THE 12-STRING GUITAR
AS PLAYED BY LEDBELLY
An Instruction Record by Peter Seeger

Folkways Records CRB 8

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

MT 588 S4532 1972 MUSIC
INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

HOW CLOSELY SHOULD ONE TRY AND IMITATE LEADBELLY?

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

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

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

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

HISTORY OF THE 12 STRING GUITAR

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

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

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

*If anyone knows any authoritative history of the 12-stringed instrument prior to the 19th Century, this writer would like to hear from them. It is well known that lutes usually had double strings, and the "Portuguese guitar" has five sets of double strings. Mandolins, and probably dozens or hundreds of other plucked stringed instruments of Europe also use double strings. The guitar itself, it is generally believed, was brought to Europe in the 12th Century by Gypsies. Its ancestor is the Persian Tar, and one of its most illustrious cousins is the East Indian Sitar.
as for a six string guitar. But it is customary to tune all twelve strings slightly lower in pitch, so when one fingers an "E" chord, it may come out sounding like C or D. The D chord may sound Bb or C. The reason for tuning the strings slack once may have been to keep from buckling the fragile guitar frame, since bringing the strings up to proper tension might put half a ton of stress on the bridge. I think, also, the presence of so many high pitched strings makes it possible to play a chord without giving as much of a rumbling, boomy tone as a six-stringer would give, if tuned so low.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHERE TO BUY A TWELVE STRING GUITAR

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

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

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

Twelve String Guitar Made By Stanley Francis, Liverpool, England

TAKING CARE OF THE GUITAR

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

*Such as Vega, Gibson, Gretsch, Harmony, Stella, etc.
best to replace all 12 strings at once. (Except in replacing an occasional broken string). The tone seems to match better.

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

**Fingerpicks and Thumb Picks**

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

**What Kind of Strings to Use?**

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

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

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

**Further Notes on the 12-String Guitar**

by Bruce Jackson

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

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

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

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

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

Try tuning by harmonics. It works like this: say you've got your lowest string where you want it (C), and are tuning the 5th set to the 6th. Place your left index finger just over the 5th fret of the lowest sixth string so it barely touches, then pluck with a fingernail or pick; you'll hear a harmonic, a note quite a bit higher than what you usually get. Do the same thing at the 7th fret of the next set -- you should get the same harmonic (see fig. 1).

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

![Fig. 1](image)

Eleven steps total. You tune the bottom four sets, using harmonics and octave harmonics, then the first set by the harmonic of the thin string on the 6th set, then tune down to the second set. It sounds complicated, but if
"Negro Folk Songs As Sung By Leadbelly" appeared, Leadbelly himself had this to say about it:

There in a short story about my life and I don't think any of
that would say anything about me. I just learned from the
people I met and all that stuff. I learned a thing or two.

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

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

The following recordings are available through Folkways:

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

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

FA2034 Leadbelly Legacy, Vol. 3
Fort Worth and Dallas Blues, (Good
Morning Blues) - Black Snake, Roberta,
part 1, Roberta, part 2, Driving Song,
Daddy, I'm Coming Back To You, See
See Rider, Pigmeat.

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

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

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

LEADBELLY SONG BOOKS AND RECORDINGS

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

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

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

FA2942 Leadbelly's Last Sessions, Vol. 2
Midnight Special, Boll Weevil Blues:
Careless Love, Easy Rider, Cry for Me,
Ain't Goin' Drink No More, Birmingham
Jail, Old Riley, Julie Ann Johnson, It's
Right Like That, 4, 5, and 6, Good Morn-
ing Babe, Jailhouse Blues, I'm About
25c Dude, How Come You Do Me Like You Do Do Do,
Hello Central, Give Me Long Distance
Please, The Hesitation Blues, I'll Be Down
on the Last Bread Wagon, Springtime in the
Rockies, Chinatown, Rock Island Line,
Backwater Blues, Sweet Mary, Irene, Easy,
Mr. Tom, In the Evening When the Sun Goes
Down, I'm Alone Because I Love You,
House of the Rising Sun, Mary Don't You
Weep and Don't You Moan, Talk About Cannin
Street, Fannin Street, Sugar Beer, Didn't
Old John Cross the Water, Nobody Knows
When You're Down and Out, Bully of the Town,
Sweet Jenny Lee, Yellow Gal, He Was the
Man, We're in the Same Boat Brother, Leav-
ing Blues.

