9 Leadbelly

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Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly (1888–1949),[1] was one of the most unique, fascinating and influential singer-songwriters of the foundational American blues and folk traditions – a starting point of the contemporary singer-songwriter development. Born in 1888 on Jeter Plantation, near Mooringsport, Louisiana, he belonged to the first generation of blues artists – formed by itinerant African American musicians with outsider lifestyles, seeking social advancement in spite of the Jim Crow south. Stylistically, however, his extensive and varied repertoire has earned him a differentiated and sometimes peculiar status in blues studies and popular music history, as he is often considered a songster rather than a bluesman.[2]

A multi-instrumentalist who could play guitar, piano, mandolin, harmonica, violin and accordion, Leadbelly gained notoriety as the 'the King of Twelve-String Guitar', developing a distinctive, powerful drive that has had a profound impact on the evolution of popular music. Throughout the decades, his obscure and appealing persona has constantly inspired further reinterpretations of material he composed or first popularised by musicians from different scenes and styles, ranging from the mid-twentieth century folk revival, roots and surf rock of Pete Seeger, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and The Beach Boys respectively, to the more recent grunge and garage rock sounds of Nirvana and the White Stripes.[3]

Leadbelly's case poses significant challenges for any researcher, writer or reader discussing his music, life, and legend. Many episodes of his life remain unclear, others have been interpreted in contradictory ways, and the artist himself continuously reconstructed his persona through malleable stories. The aim of this chapter is to offer a reliable and nuanced framework for approaching such a complex character, based on the most relevant stages of Leadbelly's artistic and life trajectory. In this process, I will refer to significant events and circumstances, relating them to particular songs and styles, and incorporating previous discussions about the musical, socio-political, and racial meanings and implications of his remarkable journey.

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Figure 9.1. Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter), New York, 1944–5.

Rambling singer-songwriters in the deep south

Leadbelly grew up around Caddo Parish, Louisiana, a frontier, rural area that hosted one of the highest concentrations of African Americans west of the Mississippi River.[4] As a strong, rambunctious young man, he proved to be an effective agricultural worker, picking cotton and learning about farming and cowboy culture, and, by the time he was fourteen, he had won a local reputation for his guitar playing and singing. His relentless progression, however, would soon be inextricably bound to problems with the law.

In 1903, after having seen him returning home with cuts and bruises from fights, his father gave him a Colt pistol; 'a typical coming-of-age present in the frontier South' that came with some rather ambiguous advice

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in favour of self-defence.[5] A few weeks later, Leadbelly got into a dispute over his girlfriend Eula Lee, which ended with him pistol-whipping a young boy on the side of the head. Fortunately, the sheriff let him go with a $25 fine for carrying a concealed weapon.

Anxious to see the outside world, Leadbelly continuously defied his parents by travelling nineteen miles from Mooringsport to Shreveport, where he explored the exciting and often troubled nightlife of the red-light district. It was centred on Fannin Street, a row of saloons, brothels, dance halls, and gambling houses that operated legally between 1903 and 1917. Leadbelly's experience in the more competitive, crowded, and celebratory environment of Fannin Street made him grow personally and artistically. The popular barrelhouse piano players and their rolling-bass technique made an impact on his already dynamic guitar picking and songwriting. Moreover, blues became a bigger part of his repertoire, as it was more popular in this 'sinful' environment than the country-folk songs he had generally been singing. A groundbreaking formative experience, his time in Shreveport inspired the composition 'Fannin Street', which dealt with the acts of defying his mother and sister, and proving his growing independence. It also served Leadbelly to affirm himself as a singer-songwriter, and express his already self-conscious rambling character. Overall, the song manifested the intense contrast between the correctness of family life in respectable, small communities, and the thrilling, instinct-liberating ambiance of Fannin Street and, more generally, of the musician's life.

