

## LEAD BELLY: MUSICAL BRIDGE-BUILDER

Lead Belly had the odds stacked against him. He spent most of his life in poverty. He served lengthy stints in prison, including for murder. As an African American, he lived 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, he 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 repertoire, which he built on an array of old folksongs, blues, and early jazz. In 1918, he 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 1925. Six years later, he was in prison again, this time in Louisiana, for assault. His talent was discovered there in 1933 by John Lomax, who was scouring the South to collect old folksongs for the Library of Congress.

After his release in 1934, Lead Belly joined Lomax as his driver, and Lomax began promoting his music. The national press took notice, and almost overnight, Lead Belly became



famous. 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 a newly emerging folk movement, alongside such white artists as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.

Historians trace most of Lead Belly’s 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 ancestry and contemporary tastes.

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### LISTEN

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

## LEAD BELLY: MUSICAL BRIDGE-BUILDER (CONTINUED)

“Perhaps more than any other folk artist, his ability to cross genres and musical paths was unparalleled,” said music historian Robert Santelli.

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 helping ignite the folk revival movement 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.”



### CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In the fourth paragraph, what does the word “repertoire” mean in this context? Circle any clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning and then define this term below in your own words.

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2. Do you agree or disagree with the quotation from Benjamin Booker: “Lead Belly still represents the ‘American dream’—that naïve idea we Americans have that anything is possible. Sometimes it is.” Why or why not?

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3. Explain in your own words why the author titled this essay “Musical Bridge Builder”? Highlight any evidence in the text that supports your answer.

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