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

THE 12 STRING GUITAR AS PLAYED BY
LEADBELLY

Verbatim transcript

SIDE 1, BAND 1

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

Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and
Hollaway's LP FA 204.

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

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

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

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

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

Compare that same chord on a regular six string
guitar:

Furthermore, the double strings give it a rich tone

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

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

* I met Jesse again in 1962, and find he's using all 12 strings now
(flat wound, steel guitar type) and unusual on all but the 6th and
6th pairs.
But not as pointed:

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

*(Living In The Country)*

Tune by Pete Seeger, ©1963 by Fall River Music, Suite 602, 200 W. 57th St., N.Y.C. Complete guitar part available from them. Recorded on Folkways LP FA0499 ("Nonemch").

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

(same as above)

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

On the twelfth string all you can do is give it a slide, perhaps
Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?
Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?
I'm dain! all right, good mornin', how are you?
(spoke) Come with me now...

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

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

(spoke) Take it easy.

(Repeat same passage)

Yes, yes

(Sung) Hitler started out in nineteen hundred and thirty two
Hitler started out in nineteen hundred and thirty two
When he started out, he took the home from the Jew
We're gonna tear Hitler down...
Almost half of his songs, Leadbelly accompanied in the D position

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

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

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

But they alternate

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

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

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

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., and Helicon L.P. 1954

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

Now, there's something else important to note here. He lifts up the fingers of his left hand, dampening the strings, lifting them up all the way off the string, on the second beat of every measure, like this:

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

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

© Complete words and music in Negro Folksongs as Sung by Leadbelly, MacMillan
Listen hear people, listen to me
Don't try to buy no home down in Washington, D.C.
Cause it's a bourgeois town
Ooh! It's a bourgeois town
I got the bourgeois blues, I'm gonna
Spread the news all around
Me an my sweet wife and Miss Barnicle...

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

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

\[ \begin{align*}
T & \quad 3 \\
A & \quad 5 \\
B & \quad 3 \\
\end{align*} \]

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

\[ \begin{align*}
T & \quad 5 \\
A & \quad 5 \\
B & \quad 5 \\
\end{align*} \]

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

\[ \begin{align*}
T & \quad \quad \quad \quad \\
A & \quad \quad \quad \quad \\
B & \quad \quad \quad \quad \\
\end{align*} \]

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

\[ \begin{align*}
T & \quad \quad \quad \quad \\
A & \quad \quad \quad \quad \\
B & \quad \quad \quad \quad \\
\end{align*} \]

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

And then he does a simple walking bass:
And notice that nice slide into the D chord. Put your fingers down in the lower of the two positions

T  
A  
B  

And then keeping the pressure on, you slide it up

T 1 3  3  
A 1 3  
B T SL  

When you do it quickly -

T 1 3  3  
A  3  
B T SL  T  

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

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

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

T 1 3  3  
A 1 3  3  
B 1 3  3  

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

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

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

(almost the same as previous passage)

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

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

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

She take me to the house, she called me honey
She said she loved me but she just wanted my little money
She was a noted rider
Hoo! She ain't no good.
She got drunk this morning, woke up the neighborhood.
She was a good lookin' woman, she had great big legs...

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

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

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

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

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

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

And never, never, an A minor

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

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

Notice that he usually plays an A-seventh chord

You know, the words of this song may be sarcastic nonsense - or not, but the music is unequivocal and magnificent, I think. You try playing that:
And in this key of A seventh, or whatever you want to call it, he also plays that slow and moving song which he first called "Black Girl", later on "My Girl" and Woody and I learned it from him and sang it as "Little Girl".

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

© Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book, Oak Pub., 2nd edition, 1964

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

But it - you just put your middle finger - of your left hand down on the first string
And hold it there while you slide up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

© Complete words and music in American Favorite Ballads as sung by Pete Seeger, Oak Pub., and Folkways LP FA 2450

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

(additional instruments you hear: banjo and 6-string guitar)
Now there I had just three fingers down.