For a brief time Leadbelly returned home, but at eighteen he started wandering again, mainly through West Texas. After a period of promiscuity which culminated in his contracting gonorrhoea, he decided to settle down and married Lethe Henderson in 1908. The couple moved to Dallas in 1910, where Leadbelly met his greatest partner and mentor: Blind Lemon Jefferson, a blind singer-guitarist who would later become the first country blues recording star. Both musicians met each other around Deep Ellum, a thriving area similar to Shreveport's Fannin Street where 'hobos invariably landed and where African American, Hispanic, and white cotton pickers were picked up'.[6] Like Leadbelly, Lemon had an eclectic repertoire ranging from old ballads to gospel songs, though he was first and foremost a blues singer. Together they played topical songs about historic events and localised situations of the day such as 'The Titanic', 'Boll Weevil Song', and 'Fort Worth and Dallas Blues'; as well as celebrated blues standards such as 'C.C. Rider' and 'Matchbox Blues', which would later be extensively covered by blues, rhythm and blues, and rock 'n' roll performers.

Leadbelly also learnt new techniques from Lemon, most notably the slide guitar, and recorded several songs in tribute to his beloved friend. The most special one was his composition 'Silver City Bound', a travelling song which remembered their trips around Texas. In the spoken

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introduction to the recording, Leadbelly expressed the desire for freedom entrenched in blues lives: 'We get out two guitars; we just ride … anything. We didn't have to pay no money in them times. We get on the train; the driver takes us anywhere we want to go.'

Finally, he also explained some of their business 'planning', typically related to women and money: 'There's a lot of pretty girls out there [Silver City], and that's what we were looking for. We like for women to be around, 'cause when women's around, that brings men and that brings money.'[7]

Accommodation and resistance in the Jim Crow era

Due to his living circumstances and volatile temper, Leadbelly was incarcerated several times in Texas and Louisiana, a background that became fodder for the construction of his myth,[8] and his presentation in the college concert and folk circuits of northern cities.[9] Surprisingly, unlike the vast majority of inmates, Leadbelly was able to contradict the restrictive statues of Jim Crow, and gain his freedom repeatedly through several formulae, most notably through the creativity and persuasive powers of his pardon songs.

In 1915 he was arrested, allegedly for attacking a woman who had rebuffed his advances. He was convicted of carrying a pistol, and sentenced to thirty days in the Harrison County (Texas) chain gang. Three days into his sentence, however, Leadbelly managed to escape. His adventure may be pictured and understood through the heartfelt and ironic lyrics of 'Take this Hammer', a prison song which he popularised in the early 1940s:

> Take this hammer, carry it to the captain (x3), tell him I'm gone (x2)
> If he asks you was I runnin' (x3), tell him I was flyin' (x2)
> If he asks you was I laughin' (x3), tell him I was cryin' (x2)
> They wanna feed me cornbread and molasses (x3), but I got my pride (x2)

After a brief stay in New Orleans, Leadbelly returned to north-eastern Texas and changed his name to Walter Boyd. He survived picking cotton and playing music occasionally, but in 1917 found himself in trouble again, and was charged for murder and assault to murder. Though the circumstances remain unclear, he was sentenced to 'a minimum of seven years and a maximum of thirty years in the notorious Texas penal system'.[10] After two failed attempts to escape, he was transferred to Sugarland Prison, a state prison outside Houston which became associated with the traditional folk song 'Midnight Special'. Told in the first person, the lyrics referred to the everyday conditions of prisoners, warned about the dangers of travelling to Houston, and talked about receiving news of deceased wives. Despite this, the prisoner ultimately finds a powerful glimpse of hope in the shining, 'ever-loving light' of the Southern Pacific passenger

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train, the Midnight Special. Its light represented salvation, and the train itself symbolised mobility and travel which provided the most tangible evidence of freedom for African Americans, a community emerging from a harsh history of enslavement and oppression.[11]

In 1924, the Governor of Texas Pat Neff initiated a tour around different prison camps, which often included entertainment shows by talented inmates like Leadbelly. Armed with his twelve-string Stella guitar and dressed up in a special white suit for important occasions, Leadbelly performed traditional African American songs, pleased the governor with hillbilly tunes, and even danced 'The Sugarland Shuffle', a parody of a frantic (black) man chopping cotton.

