasant, amazing, astonishing, exciting and admirable. Anyone could feel the same way as I did. He was not self-conscious and didn't show any embarrassment or ashamed. He didn't carry his feeling around with him.

During this long session I had a chance to learn the history of his life, about his song, why he compose certain one and why he sang certain songs. Before hand I ignored some portion of his sound. I didn't know what principle to accept them. I am sure I was not the only one. I have been approached by others concerning the same matter. Leadbelly was aware of this. Later on in years he began to explain his song. Making them more clear and understanding. Not being able to understand...build a isolate wall between Leadbelly and people, and held him at a stand still.

Leadbelly was never...and hours thinking up a new song. He always sang songs the way he felt, what he experience and seen. They was not just words to make a verse, they was not words to complete a sentence, they was not words without a meaning to him. Leadbelly had a very close feeling to all of his songs. They meant more to him than entertaining a crowd which one third knew nothing about what he was saying.... Approval he was capable of handling it. Because Leadbelly sang to please himself and to sing about thing he could not say and mean as well. Some song expressions was stranger than standing on a soap box.... From block to block. Some unsatisfaction evidently firmly place and confine him to feel that way. He always said some of us don't have anything to sing about except the love of music and to amuse others. He felt he had much more to sing about beside chain-gang songs. Some of the thing was; the environment, which

he was, brought up under. Don't do this, don't do that, be careful what you say, and where you go, you have no right walking down that road where those folk live, and stay on this side where you belong. He was connected with those series of episode soon as he was able to walk a block by myself. I have my people to sing about. The way they struggle and nothing seem to be coming their way. Nothing was done to improve the matter. The violent grasp was too strong for us to escape. So we had to sang about them.

I felt free sang (singing) folk song. I could express my feeling about certain thing when I was Jim Crow I would sang about that town without being afraid. Where as I would never be able to make a speech I would deliver my feeling and the way we suffer pressure through various of verse.

He sang spiritual because when he was child that was all he knew. His family was very religious and quite a bit of still exist in Leadbelly. He remembers old spiritual tune his mother and father sang at church and around home. Leadbelly sang quite a few of them. He say they give him courage and expand his memory from long hot days on the small farm. He could see his mother and himself working side by side harmonizing those tune. She like to sang and did sing all the time. Out in the field before I could carry a row by myself I work on the same row with her. We would sing and sing. She would say son help momma sing this song. I song the verse I knew and would learn the other verse as she go along. My father would whistle most of the time. I guess that was because he always in another field by himself. He would sang when he was worry and the crop was going bad. Spiritual song was a great cure for most Negro in the South. They had such strong feelings toward them. From their long struggleing and suffering a few spiritual tunes and a few words of pray was the greatest medicine at that time a science could have discovered. Leadbelly said I never had that kind of belief, but I enjoy singing them. I guess because it was something I adopt from the family tradition. Leadbelly my family was not the only one who participated in religious movement. This doctrine been taught and accept in the south by Negroes from generation to generation. It was a persistent relation that must be carry out until you reach a age to draw your own opinions. Leadbelly was not under that influence very long because he left home very early.

# DISCOGRAPHY

## THE MOSES ASCH LEAD BELLY SESSIONS

(Drawn from the research of Kip Lornell and John Cowley, with additional entries by Jeff Place)

### JANUARY 1942

SC 101 Take This Hammer  
SC 102 Haul Away Joe  
SC 103 Rock Island Line  
SC 104 Old Riley  
SC 105 Corn Bread Rough  
SC 106 Old Man

### JANUARY 1943

Bring Me a Little Water, Silvy

### AUGUST 1943

SC 258 On a Monday (with Sonny Terry)  
SC 259 John Henry (with Sonny Terry)  
SC 260 How Long (with Sonny Terry)  
SC 261-1 Irene  
SC 261 Irene  
SC 262 Ain't You Glad (The Blood Done Signed My Name) (with Sonny Terry)  
SC 263 Good Morning Blues (with Sonny Terry)

