



LEAD BELLY: MUSICAL BRIDGE-BUILDER

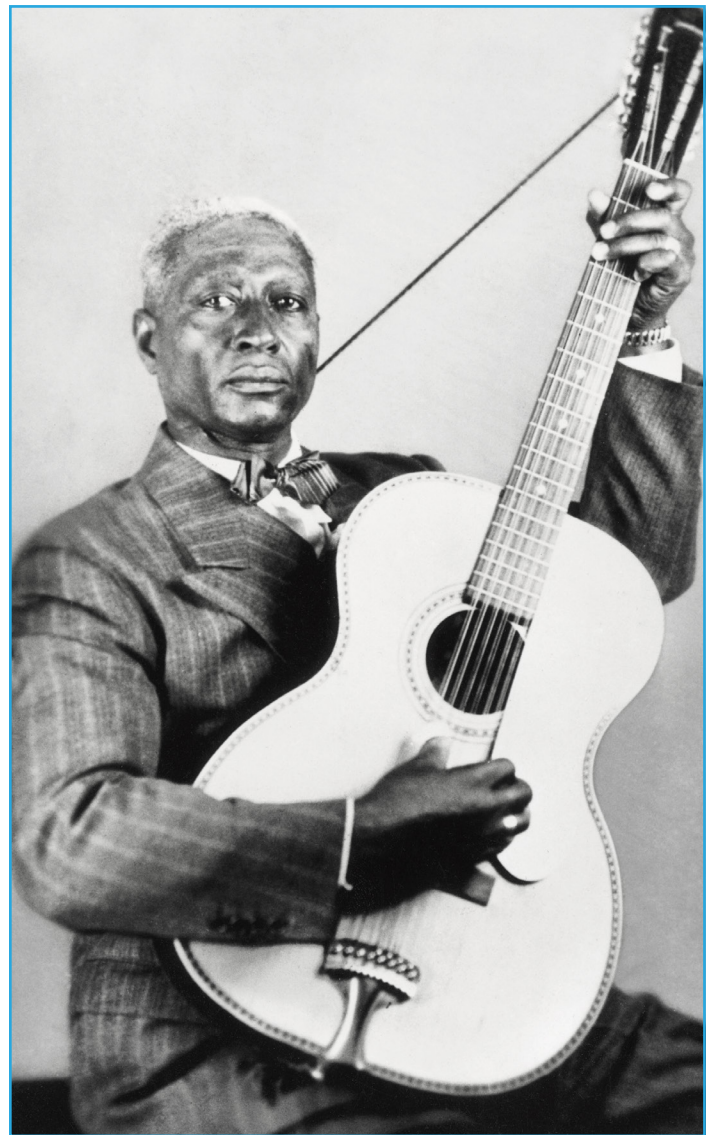
Lead Belly had all the odds stacked against him. He spent most of his life poor. He served time in prison for murder. As an African American, he lived in a time of terrible racial unfairness. Yet his self-taught gifts turned him into a huge force in popular music.

He was born Huddie (pronounced “HEW-dee”) William Ledbetter in 1888 or 1889 near Mooringsport, Louisiana, the only child of farmers. By 1903, he was already playing the accordion and church organ when his father gave him a guitar.

An eighth-grade dropout, Ledbetter moved around Louisiana and Texas, performing his music, which he built on old folksongs, blues, and early jazz. In 1918, he shot and killed a man in Texas during an argument and went to prison. Inmates nicknamed him Lead Belly (sometimes spelled “Leadbelly”), and the nickname stuck.

During a prison visit by the governor, Lead Belly performed a song he had written that asked for his release. The governor was moved by his song, and Lead Belly was freed in 1925. Eight years later, he was in prison again, this time in Louisiana, where his talent was discovered by John Lomax, who was traveling the South to collect old folksongs for the Library of Congress.

After Lead Belly was released from prison in 1934, he joined Lomax as his driver, and Lomax began



promoting his music. Almost overnight, Lead Belly became famous. But in a time when African Americans were seen as second-class citizens, Lomax

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LISTEN

“Cotton Fields,” “The Midnight Special,” “Pick a Bale of Cotton,” “Rock Island Line”



LEAD BELLY: MUSICAL BRIDGE-BUILDER (CONTINUED)

(who was white) also mistreated Lead Belly by making him wear prison clothes to perform and taking most of his money.

Lead Belly stopped working with Lomax in 1935 and moved to New York, where he joined other folksingers like Woody Guthrie.

Historians have found that most of Lead Belly’s early music comes from the blues and folk styles. 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 country, modern folk, rock, and blues music.



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What does it mean to have the “odds stacked” against you? Use the clues words and phrases in the first paragraph to explain its meaning.

2. What two instruments did Lead Belly play before he learned to play the guitar?

3. Where was Lead Belly when his musical talent was discovered? Do you think many musical artists are discovered in the same place? Why or why not?