Once he established a strategic self-deprecating rapport with the authority audience, Leadbelly started singing a pardon song (later recorded as 'Governor Pat Neff') in which he pleaded for his liberation:

> Please, honourable governor, be good and kind,
> If I don't get a pardon, will you cut my time?
> If I had you, Governor Neff, like you got me,
> Wake up in the morning, I'd set you free.

Delighted with this apparently improvised tune, Neff – who had actually campaigned against pardons – agreed to set him free before leaving his office. Throughout the following year, the Governor returned several times to celebrate crowded parties with guests and inmate entertainers. Finally on 16 January 1925, he signed a full pardon for Leadbelly, who had served a bit more than six and a half years of his seven-to-thirty-year sentence.

Gordon Parks' film *Leadbelly* (1976) provides an unmatched cinematographic rendition of Leadbelly's southern experiences, including a dramatic, caricaturised yet complex scene of the pardon plea to the Texas governor. Broadly situated in the context of the 1970s Blaxploitation cinema, the film inscribed Leadbelly's figure in the problematic and paradoxical post-civil rights movement era, and presented him as an inspirational model, 'as an example of a black man who survives, who uses his art to aid in that survival and to overcome the dominance of violence in his life'.[12]

The feeling of self-affirmation, masculinity and agency is particularly intense in the film's final scene, where the fictionalised Leadbelly, longing for his freedom, exclaims: 'And after seven years you ain't broke my body, you ain't broke my mind, you ain't broke my spirit.'

Liberation, mobility, and New York's folk revival

In 1930, five years after his release, Leadbelly got into a knife-fight over an argument with Dick Ellet, a respectable white citizen of Mooringsport, and was convicted of assault with intent to murder. He was sentenced

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to six to ten years of hard labour at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, 'a facility that made Sugarland look like easy time'.[13]

Immersed in their committed search for the uncontaminated 'purity' of African American folk songs, father and son folklorists John and Alan Lomax visited Angola in 1933 and 1934, making pioneering recordings of Leadbelly, as well as of other inmates and farmers throughout the south. Among Leadbelly's recordings was 'Governor O.K. Allen', a new pardon song addressed to the Governor of Louisiana that was personally delivered to him by the Lomaxes. Leadbelly was effectively liberated in 1934 and the popular legend – backed by both the Lomaxes and the artist himself – made the white 'ballad hunters' responsible for the black man's liberation. However, this version, which was widely accepted and reproduced at the time, was not accurate and has been contested with evidence showing that Leadbelly was actually released under Louisiana's 'good time' laws.[14]

Upon his release, Leadbelly and John Lomax formed a groundbreaking, mutually beneficial, and highly controversial partnership, which would ultimately expose the complexities of intercultural dialogues and relationships between different social and 'racial' groups. Leadbelly became Lomax's chauffeur and field-expert recording assistant in his prison investigations, and through him Lomax was also able to bring life to his recently published *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1936) and upcoming *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly* (1936).

Their northern conquest began with their presentation at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in Philadelphia – a leading professional association for scholars of literature and language. Almost immediately, they were invited to a New Year's Eve party at the Greenwich Village apartment of two committed enthusiasts of folk culture, where Leadbelly performed for a bohemian audience 'of New York tastemakers, Village intellectuals and artists, reporters, and faculty from Columbia and New York University'.[15] Although his new white audience had difficulties understanding his southern dialect, Leadbelly was, according to Alan Lomax's description, 'the performer everyone thought of when they wanted honesty, authenticity and power'.[16]

Press coverage emphasised the artist's origins and extraordinary life story, and was generally marked by a blatant sensationalist tone, which reflected the intrigued fascination, exotic appeal and marketing potential of Leadbelly's figure in this new public sphere. The New York *Herald Tribune*, for instance, published a significant article with the lead line 'Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to do a Few Tunes Between Homicides'.[17] Moreover, *Time* magazine produced a newsreel of *The March of Time* with Leadbelly and John Lomax themselves, where the former appeared willingly submissive to his 'boss'.