### CA. OCTOBER 1943

SC 270 Cow Cow Yicky Yicky Yea/Out on the Western Plains  
SC 271 Noted Rider/Big Fat Woman/Borrow Love and Go (Bottle Up and Go)  
SC 272 John Hardy (accordion version)  
SC 273 Meeting at the Building/Talking, Preaching/We Shall Walk Through the Valley  
SC 274 Fiddler's Dram/Yellow Gal/Green Corn  
SC 275 Bring Me a Little Water, Silvy/Julie Ann Johnson/Linin' Track/Whoa, Back, Buck

### APRIL 19, 1944

MA 60 I Have a Pretty Flower (with Josh White)  
MA 61 Don't Lie Buddy (with Josh White)

### APRIL 23, 1944

683 How Do You Know (unissued)  
683-1 How Do You Know/Don't Mind the Weather  
684 What Are Little Boys Made of  
684-1 What Are Little Boys Made of/Let Me Hold Your Hand/Polly Wee  
685 Skip to My Lou  
685-1 Skip to My Lou/Christmas Song (It's Almost Day)  
686 Sally Walker  
686-1 Sally Walker/Ha-Ha This a Way/Red Bird

### APRIL 25, 1944

MA 97 Outskirts of Town (with Sonny Terry)  
MA? Red River Blues/Black Girl/You Don't Miss Your Water Blues  
MA 160 Blind Lemon  
MA 161 Lead Belly's Dance  
MA 167 Little Children's Blues (with Josh White)  
MA 168 Mo' Yet/How Old Are You?/Green Grass Grows All Around

### CA. MAY 1944

MA 196 In the Evening When the Sun Goes Down (with Sonny Terry)  
No matrix We Shall Be Free

### UNKNOWN DATES AND MATRICES

Easy Rider  
There's a Man Going Round Taking Names  
Red Bird  
Linin' Track  
Jim Crow Blues  
Bourgeois Blues  
Army Life  
Hitler Song (Mr. Hitler)  
Julie Ann Johnson  
Pigmeat  
Jean Harlow  
Corn Bread Rough  
National Defense Blues  
Little Children's Blues  
Ain't You Glad (The Blood Done Signed My Name)

### CA. JULY 1944

Cow Cow Yicky Yicky Yea

There is a contract for a session for four "sides" to be recorded April 18, 1946. It is unknown which four sides they were.

CA. JUNE 1946 (This session included Lead Belly, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Pops Foster, and Willie "The Lion" Smith.)

D308 Pigmeat  
No matrix Keep Your Hands Off Her  
No matrix Easy Rider  
D384 4, 5, and 9  
D385 Diggin' My Potatoes  
D386 National Defense Blues  
D386-2 National Defense Blues/Careless Love  
John Henry

CA. OCTOBER 1946 (This session included Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston.)

D669 Alabama Bound  
D670 Ham and Eggs  
D671 Yellow Gal  
D672 Stewball  
D673 Grey Goose  
D674 The Midnight Special  
Green Corn  
Fiddler's Dram

### CA. FEBRUARY 1947

Yellow Gal  
You Can't Lose Me, Cholly  
Laura  
Good Morning Blues  
Leaving Blues  
Big Fat Woman  
Grey Goose  
Take This Hammer  
Moanin'  
We Shall Walk Through the Valley

### SUMMER 1947

Cotton Song  
Ha-Ha This a Way  
Sukey Jump  
Black Girl  
Rock Island Line  
Blind Lemon  
Borrow Love and Go  
On a Monday  
Shorty George  
Duncan and Brady  
Old Riley  
Leaving Blues  
Pigmeat

## LEAD BELLY'S LAST SESSIONS

(recorded by Frederic Ramsey Jr.)

