Hudie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter

(Folk Musicians)

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Designed by Howard Paine

Hudie Ledbetter was born in Shiloh, Louisiana on January 21, 1888.

More than any other black folk-blues artist of his time, Leadbelly helped expose his race's vast musical riches to white America, and, in the process, helped preserve a folk legacy that has become a significant part of this nation's musical treasury. Leadbelly was not a blues singer in the traditional sense; he was, rather, more of a songster, that is, one who played blues, spirituals, pop, and prison songs, as well as dance tunes and folk ballads. That many of his songs carried a blues spirit could be traced back to the days when Leadbelly learned about the blues from seminal Texas bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson. But Leadbelly's greatest contribution to American music was in the folk field. Leadbelly classics such as "Goodnight Irene," "The Midnight Special," "Rock Island Line," "Cotton Fields," and "Bring Me a Little Water, Sylvie" all contain black folk elements that many prewar bluesmen shunned, at least in the recording studio.

Leadbelly certainly led the life of a bluesman. Born and raised in rural Louisiana to hardworking sharecropper parents, he left home as a youth and wandered through Louisiana and East Texas. Though little is known about Leadbelly's early life-he rarely spoke of those days-it is assumed that sometime around 1915he met Blind Lemon Jefferson and worked and traveled with the legendary bluesman. By this time, Leadbelly (who played guitar, mandolin, piano, and accordion) had settled on the twelve-string guitar as his instrument of choice. He had probably heard the guitar's rich, ringing sound from Mexican musicians who often played in Texas saloons and bordellos. Leadbelly also developed a wonderfully rhythmic guitar style in which he imitated the walking bass figures commonly employed by

barrelhouse piano players on Fannin Street, the most celebrated street in Shreveport's red-light district, where Leadbelly was known to have worked in his early years.

A large, muscular man who had an explosive temper, Leadbelly had frequent run-ins with the law. The worst occurred in 1917 when he killed a man in Texas, was convicted of murder, and sentenced to a thirty-year prison term at the Huntsville Prison Farm. Six years were added to the sentence when he tried to escape. Yet Leadbelly was a shrewd prisoner. He used his musical talent to avoid harsh work details and, incredibly, was able to wrangle a pardon from Texas governor Pat Neff in 1925 after he composed and sang a tune for him pleading for freedom.

Leadbelly returned to the Lake Caddo district of Louisiana where he had been raised. But in 1930 he was arrested again, this time for assault with intent to murder. Leadbelly was sent to the Angola Prison Farm in Louisiana where, in1933, John and Alan Lomax discovered him. At Angola to record folk songs sung by prisoners, the Lomaxes were struck by Leadbelly's powerful voice and rhythmic guitar style as well as his wide knowledge of black folk songs. Thanks to the Lomaxes, who petitioned Louisiana governor O.K. Allen to pardon Leadbelly because of his folk singing resources, Leadbelly secured his freedom in 1934and went to work for the Lomaxes as a chauffeur and occasional performer.

A year later, Leadbelly had taken a second wife and settled in New York City, where he became a favorite among left-leaning white folksingers of the 1930s.Leadbelly became friends and musical partners with Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger as well as black bluesmen Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. With them he performed at hootenannies and union halls, often in support of left-wing causes. That Leadbelly got involved with politics and remained for the rest of his days in New York, separated him from his rural Southern roots, and he thus forsook the chance to build a loyal black audience for his many recordings. From1934 to his death in 1949, Leadbelly recorded for the Library of Congress and Folkways Records as well as other labels. Though his recordings were powerful examples of black folk music, what few were sold most likely went to white listeners.

Leadbelly did not, however, concern himself with just black folk music. Influenced by Guthrie and the other New York-based folksingers, Leadbelly wrote songs such as "Bourgeois Blues" and "Scottsboro Boys" that carried strong political messages. Despite his stature among white folksingers of the l930s andl940s, Leadbelly made little money. He and his wife lived constantly on the brink of poverty.

In 1949, after an unsuccessful trip to Paris where he had hoped to build a European following, Leadbelly was diagnosed as suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease, a sickness that destroys the muscular system. Lou Gehrig's ended Hudie's life that same year on December 6, 1949 in New York, NY. Ironically, in 1950, the Weavers, a folk group led by Pete Seeger, recorded Leadbelly's "Good Night Irene." The song went to number 1 on Billboard's pop charts. Since then a number of artists and rock groups have recorded Leadbelly songs. In 1988, Columbia Records released Folkways: A Vision Shared, which contained renditions of Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie songs by such artists as Taj Mahal, Brian Wilson, Bruce Springsteen, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Bob Dylan, and John Mellencamp. The net profits went to purchase the Folkways record catalog for the Smithsonian Institution. Leadbelly was inducted into the

Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1986 and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in1988 as one of the music form's chief pioneers.

Sources:

Encyclopedia Britannica

Encyclopedia Africana