

Lead Belly: Musical Bridge Builder

Lead Belly had the odds stacked against him. He spent most of his life in poverty. He served lengthy prison terms, including one for murder. He lived, as an African American, in an era of humiliating racial discrimination. Yet his self-taught gifts turned him into one of the most enduring forces in popular music.

“Lead Belly still represents the ‘American dream’— that naïve idea we Americans have that anything is possible,” contemporary blues-rocker Benjamin Booker said. “Sometimes it is.”

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, he rambled around Louisiana and Texas, switching to a twelve-string guitar to perform songs that drew on an array of old folk songs, blues, and early jazz. In 1918, Ledbetter was convicted in Texas of shooting and killing a man 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. Impressed, the governor eventually obliged, 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 scouring 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 became known as “the King of the Twelve-String Guitar.” But in a time when blacks were considered second-class citizens, Lomax, who was



white, also exploited Lead Belly by playing up his criminal past, 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 forge the newly emerging folk revival, alongside such white artists as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.

Historians trace most of Lead Belly’s “original” work to earlier blues and folk music, but he made the songs his own, changing words, rearranging the rhythm, adjusting the melody. In doing so, he built a bridge between America’s musical past and contemporary tastes.

“Perhaps more than any other folk artist, his ability to cross genres and musical paths was unparalleled,” said Robert Santelli, executive director of the Grammy Museum.

Yet Lead Belly’s place in history wasn’t secured until after his death, in 1949, of ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease). The songs and sounds he left behind are now credited with igniting the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s and Britain’s “skiffle” craze that gave birth to the Beatles.

“Lead Belly is still a mighty inspiration,” said rock legend Van Morrison. “Arguably, more relevant today than ever.”

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

LISTEN:

“Cotton Fields”
“Gallis Pole” (also known as “Gallows Pole”)
“Goodnight, Irene”
“Midnight Special”
“Pick a Bale of Cotton”
“Rock Island Line”

READ:

The Life and Legend of Leadbelly, by Charles K. Wolfe and Kip Lornell (HarperCollins, 1992): This well-researched biography traces the life of Huddie Ledbetter from cotton picker to street performer to convict to trailblazing folk and blues artist.