

Huddie ledbetter essay sample



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According to no less an authority than the man himself Huddie William Ledbetter, otherwise known as Leadbelly or Lead Belly was the world's greatest cotton picker, railroad track liner, lover, [1]and drinker as well as guitar player. He was a man endowed with that fatal combination of a hot temper and enormous strength as well as very obvious musical talent.

Lawrence Cohn described him as ' a man of many facets: minstrel, blues artist, musically adept at several instruments, singer extraordinaire, raconteur and people's songbook'.[2] His background and heritage, emotions and family expressions all found their way into his music, but were by no means his only influences as will be seen.

His interactions with those who disagreed with his own estimation of himself frequently got him into trouble and even jail where, according to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame website he spent his spare time.[3] It was in jail that he learned from other inmates, and he later used or adapted the songs he discovered there.

He played a number of instruments including the piano, mandolin, harmonica, violin, concertina, and accordion and on some recordings he merely claps or stomps his feet to the tune, but of course was best known as a guitarist. His talent revealed itself early in life as when he played in the school band.

As far as guitar playing went he was certainly one of the most skillful. He played rhythm guitar, but was so skilled at weaving quick figures into his work that his recordings sound sometimes as if there are two Leadbellies

playing. This fits in with the story of his life which had two distinct parts. At first he was a rural field worker, a period he sang about in songs such as 'Boll Weevil'. He was also of course often a prisoner in the South. Later he became a city dweller, a folksinger, and recording star in the North.

Over time he became familiar with a huge repertoire of both songs and styles which he merged and manipulated into a unique style of his own. His style is described on the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame web page as being an authentic African-American folk-music and the foundation for many kinds of American music including rock and roll.[4]

The nickname apparently came after he took a bullet in his abdomen from a deputy sheriff's shotgun in his home town of Caddo in 1918. So much part of him did the name become that the Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia lists him under that name rather than as Ledbetter.

Huddie William Ledbetter was born on January 29, on a plantation in the Shiloh community near to the town of Mooringsport, Louisiana, not far from the Texas border. The year is uncertain. It may have been as early as 1885 or possibly 1888 or 9. His tombstone records the latter date, though this does not fit in with various census data. His parents were Wesley and Sally or Sallie, a part Cherokee. The Handbook of Texas Online records her as being Sally Purho and half Indian.[5]

He was their only natural child, though they did adopt a little girl. When he was five the family moved to Leigh, Texas, where a plot of land of some 68 acres was bought near Caddo Lake and it was there, encouraged by his uncle Terrell, that an interest in music began to develop. It was Uncle Terrell who

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bought him his first instrument - an accordion and who taught him Cajun tunes and songs. It was in 1903 that he got his first guitar. By this time he was already performing for money at local dances known as 'sukey jumps'.

It was in Leigh that he lived with his first wife Aletha, who had been 15 at the time of their marriage according to the 1910 census which reports that they lived next door to the older Ledbetters. That same year he and his wife moved to Dallas. They had at least two children before he left home to become an itinerant tramp. He was first arrested in 1915[6]

It was later, on Fannin Street, Shreveport, that Leadbelly met his real mentor - a blind, black musician called Lemon Jefferson. In his relationship he sang about in 'Blind Lemon blues'. Leadbelly became his guide, companion and protégé around the streets of Dallas. Jefferson was his younger by 10 years, but possessed immense talent. However, talented as he was, it was impossible to make a living just by playing around Dallas and he often took on laboring work.

By that time of course Leadbelly was playing a 12 string guitar, which he began to do some time before the onset of the First World War. He felt that it fitted his physique which was solid and wide although of somewhat less than average height at 5 foot 7.

A more usual 6 string guitar which he had played up until then seemed too small and delicate for him. The new instrument was tuned in a particular way in order to simulate the piano sound that he wanted. This he did by tuning the top three pairs of strings in unison, then making the 4th and 5th pairs an octave apart and finally tuning the bottom pair two octaves apart.

Despite the fact that his father Wesley had said that his guitar would be his ‘starvation box’ [7] he would later be called ‘King of the 12 String Guitar Players of the World’.[8]

His long and frequent spells in jail, usually for crimes of violence, gave him plenty of time to practice and perfect his art. His first sentence seems to have been in 1916 on charges of assault. He soon escaped and lived for a while, using the name of a neighbor, as William Boyd, He was imprisoned for the murder of a relative, Will Stafford, in 1918 and sentenced to thirty years hard labor. He was pardoned 6 years later after convincing the governor with a song :-

Please, Governor Neff, Be good ‘n’ kind

Have mercy on my great long time...

I don’t see to save my soul

If I don’t get a pardon, try me on a parole...

If I had you, Governor Neff, like you got me

I’d wake up in the mornin’ and I’d set you free [9]

although official records mention only his good behaviour.

In 1930 he was again incarcerated, this time for attempted murder. During one of his many incarcerations he met John and Alan Lomax who were traveling about the country making recordings for the Library of Congress. Alan Lomax is reported in the Shreveport Journal [10] as saying :-

We were amazed by his mastery of his great, green-painted, 12 string guitar.

We were deeply moved by the flawless tenor voice which rang out across the cotton field like a big sweet-toned trumpet.