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Leadbelly was certainly attracted by the urban landscape of the 'Big Apple', as reflected in his own composition 'New York City' (1940). He naturally explored the black nightlife of Harlem, where he ran into Cab Calloway's band and made friends with writer Richard Wright. Wright portrayed him in the *Daily Worker* newspaper as a talented and fearsome folk singer, and accused John Lomax of cultural colonisation.[18] But it was in the developing, leftist folk scene where Leadbelly achieved a venerated and inspirational status, as he embodied a powerful political symbol in the emergent African American Civil Rights Movement, a modern John Henry, an authentic heroic figure otherwise unattainable in the inherited white, middle-class experiences. 'Bourgeois Blues' (1938), a race and class-based critique of Washington DC; 'Scottsboro Boys' (1938), a civil rights song in which he advises black people not to go to Alabama; 'Mr Hitler' (1942), a cry against Hitler which reinforced his American citizenship; and 'Jim Crow Blues' (1944), a protest song about the shameful widespread of Jim Crow discrimination, provide useful examples to explore his overtly political songs.

In 1939 Leadbelly was arrested in Manhattan for allegedly stabbing an intruder who had been harassing his wife Martha Promise. By then, his relationship with John Lomax was over due to distrust, fatigue, and problems over money, but Alan, then twenty-four, left his ethnomusicology studies at Columbia University for a semester and raised money for the singer. He also arranged commercial recordings with Musicraft and RCA, and invited him to his radio show *Back Where I Come From*, which he produced with film director Nicholas Ray.

Focused in New York's burgeoning integrated musical scene, the groundbreaking radio programme featured musically and socially related artists like Woody Guthrie, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, Pete Seeger, and Josh White, with whom Leadbelly actually formed a duo that enjoyed a very successful six-month engagement at the historic Village Vanguard. The influence of these folk revival founding fathers was long-lasting and would reach the peak of its visibility during the 1960s with the rise of upcoming stars like Bob Dylan.

Transatlantic crossover

In May 1949 Leadbelly travelled to France and performed several shows, most notably at the Paris Jazz Fair. He became the first country blues singer to visit Europe, initiating an influential trend that was followed by Josh White and Big Bill Broonzy in the early 1950s, but became ill before completing the tour and ultimately died in New York on 6 December 1949, at age sixty-one. The commercial impact and influence of his work and artistic persona continued to grow, inspiring endless renditions that

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reflect Leadbelly's far-reaching and versatile position in popular culture, as well as the intricate problems of discussions about music, 'race' and performance.

About a year after his death, The Weavers, a folk quartet formed by Pete Seeger, recorded a version of 'Goodnight Irene' which peaked at number 1 in the Billboard Best Seller chart. Other performers like Frank Sinatra or country musicians Ernest Tubb and Red Foley also obtained hit records with their versions. In Britain, Lonnie Donegan, the 'King of Skiffle' who earned his success appropriating material from folk-blues artists, recorded several versions of Leadbelly songs, including 'Rock Island Line' (1955), which sold three million copies, 'John Henry' (1955), and 'Pick A Bale of Cotton' (1962). Though it would have certainly been interesting to see his reactions and evolution throughout the decades, Leadbelly was not able to see the widespread success of his songs – many of which he picked up from family members, partners, inmates and recording musicians – in the hands of other artists.

Hopefully, this chapter serves to enrich the debate addressing Leadbelly's accomplishments, trials, and contradictions, and brings greater attention, acknowledgement, and present discussion about his contributions. Embodying the outlaw bluesman archetype, his case illustrates the intimate relationship between popular music and biography, as his life story and artistic trajectory arguably represent the full potential of musical performance in contrasting social settings, providing insights on the history and hybridity of popular music, the complexities of 'race' relations and geopolitical dialectics between north and south, and the unstoppable search for authenticity.