### LATE SEPTEMBER 1948

Yes, I Was Standing in the Bottom  
Yes, I'm Going Down to Louisiana  
Ain't Going Down to the Well No More  
Dick Ligger's Holler  
Miss Liza Jane  
Dog Latin Song  
Leaving Blues  
Go Down, Old Hannah (with Martha Ledbetter)  
Blue Tailed Fly  
Nobody in the World Is Better Than Us  
We're in the Same Boat, Brother  
Looky, Looky, Yonder  
Jolly O' the Ransom  
Old Ship of Zion (with Martha Ledbetter)  
Bring Me a Little Water, Silvy (with Martha Ledbetter)  
Mistreatin' Mama  
Black Betty  
I Don't Know You What Have I Done  
Rock Island Line  
Old Man  
Shorty George  
Stewball (with Martha Ledbetter)  
Bottle Up and Go  
You Know I Got to Do It  
Ain't It a Shame to Go Fishin' on Sunday  
Ain't Gonna Drink No More  
My Lindy Lou  
I'm Thinking of a Friend  
He Never Said a [Mumblin'] Word  
Army Life  
In the World  
I Want to Go Home

### OCTOBER 1948

New Iberia  
Dancing with Tears in My Eyes  
John Henry  
Salty Dog  
National Defense Blues  
Easy Mr. Tom  
Relax Your Mind  
Princess Elizabeth  
Bottle Up and Go  
Polly Wee  
Pig Latin Song  
My Hula Love (Hawaiian Song)  
Drinkin' Lum Y A-Alla  
Grey Goose  
Silver City Bound

The Titanic  
Death Letter Blues  
Mary Don't You Weep (with Martha Ledbetter)  
He Never Said a Mumblin' Word  
The Midnight Special  
Boll Weevil  
Careless Love  
Easy Rider  
Cry for Me (Fannin Street)  
Ain't Going to Drink No More  
Birmingham Jail  
Old Riley  
Julie Ann Johnson  
It's Tight Like That  
4, 5, and 9  
Good Morning Babe, How Do You Do  
Jail-house Blues  
Well You Know How to Do It  
Irene  
Story of the 25 Cent Dude  
How Come You Do Me Like You Do?  
Hello Central, Give Me Long Distance Phone  
Hesitation Blues  
I'll Be Down on the Last Bread Wagon  
Springtime in the Rockies  
Chinatown  
Rock Island Line  
Backwater Blues  
Sweet Mary (with Martha Ledbetter)  
Irene (with Martha Ledbetter)  
Easy Mr. Tom  
In the Evening When the Sun Goes Down  
I'm Alone Because I Love You  
House of the Rising Sun (with Martha Ledbetter)  
Mary, Don't You Weep (with Martha Ledbetter)  
Fannin Street  
Sugared the Beer  
Didn't Old John Cross the Water  
Nobody Knows You 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 (with Martha Ledbetter)  
Leaving Blues  
Poor Howard

*These recordings made by Moses Asch and Frederic Ramsey Jr. and are part of the Smithsonian Moses and Frances Asch Collection. Song titles are followed by the Smithsonian Folkways catalog number of the album on which the song has been issued.*

