

Everything I Know, I Learned from Lead Belly, Folkways, and the Gray Goose

by Dan Zanes

When my daughter was born in 1994, I went into the now long gone Tower Records to buy some tunes for us. I fully anticipated finding contemporary equivalents of the [Folkways Records](#) albums that I knew as a kid. Those were records that sounded artful and homespun, like they'd been recorded in someone's kitchen with the best players on the block. They were records with a mix of old and new songs from a variety of traditions; records with a freewheeling pop art graphic style that squeezed every bit of available life out of two colors, a photo, and some wood type. They were records that my whole family listened to together.

That's what I thought I would find. But I was wrong. Everything I saw seemed to be tied to a cartoon or a movie. With few exceptions—which mostly included older Folkways classics from [Pete Seeger](#) and [Ella Jenkins](#)—it was a corporate musical landscape. I didn't mind that the "corporate" records were there, but it bugged me that I couldn't find the sounds that I heard in my head! I had to ask myself, why was this vision of an updated Folkways experience such a big deal to me?

When I was eight years old, I got my first library card and was able to check out both books and records. I told the librarian that I was interested in guitar and she suggested that I look in the "folk" section. There was something in the first rack that spoke to me immediately—a recording by a handsome man wearing a suit and bowtie, holding a large guitar. He had the awe-inspiring name of [Lead Belly](#).

When I put the record on at home, I could picture him in my kitchen singing. He was there and I was there with him! When Lead Belly sang "[The Grey Goose](#)" the power of his voice and guitar sent me into the musical stratosphere, worlds away from the city limits of Concord, New Hampshire. He wasn't singing about school buses, or learning to eat with a fork, or the importance of saying please and thank you; he was singing about a goose that could not be killed with a knife or a saw or a hog's jaw. He sang about things that I didn't always understand, but he sang in a way that invited me along for the ride.

I felt included and uplifted and very, very curious. And then I started to play guitar, with gusto.

Although Lead Belly was, and still is, my main man, it's worth noting that much of the Folkways catalog set my mind on fire. I could spot those records from across the room. The look was unique. And the sound was dependable. Driftwood and bent nails, chicken feathers and scaffolding planks. No fluff. No gloss. [Woody Guthrie](#), [Barbara Dane with The Chambers Brothers](#), [Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee](#), [Pete Seeger](#), [Ella Jenkins](#), [Elizabeth Cotten](#), [The New Lost City Ramblers](#)—music by people who looked like me and also by those who didn't. I see now that, at the time, I was living in somewhat of a white monoculture, but these records communicated our country as a crazy quilt of songs, sounds, and stories. I wanted to know more.

As the oldest of three siblings, I made most of the decisions about what we listened to at home, but we listened together as a family. It was this shared experience that I was yearning for when I walked into Tower Records that day. I saw children's music in the children's section and grown-up music everywhere else. Eventually, I discovered that [Sweet Honey in the Rock](#), Taj Majal, [Jerry Garcia](#) and David Grisman had made deep soulful recordings for families. But I didn't find the 21st century version of the dusty sonic trails that I'd grown up with as a kid, the records that made me want to sing and play and discover the world.

I went home from the record store that day empty-handed, and I wondered if a rustic all-ages sound was even feasible in this corporate age. Maybe it was a personal dream based on experiences that were mine alone. I decided to try and create what I was hearing—to try and take the spirit of [Lead Belly](#) and make something for these modern times. I did recognize that it was foolish to imagine that I would ever come close to his genius, but I was inspired, doing what inspired people do.

And so I made my own music for the young and old alike. And I've been doing it for almost twenty years. Whenever anyone asks why, I say because I was looking for something that I couldn't find, the contemporary equivalent of [Lead Belly's](#) Folkways Records. And I wanted my daughter to know that music was something that we could enjoy *together*.

Folkways records were my multicultural education in a stifling Eurocentric world. They were educational for me in the way that life is educational. Mysterious, limitless, comforting, joyous, and beckoning, they invited me to walk out into the fray and participate. These records sang to me of the deepest pitfalls and best possibilities. They told me in a thousand roundabout ways that something important was missing from the textbooks that we joylessly chewed our way through in grade school.

Folkways records, particularly the ones that Lead Belly made, said to me that there are songs to be sung and stories to be told and, although they may not always be easy to find, they are somewhere and they are important. If you know your story and I know my story, we have something to talk about. Or dance about. Or sing about.

Lead Belly's music was for me the ultimate expression of the Folkways experience and when I listened to it, the message was loud and clear: this world is big and broad and people are hurting and spirits need comforting and restoration. But there is joy and there is mystery and, never forget, an eternal sense of possibility. And, as I learned the day I first heard Lead Belly's music, there is a "Gray Goose" that can't be killed. In spite of all efforts, in the end, it flies across the ocean with a long string of goslings. And they're all going, "Quank! Quank!"

***Dan Zanes** is a GRAMMY Award-winning musician and performer of children's music. His work appears on over twenty albums, including Elizabeth Mitchell's [Sunny Day](#) and [The Sounding Joy](#), which are available on Smithsonian Folkways.*