

Lead Belly: Musical Bridge Builder

Lead Belly had all the odds stacked against him. He spent most of his life poor. He served time in prison for murder. As an African American, he lived in a time of terrible racial unfairness. Yet his self-taught gifts turned him into a huge force in popular music.

He was born Huddie (pronounced hew-dee) William Ledbetter, in 1888 or 1889, near Mooringsport, Louisiana, the only child of a farming couple. By 1903, Ledbetter was already playing the accordion and church organ when his father gave him a six-string guitar. “When he give it to me,” Ledbetter recalled, “glory to God, I was gone some.”

An eighth-grade dropout, Ledbetter rambled around Louisiana and Texas, switching to a twelve-string guitar to perform his music, which drew on old folk songs, blues, and early jazz. In 1918, he shot and killed a man in Texas during an argument. In prison, fellow inmates nicknamed him Lead Belly (sometimes spelled “Leadbelly”), and it stuck. During a prison visit by the governor, Lead Belly pleaded in song for a pardon. The governor was swayed, and Lead Belly was freed in 1924. Six years later, he was in prison again, in Louisiana, for assault. His talent was discovered there in 1933 by John Lomax, who was traveling the South to collect old folk songs for the Library of Congress.

After his release in 1934, Lead Belly joined Lomax as his driver, and Lomax began promoting his music. Almost overnight, Lead Belly rose to fame, and he became known as “the King of the Twelve-String Guitar.” But in a time when blacks were seen as second-class, Lomax (who was white) also mistreated Lead Belly by insisting he wear prison garb to perform and taking most of his earnings.



Lead Belly bitterly split from Lomax in 1935. Afterward, Lead Belly settled in New York, where he helped create a new folk movement, along with such white artists as Woody Guthrie.

Historians have found that most of Lead Belly’s “original” work borrows from earlier blues and folk music. But he made the songs his own by changing words, rhythm, and melody. In doing so, he built a bridge from America’s musical past to its present.

Yet Lead Belly didn’t earn his place among musical giants until after his death from illness, in 1949. The songs and recordings he left behind are now credited with influencing modern folk, rock, and blues music.

“Lead Belly is still a mighty inspiration,” said rock legend Van Morrison.

Sources: *American History*, *Guitar Player*, LeadBelly.com, *The New York Times*, Songwriters Hall of Fame

LISTEN:

“Cotton Fields”

“Goodnight, Irene”

“Midnight Special”

“Pick a Bale of Cotton”

“Rock Island Line”