4, 5, and 9 (Hollywood and Vine) 40001, 40044, 40068  
Abraham Lincoln 40045  
Ain't Going Down to the Well No More 40068, 40105  
Ain't It a Shame to Go Fishin' on Sunday 40068  
Alabama Bound 40045  
Alcoholic Blues 40068  
Baby, Don't You Love Me No More (Don't You Love Your Daddy No More) 40045  
Backwater Blues 40068  
Been So Long (Bellevue Hospital Blues)  
Big Fat Woman 40044  
Birmingham Jail (Down in the Valley) 40068, 40105  
Black Betty 40068  
Black Girl (Where Did You Sleep Last Night) 40044, 40061, 40062  
Blind Lemon 40044  
The Blood Done Signed My Name (Ain't You Glad) 40010  
Blue Tailed Fly (Jimmie Crack Corn) 40068  
Blues in My Kitchen, Blues in My Dining Room  
Boll Weevil 40068  
Borrow Love and Go (Bottle Up and Go) 40044, 40068  
Bottle Up and Go (Uncle Sam Says) 40105  
The Bourgeois Blues 40045  
Bring Me a Little Water, Silvy 40001, 40045, 40068  
Broke and I Ain't Got a Dime (One Dime Blues)  
Bully of the Town 40068  
Buy You a Brand New Ford  
By and By When the Morning Comes  
Careless Love 40045, 40068  
Chicken Crowing for Midnight (Christmas Day) 40044, 40068, 40105  
Chinatown 40068  
Come and Sit Down Beside Me 40105  
Corn Bread Rough 40010  
Cotton Fields 40044  
Cowboy Song 40045  
Daddy I'm Coming Back to You  
Dancing with Tears in My Eyes 40068  
Dark Town Strutter's Ball 40068  
Death Letter Blues 40068  
DeKalb Blues (Ain't Going to Drink No More) 40068  
Dick Ligger's Holler 40068  
Didn't Old John Cross the Water 40068  
Diggin' My Potatoes 40045, 40068  
Dog Latin Song 40068  
Don't Lie Buddy (with Josh White) 40081  
Don't Mind the Weather 40045



Don't Sleep Too Long 40105  
 Drinkin' Lum Y A Alla 40068  
 Duncan and Brady 40044  
 Easy Rider 40045, 40068  
 Easy, Mr. Tom 40068  
 Ella Speed  
 Every Time I Feel the Spirit  
 Fannin Street 40001, 40045, 40068  
 Fiddler's Dram 40010  
 Fort Worth and Dallas Blues  
 Gallis Pole 40045  
 Gee But I Want to Go Home (Army Life)  
 40021, 40045, 40068  
 Get Your Basket  
 Go Down, Old Hannah 40068, 40105  
 Good Morning Babe, How Do You Do 40068  
 Good Morning Blues 40044, 40045  
 Good, Good, Good (Talking, Preaching)  
 40010  
 Governor Pat Neff 40105  
 Green Corn 40044, 40105  
 Green Grass Growing All Around 40105  
 Grey Goose 40001, 40044, 40068, 40105  
 Ha-Ha This a Way 40044, 40105  
 Ham and Eggs 40105  
 Happy Birthday (Lead Belly's version)  
 Haul Away Joe 40045  
 He Never Said a Mumblin' Word 40068  
 He Was the Man 40068  
 Hello Central, Give Me Long Distance Phone  
 40068  
 Hesitation Blues 40068  
 Hide Me in Thy Bosom  
 Hitler Song (Mr. Hitler) 40021, 40045  
 House of the Rising Sun 40044, 40068  
 How Come You Do Me Like You Do? 40068  
 How Do You Know? 40045  
 How Long, How Long 40105  
 I Don't Know You, What Have I Done 40068  
 I Want to Go Home 40068  
 I Went on the Mountain and Looked Down on  
 the Rising Sun  
 I'll Be Down on the Last Bread Wagon 40068  
 I'm Alone Because I Love You 40068  
 I'm Going Back Down to Louisiana 40068  
 I'm So Glad, I Done Got Over  
 I'm Thinking of a Friend 40068  
 If You Want to Do Your Part 40021, 40105  
 In the Evening When the Sun Goes Down  
 40044, 40068  
 In the World 40068  
 Irene (Goodnight) 40001, 40044, 40061,  
 40062, 40068  
 It Was Early One Morning (Jailhouse Bound)  
 40105