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

---

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

©Complete words and music in Leadbelly Song Book. Oak Pub.,
and follow-up LP. FA 2408

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

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

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

Watch for those chords:

---

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

Or would this be better?

Or maybe it's just like this

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

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

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

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and folioways IP 'TA 2034
Now, if you've got courage and power, try this next.
It's not as hard as it looks. Got to have nerve to
try it. Go wayyy up the neck.

**Note:**

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

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

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

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

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

And that seventh measure, that's the tricky part

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Now, the thumb comes up and helps out on the top strings.

You can vary it. Try it different ways.

But in any case, keep a rock steady rhythm with your thumb, whether you go high or low.

Later on he takes a break, and tries syncopating the bass.

Here's another blues, using a similar opening pattern.

Yes, I'm leavin', leavin', mama
Hoo!

But I don't know which-a-way to go.

Yes, I'm leavin', I'm leavin' mama,
But I don't know which-a-way to go.
'Cause that woman I been living with for twenty years, mama
Says she don't want me no more.
And I feel like walkin', mama,

Notice how the thumb comes up to play the second string. Gives it a kind of definiteness that the finger couldn't.

Frequently, you'll notice that you have a choice, also, whether you want to play the thumb on just one string, or a whole chord. Whether just bass notes:

Or bring it up on every other beat.

Or maybe just bass and chords.

And now I've left - until now, one of the greatest of all, known as Fannin' Street, sometimes called 'Mister Tom Hughes' Town'. I trust you can follow the tablature. Nothing brand new here, except the accelerating speed and drive with which he plays it:

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

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

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

He'd go

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

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

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

He'd usually play that instrumental break on the first string, though. It was more commonly done like this: 
If we have time, one more blues in the E position—remember, it's actually C. I think you can follow the notes. Easy Rider.

(Spoken) Hey, Defense!

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

(Tail end, talking, drums, and piano)

(Other instruments like on this recording)

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

One other key Huddie Ledbetter mainly played in, the C position, which on his guitar, remember, came out sounding more like A flat or G, actual pitch. Here's a blues with a walking bass, similar to the one we heard in G, a long while ago.
It was midnight on the sea,
The band was playing "Nearer my God, to thee."
"Fare thee well, fare thee well, Fare thee well, Fare thee well, Fare thee well."
The captain hollered "All aboard!
"Fare thee well, Fare thee well."

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

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

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

Make it sing in unison with the first.

(Recording begins here)

Try these on for size:
Also in the C position, Leadbelly plays the well-known "Salty Dog".

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

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

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

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

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

Going home to Mary, sweet Mary!

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

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

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

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

BAND 2

Now, Leadbelly rarely played outside these five keys, E, A, D, G, and C - keeping in mind that all of them turn out about three or four notes lower in pitch, because he tuned his strings slack. A few early records, though, he made in F. Here is one of them.
Oh, Roberta, honey where you been so long
Oh, Roberta, honey where you been so long
Yes, I been to the country
With my long clothes on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Poor Howard's a poor boy,
Poor Howard's dead and gone
Left me here to sing this song
Who been here since I been gone
BAND 3

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

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

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

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

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

One octave below the fourth strings

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

Bells of Rhymney: Is there

Say the brown bells of Merthyr,
Who made the nine owner?
Say the black bells of Rhondda
And who robbed the miner? Say the grim bells of Blaen—on.

Here are the chords I use:

Then for the middle two lines:

Sometimes I use these chords for the 4th line.

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

"Why so worried?"

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

The chord up the neck here:

(x means repeat previous measure)

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

(Free rhythm) (capo on ninth, D minor)

(comb through) "A ship there was..."

and she sailed the sea— Shes loaded
A ship there was, and she sails the sea
She loaded deep as deep can be
But not so deep as the love I'm in
And I know not how to sink or swim.*

(whistle)

Freight train, freight train, going so fast
Freight train, freight train, going so fast
Please don't tell them what train I'm on
So they won't know which route I have gone.