Ultimately, Leadbelly's legacy will continue to resonate in popular culture, extending an ongoing and stylistically varied historical and spatiotemporal dialogue with the era that he helped to define and represent, as he emerged as a legendary storyteller who consolidated a decisive link between the southern working-class tradition and the progressive urban Bohemia.

Notes

1 Over the years, Huddie Ledbetter's nickname has been spelled both as 'Leadbelly' and as 'Lead Belly'. During the 1930s and 1940s it was generally written as two words, but current conventions have standardised the single-word use 'Leadbelly', which I follow here. See Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), p. xv. Throughout this article I rely on the biographical data offered in this exhaustive work.

2 The use of the term 'songster' over 'bluesman' emphasises the stylistic variety of a given performer, often including diverse folk, work and spiritual songs. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the work of early country blues artists generally transcended the most currently standardised forms of blues music (i.e. I-IV-V chord progression). A searching and creative musician, Leadbelly drew on different branches of the southern oral traditions, transforming and popularising many songs, and also creating his own compositions.

3 'Leadbelly songs', those composed or 'originally' associated with Leadbelly, have been

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covered extensively and periodically in popular music, as shown by the following examples: the folk group The Weavers covered 'Goodnight Irene' in 1950 achieving a great success; Brook Benton made 'The Boll Weevil Song' a pop hit in 1961; Creedence Clearwater Revival recorded 'Midnight Special' and 'Cottonfields' in their album *Willy and the Poor Boys* (Fantasy, 1969); that same year 'Cottonfields' also afforded The Beach Boys' their most widespread international success; and a year later Led Zeppelin recorded 'Gallow's Pole' ('The Gallis Pole') in their album *III* (Atlantic, 1970); In 1993, Nirvana's MTV unplugged interpretation of 'Where Did You Sleep Last Night' (also titled 'In the Pines') exposed Leadbelly's material to new generations and audiences, a trend that would continue through other singular bands and artists like The White Stripes, who covered 'De Ballit of de Boll Weevil Song' and 'Take a Whiff on Me' in their live DVD *Under Blackpool Lights* (Third Man, 2004), and Tom Waits, whose compilation *Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers & Bastards* (ANTI-, 2006) includes a cover of 'Goodnight, Irene'.

4 Wolfe and Lornell, *Life and Legend*, p. 6.

5 Ibid., p. 27. 'Now son, don't you bother nobody, don't make no trouble, but if somebody try to meddle with you, I want you to protect yourself.'

6 Alan Govenar, *Texas Blues. The Rise of a Contemporary Sound* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), p. 92.

7 Leadbelly, 'Silver City Bound', in *Lead Belly's Last Sessions*. Smithsonian Folkways, 1994.

8 For more details on accommodation and resistance during the Jim Crow Era, see R. A. Lawson, *Jim Crow's Counterculture. The Blues and Black Southerners 1890–1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

9 As shown throughout the article, Leadbelly's northern conquest was mainly defined by his performances in Philadelphia, New York and Washington, which took place at a variety of settings ranging from scholarly reunions to bohemian nightclubs.

10 Wolfe and Lornell, *Life and Legend*, p. 75.

11 Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 67. The pleasures alluded to in the sexual double-meaning in the lyrics are also arguably another symbol of freedom.

12 Maurice L. Bryan Jr, 'Good Morning Blues: Gordon Parks Imagines Leadbelly', in Tony Bolden (ed.), *The Funk Era and Beyond. New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2008), p. 135.

13 Wolfe and Lornell, *Life and Legend*, p. 99.

14 Ibid., p. 120. His discharge was a routine matter under the 'good time law' which applied to all first and second offenders.

15 John Szwed, *Alan Lomax. The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking, 2010), p. 65.

16 Ronald D. Cohen (ed.), *Alan Lomax. Selected Writings 1934–1997* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 198.

17 Wolfe and Lornell, *Life and Legend*, p. 139.

18 Ibid., pp. 200–2.

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