It Was Soon One Morning 40105  
 It's Tight Like That 40068  
 Jailhouse Blues 40068 Jailhouse  
 Jean Harlow 40010, 40105  
 Jim Crow Blues 40045  
 Jim Crow Blues #2 40045  
 John Hardy 40045  
 John Henry 40045, 40068, 40105  
 Jolly O the Ransom 40068  
 Julie Ann Johnson 40045, 40068  
 Keep Your Hands Off Her 40010  
 Las Vegas Story 40045  
 Laura 40044  
 Lead Belly's Dance  
 Leaving Blues 40044, 40045  
 Let It Shine 40044  
 Linin' Track 40010, 40045  
 Little Boy How Old Are You 40105  
 Little Children's Blues 40010, 40105  
 Liza Jane 40068  
 Looky Looky Yonder 40068  
 Mary, Don't You Weep 40068  
 Meeting at the Building 40010, 40044  
 The Midnight Special 40001, 40045, 40068,  
 40105  
 Mistreatin' Mama 40068  
 Moanin' 40044  
 Molly, Don't You Grieve  
 More Yet 40105  
 Move On, Soldier Boy, Move On  
 My Hula Love (Hawaiian Song) 40068  
 My Lindy Lou 40068  
 National Defense Blues 40010, 40021,  
 40068, 40105  
 New Iberia 40068  
 Newborn Again (with unknown vocalist)  
 Nobody in the World Is Better Than Us 40068  
 Nobody Knows You When You're Down and  
 Out 40068  
 Noted Rider 40044  
 Old Man 40068, 40105  
 Old Riley 40044, 40068  
 Old Ship of Zion 40068  
 On a Monday 40010, 40044  
 Out on the Western Plains 40043, 40045  
 Outskirts of Town 40010  
 Packin' Trunk Blues  
 Parting Song 40105  
 Pick a Bale of Cotton 40044, 40105  
 Pig Latin Song 40068  
 Pigmeat 40044  
 Play with Your Poodle 40105  
 Polly Wee 40068, 40105  
 Pretty Flower (with Josh White)  
 Red Bird 40045

Red Cross Store Blues  
 Red River  
 Relax Your Mind 40068  
 Roberta  
 Rock Island Line 40001, 40044, 40068  
 Sail On, Little Girl (You Can't Mistreat Me)  
 40045  
 Sally Walker 40044  
 Salty Dog 40068  
 See See Rider  
 Shorty George 40044, 40068  
 Shout On 40105  
 Silver City Bound 40068  
 Skip to My Lou 40045, 40105  
 Springtime in the Rockies 40068  
 Stewball 40010, 40068, 40103  
 Story of the 25 Cent Dude 40068  
 Sugar'd Beer 40068  
 Sukey Jump (Win'Jammer) 40044  
 Sweet Jenny Lee 40068  
 Sweet Mary 40068, 40105 (see Governor Pat  
 Neff)  
 Swing Low Sweet Chariot  
 T.B. Blues 40045  
 Take This Hammer 40044, 40105  
 There's a Man Going Around Taking Names  
 40010  
 The Titanic 40068  
 Walked Through the Valley  
 We Shall Be Free 40001, 40007, 40010  
 We Shall Walk Through the Valley 40044  
 We're in the Same Boat, Brother 40068  
 What Are Little Boys Made Of? 40105  
 When a Man's a Long Way from Home (Po'  
 Boy) 45047  
 Where Did You Sleep Last Night? (see Black  
 Girl)  
 Whoa, Back, Buck 40105  
 Will You Miss Me 40007  
 Wrote Me a Letter Blues  
 Yellow Gal 40044, 40068, 40105  
 Yes, I Was Standing in the Bottom 40068  
 You Can't Lose Me, Cholly 40044, 40105

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## JEFF PLACE

Jeff Place has been the archivist for the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage since January 1988. He has overseen the cataloging of the Center's collections. He has a master's degree in library science from the University of Maryland and specializes in sound archives. He has been involved in the compilation of fifty CDs for Smithsonian Folkways Recordings including Woody Guthrie's *Long Ways to Travel: The Unreleased Folkways Masters*, for which he won the 1994 Brenda McCallum Prize from the American Folklore Society, the *Lead Belly Legacy Series*, *Lead Belly Sings for Children*, the Pete Seeger *American Favorite Ballads* series, and *The Asch Recordings of Woody Guthrie*. Place has been nominated for five Grammy Awards and eleven Indie Awards, winning two Grammys and five Indies. He was one of the producers and writers of the acclaimed 1997 edition of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* and *The Best of Broadside, 1962–1988* (2000). Place has overseen the recording of a number of regional folk festivals in addition to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (1988 to present). He was on the curatorial team for a number of exhibitions including the traveling Woody Guthrie exhibition, *This Land is Your Land*. He also co-curated the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program on Appalachian culture.