You know, it's no wonder that hobo songs have always been popular with young people. You want to travel, you want to see people, learn things. And - maybe all of us are hitchhikers in one way or another. When you go into a big library you hitch a ride with the experience of every writer of every book there. And here on this record we've taken a bit of a hitchhike trip with old Huddie Ledbetter, who was a wonderful man and a wonderful musician, and we'll never see his like again, never. But if he could see you now, trying to master this instrument that he knew and loved so well, he might say something like this:

"Now, just take it easy. Relax your mind and take your time. Play it like you feel it and soon you believe it. You're doin' all right. Just be yourself. There now; we're fine as wine in summertime."

When I die, just bury me deep
Down at the foot of old Chestnut Street
So I can hear old Number Nine
As she goes roarin' by,
Freight Train, freight train,
Going so fast.
Freight train, freight train,
Going so fast
Please don't tell them what train I'm on
So they won't know which route I have gone.
Folk music really should be learned by ear, not by reading the printed page. To try and teach a child how to read music before it can play it, seems to me like teaching a baby to read before it could talk, or teaching some child dance notation before you let it learn how to dance. And if you want to learn how to play the guitar, you should spend long hours watching and listening to the one you want to learn from. But Huddie Ledbetter is long gone, and we'll have to rely on the printed page a little, after all. On this record I've tried to show you which string he's playing and which finger he uses, by writing out each piece of music in tablature. Not in usual music notation. Tablature is a special kind of music notation, just for guitar players. You're going to have to learn it, to get the most out of the record. So pick up the brochure which accompanies the record, and read through it with me now.

The six horizontal lines represent the six pairs of strings of the twelve string guitar, and the bottom line represents the lowest pair.

And the numbers written on the lines represent the fret at which the string is pressed down by the fingers of the left hand. The zero means you play the open string without fretting it at all.

Incidentally, now's your best chance to get it tuned up with me, so we can go through the record together. Don't bother that it's not exact concert pitch. I'll explain that later.

Now, if you're still looking at the page, here's how a scale would sound if you played "do re mi" right from the bottom string up.

And here would be a "chromatic scale", as they say. That includes all the black notes on the piano as well. If you started on just the lower string alone.

And on the top string alone.

Now, if I play a whole chord, it would be written this way.

That's an E chord, and I've put a diagram down - a picture, too.

There's an A chord.

D chord.

G chord.

C chord.

BAND 2.

Now, so much for the way tablature indicates the pitch of a note, and the string that makes it. Rhythm and time values of the notes are indicated much as in usual music notation. Supposing a song is in what is called 4/4 time. It's the most common time we use in this country. One two three four, as we used to count in the army, Hup two Hip Ho! Now, right after the three-letter, TAB, you'll see two numerals, four and four.

And then, the vertical lines across all of the six horizontal lines - they mark off the rhythm, every four beats. These are called bar lines, and the spaces between them called measures. Now, see if you can follow this. I'll start on the sixth string.
Hope you got it. As in regular notation, the shorter notes are indicated by little tails on the end of the stems. They're called "eighth notes." The regular notes are called "quarter notes." You don't have to know why, but here's a batch of little eighth notes. Now, I'm still beating four beats to the measure. One, two, three, four.

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

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

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

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

Did you get that? Try it on the top string.

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

Or this one

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

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

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

Now ¾ time, or waltz time, would be written like this, the letter three over the four.

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

Try it again

Or this

Now, there's many other kinds of rhythms. Some square dance tunes might be printed as 2/4 time, instead of 4/4 time. That is accenting every second beat, instead of every fourth beat.
And there's 6/8 time, and many other kinds of rhythm, but I'll let you learn about them from better music teachers than me. For this record, we'll skip 'em.

**BAND 3**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then suddenly you leave out the first note.

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

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

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- Means "get louder"
- Means "get softer"
- rit. = "slow down"
- accel = "speed up"
- ff loud
- ffp very loud
- Pp soft
- pp very soft
- means "repeat the previous measure"

The music between the double bar lines should be repeated.

**BAND 4**

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

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

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

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

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

Try it

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

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

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

(same as above)

BAND 5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE END

Photo by Mrs. Wah Ming Chang, Los Angeles, 1945. Leadbelly was about 69 years old.
Photo from 16 mm, movies taken by Blanding Sloan and Wah Ming Chang near Los Angeles 1945

Photo by Mrs. Wah Ming Chang, 1945

Photo taken in New York City about 1946-48.