## ROBERT SANTELLI

Robert Santelli is executive director of the GRAMMY Museum in Los Angeles. He is the author of *This Land Is Your Land: Woody Guthrie and the Journey of an American Folk Song* and co-editor of *Hard Travelin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie*. He has also written nearly a dozen other books on American music and held positions at both the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, where he celebrated Guthrie in the museum's first-ever American Music Masters series, and the Experience Music Project in Seattle.

This project was made possible with the generous support of the **National Museum of African American History and Culture** and its founding director, Lonnie Bunch. Through this publication and through its jointly sponsored *African American Legacy* series of recordings, Smithsonian Folkways joins with the Museum in helping all Americans learn about the richness and diversity of the African American experience, what it means to their lives, and how it has helped shape the nation.



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## CREDITS

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Notes written by Jeff Place

Introductory essay by Robert Santelli

Recorded by Moses Asch except disc 1, tracks 16, 17; disc 2, tracks 19, 20, 26 recorded by John and Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress; disc 5 recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr.

Disc 2, tracks 6, 10, 11; disc 4, tracks 1-14 from radio broadcasts on WNYC included in the Frederic Ramsey and Moses Asch Collections. Used with permission.

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### **THE LEAD BELLY ESTATE & ARCHIVES/ LEAD BELLY FOUNDATION**

The **Lead Belly Estate** is owned and operated by Huddie 'Lead Belly' Ledbetter's family. It is dedicated to preserving and honoring his rich musical legacy. The **Lead Belly Archives** works on the archival preservation of Lead Belly's material and works. It is currently creating a digital archival database to include correspondence, photos, articles, and other material. The Estate and Archives has partnered with the GRAMMY Museum for an exhibition celebrating Lead Belly's 125th birthday. In addition, they have collaborated with the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture's *Musical Crossroads* exhibition. Queen "Tiny" Robinson, niece of Huddie Ledbetter, created the **Lead Belly Foundation** to help spread awareness about Lead Belly. The organization supports and inspires promising young musicians by granting scholarships to further their musical studies. It will also release a documentary film called *Lead Belly: Life, Legend, Legacy*. Terika Dean, the licensing manager for the Lead Belly Estate, develops projects that continue to expand Lead Belly's cultural legacy using his name, image and likeness. For more information about the "King of the 12-string Guitar," the forthcoming film documentary, and licensing opportunities, please visit [www.leadbelly.com](http://www.leadbelly.com).

### **JOHN REYNOLDS COLLECTION/LEAD BELLY SOCIETY**

John Reynolds has been a fan, collector, advocate and family confidant for almost 60 years and has known through his own sense-driven perception, the enormous importance of Huddie Ledbetter. His extensive files contain just about every photograph, article, artifact and tangential scrap that bears Lead Belly's stamp. He worked closely with Sean Killeen, long-time enthusiast and founder of the Lead Belly Society and publisher of the quarterly, *Lead Belly Letter*. The Sean Killeen Lead Belly Research Collection is now at Cornell University.

### **SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS**

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.

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### **NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE**

Through its exhibitions, public programs, and publications, the National Museum of African American History and Culture creates opportunities to explore the richness and diversity of the African American experience and to revel in its history. The Museum provides a lens into a story that unites us all as Americans, as the experiences it creates transcend the boundaries of race and culture. It reminds us of who we are, of the challenges we face, and of the future we can create together. It is a truly national museum, reaching far beyond Washington, D.C. to collaborate with institutions and individuals nationally and internationally through a sense of shared mission.



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Lead Belly is “the hard name of a harder man,” said Woody Guthrie of his friend and fellow American music icon who was born Huddie Ledbetter (c. 1888–1949). From the swamplands of Louisiana, the prisons of Texas, and the streets of New York City, Lead Belly and his music became cornerstones of American folk music and touchstones of African American cultural legacy. With his 12-string Stella guitar, he sang out a cornucopia of songs that included his classics “The Midnight Special,” “Irene,” “The Bourgeois Blues,” and many more, which in turn have been covered by musical notables such as the Beach Boys, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Van Morrison, Nirvana, Odetta, Little Richard, Pete Seeger, Frank Sinatra and Tom Waits. *Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection* brings us the story of the man as well as the musician. *5 Discs, 108 tracks (15 unreleased), 5 hours of music, historic photos, extensive notes, and 140 page book.*

## ONE

**1. IRENE (GOODNIGHT IRENE)** 1:53 **2. THE BOURGEOIS BLUES** 2:18 **3. FANNIN STREET (MISTER TOM HUGHES TOWN)** 3:30 **4. THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL** 2:03 **5. JOHN HENRY** 3:10 **6. BLACK GIRL (WHERE DID YOU SLEEP LAST NIGHT)** 2:07 **7. PICK A BALE OF COTTON** 1:30 **8. TAKE THIS HAMMER** 2:15 **9. COTTON FIELDS** 2:06 **10. OLD RILEY** 1:58 **11. ROCK ISLAND LINE** 2:02 **12. THE GALLIS POLE** 2:45 **13. HA-HA THIS A WAY** 1:34 **14. SUKEY JUMP** 1:04 **15. BOLL WEEVIL** 3:07 **16. SCOTTSBORO BOYS** 4:32 **17. GOVERNOR O.K. ALLEN** 2:37 **18. GOVERNOR PAT NEFF** 3:40 **19. THERE'S A MAN GOING AROUND TAKING NAMES** 1:24 **20. ON A MONDAY** 1:47 **21. YOU CAN'T LOSE ME, CHOLLY** 2:37 **22. KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF HER** 2:51 **23. WE SHALL BE FREE** with Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston 2:34

## TWO

**1. ALABAMA BOUND** 2:17 **2. ALMOST DAY** 1:05 **3. FIDDLER'S DRAM** 2:28 **4. GREEN CORN** 1:15 **5. SALLY WALKER** 2:40 **6. BRING ME A LITTLE WATER, SILVY** 0:48 **7. JULIE ANN JOHNSON** 0:41 **8. LININ' TRACK** 1:11 **9. WHOA, BACK, BUCK** 2:09 **10. SHORTY GEORGE** 1:28 **11. HAM AND EGGS** 1:42 **12. MOANIN'** 0:60 **13. OUT ON THE WESTERN PLAINS** 1:31 **14. NOTED RIDER** 2:50 **15. MEETING AT THE BUILDING** 0:59 **16. GOOD, GOOD, GOOD (TALKING, PREACHING) / WE SHALL WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY** 2:11 **17. AIN'T YOU GLAD (THE BLOOD DONE SIGNED MY NAME)** 2:19 **18. I'M SO GLAD, I DONE GOT OVER** 1:21 **19. THE HINDENBURG DISASTER** 3:22 **20. ELLA SPEED** 5:48 **21. HAUL AWAY JOE** 2:48 **22. OLD MAN** 2:35 **23. SWEET JENNY LEE** 1:51 **24. JEAN HARLOW** 1:40 **25. LAURA** 1:41 **26. QUEEN MARY** 4:46

**1. GOOD MORNING BLUES** 2:24 **2. SAIL ON, LITTLE GIRL** 3:14 **3. EASY RIDER** 2:51 **4. POOR HOWARD** 1:36 **5. DUNCAN AND BRADY** 4:06 **6. HOW LONG, HOW LONG** 2:13 **7. T.B. BLUES** 3:43 **8. JIM CROW BLUES** 3:30 **9. PIGMEAT** 2:33 **10. JOHN HARDY** 2:43 **11. OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN** 2:40 **12. 4, 5, AND 9** 2:20 **13. IN THE EVENING (WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN)** 3:29 **14. RED CROSS STORE BLUES** 3:09 **15. DIGGIN' MY POTATOES** 2:34 **16. BLIND LEMON** 1:39 **17. WHEN A MAN'S A LONG WAY FROM HOME** 2:57 **18. ALBERTA** 3:11 **19. EXCERPT FROM "THE LONESOME TRAIN"** 3:11 **20. NATIONAL DEFENSE BLUES** 3:13 **21. HITLER SONG (MR. HITLER)** 4:31 **22. BIG FAT WOMAN** 1:10 **23. BEEN SO LONG (BELLEVUE HOSPITAL BLUES)** 2:44

**RADIO** **1. WNYC—FOLK SONGS OF AMERICA—LEAD BELLY** 14:42 GREY GOOSE, BOLL WEEVIL, YELLOW GAL, HA-HA THIS A WAY, LEAVING BLUES, IRENE (OUTRO) **2. WNYC—FOLK SONGS OF AMERICA—LEAD BELLY AND THE OLEANDER QUARTET** 14:45 ALMOST DAY, BLUES IN MY KITCHEN, BLUES IN MY DINING ROOM, I WENT UP ON THE MOUNTAIN, GOOD MORNING BLUES, BABY, DON'T YOU LOVE ME NO MORE, T.B. BLUES, IRENE (OUTRO) **3. IF IT WASN'T FOR DICKY** 2:15 **4. WHAT'S YOU GONNA DO WHEN THE WORLD'S ON FIRE** with Anne Graham 2:12 **5. ROCK ME (HIDE ME IN THY BOSOM)** with Anne Graham 2:19 **6. PACKIN' TRUNK BLUES** 2:35 **7. LEAVING BLUES** 2:58 **8. HOW COME YOU DO ME LIKE YOU DO?** 3:26 **9. ONE DIME BLUES** 2:25 **10. I'M GOING TO BUY YOU A BRAND NEW FORD** 1:40 **11. JAIL-HOUSE BLUES** 1:13 **12. SHOUT ON** 2:09 **13. COME AND SIT DOWN BESIDE ME** 1:02 **14. RED RIVER** 2:14

## FIVE

**LAST SESSIONS** **1. YES, I WAS STANDING IN THE BOTTOM** 1:41 **2. AIN'T GOING DOWN TO THE WELL NO MORE (VERSION 2)** 1:23 **3. EVERYTIME I GO OUT** 1:25 **4. GO DOWN, OLD HANNAH** 4:58 **5. BLACK BETTY** 1:53 **6. NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU'RE DOWN AND OUT** with Bessie Smith 3:42 **7. STEWBALL** 2:34 **8. AIN'T IT A SHAME TO GO FISHIN' ON A SUNDAY** 1:22 **9. RELAX YOUR MIND** 4:05 **10. PRINCESS ELIZABETH** 3:33 **11. SILVER CITY BOUND** 6:01 **12. THE TITANIC** 5:11 **13. HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN** 2:24 **14. IT'S TIGHT LIKE THAT** 3:09 **15. DIGGIN' MY POTATOES** 3:57 **16. SPRINGTIME IN THE ROCKIES** 3:02 **17. BACKWATER BLUES** 3:23 **18. DIDN'T OLD JOHN CROSS THE WATER** 1:56 **19. DE KALB BLUES** 3:51 **20. THEY HUNG HIM ON THE CROSS (VERSION 1)** 2:26 **21. THEY HUNG HIM ON THE CROSS (VERSION 2)** 2:49 **22. IN THE WORLD** 2:02



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