The Lomaxes were so impressed by Leadbelly that they pleaded with the governor for his release into their custody. One month later, on August 1 1934, Leadbelly obtained his pardon. He may have obtained his early release as part of a scheme because of the monetary problems that the prison service was going through because of the Depression. At first he went to Shreveport, but soon afterwards traveled to New York. Allen Lomax reported:-

On September 1 I was sitting in a hotel in Texas when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up and there was Leadbelly with his guitar, his knife, and a sugar bag packed with all his earthly belongings. He said, 'Boss, you got me out of jail and now I've come to be your man.' [11]

Despite his great skill by the early thirties his career was in decline, partly down of course to his long periods away from the public eye. He arrived in New York with the Lomaxes in 1935, working at first as chauffeur to John Lomax who soon arranged both a recording contract and a tour of northern colleges where he attained fame, though not fortune. Unfortunately Lomax found him unreliable, but they did collaborate on a book of Lomax's 'Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly' published in 1936.

In 1935 he married Martha Promise, and also began to record with the American Record Corporation (ARC). The contract was not a commercial

success. This may have been because the company insisted that he record only blues material rather than the folk songs he preferred.

In March 1939, Leadbelly was arrested once more, this time for stabbing a man in New York. While awaiting trial, he made his second set of recordings for Musicraft Records who brought out some of his songs under the name ' Negro Sinful tunes'. This session was arranged by Alan Lomax as a means of helping Leadbelly pay for his legal needs.

As an artist who did not compromise his material, he found for the first time an academic audience for his songs depicting Afro-American life during the Depression. He lived on Manhattan's Lower East Side where he joined a group which included white performers such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seegar. As well as hosting his own radio show which ran for a year he would make guest appearances on Woody Guthrie's show.

However he did not really like performing in front of a large group of instrumentalists, though the pay was useful. He obviously made a positive impression because in April 1946 a book was published by Jazz Music Books ' A Tribute to Huddie Ledbetter. However on a CBS show of 1941 the director , Nicholas Ray, despite the shows obvious success with audiences, felt that listeners would find Leadbelly's accent difficult to comprehend and his role in the show was gradually cut back in favor of Josh White, whose English was much more precise.

There may have been another reason as the same show featured Woody Guthrie who had a pronounced Oklahoma drawling voice. Leadbelly would be allowed to sing, but despite protests, it was White who did the speaking in

between in his cultured voice. Guthrie was so annoyed with the way his friend Leadbelly was treated that eventually he walked out on the show. The Lead Belly Letter of the summer of 1993 records his own words about his accent and dialect.:-

I had never had to learn it. When you are born and brought up in the south your only trouble is to talk any other way. All through my childhood that was almost the only talk I ever heard because the sure'nough Southerner talks almost like a Negro, even when he's white.[12]

Another place from where he made appearances was from the WNYC studios. The station was one of the few to promote folk music. He had appeared alongside Guthrie and others on a show entitled 'Adventures in Music'. Eventually, towards the end of 1940, he was given his own short weekly show, 'Folk songs of America.' The producer Henrietta Yurchenco describes in 'The Life and Legend of Leadbelly' [13] how he would arrive punctually and they would then discuss the show. Everything would be improvised live, the gaps between songs being filled with Leadbelly's stories of his Southern life. At the same time he was becoming known across the Atlantic from such airings as those on the

BBC's 'America Sings' and the American Music Festival played on WNYC. 'V' records were produced for the American armed forces and these were played in the U. K. in front of British as well as American audiences.

Of the many clubs in which he played the Village Vanguard was a favorite – a basement room in Greenwich Village. The owner Max Gordon allowed his

performers to play whatever they wanted without interfering. This attitude was almost certainly the reason for the clubs popularity.

Frederick Ramsey described in ' Goodnight Irene' [14] how Huddie would appear at about 10 pm at which point all talk would stop and be replaced by a round of applause. He would be wearing a double breasted suit, dark shoes and a plain shirt and tie. He would greet the audience and then pick someone out to make a request and he would be off. ' Good Morning Blues' was one of the most frequently requested pieces. He described the blues as follows:-

The blues is like this. You lay down some night and you turn from one side of the bed to the other, all night long. It's not too cold in that bed, and it ain't too hot. But what's the matter. The blues has got you. When you get up and sit

on the side of your bed, soon in the morning, you may have a mother and father, a sister and a brother around, but you don't want no talk out of them. They ain't done you nothing, but what's the matter? The Blues has got you.

[15]

Like Guthrie he also performed at left wing political rallies and at labor union meetings which were used by many artists as a means of expressing their political ideals. Leadbelly was not so much interested in politics in general as in civil rights which he revealed in songs such as " The Bourgeois Blues", his comment upon racist housing practices in Washington. He also sang about famous events as in ' the Hindenburg disaster' one

of the songs he recorded for the Lomaxes.

He made recordings on a number of labels including ' Folkways, and in California, where he spent about 2 years from 1944, he made records with Capitol records. The Library of Congress shop web page tell show wide was his range of songs which included some from Ireland and England and some in a cappella style. As well as traditional songs he recorded new ones about topical figures the day as in ' Howard Hughes' ' Mr Hitler' and ' The Roosevelt song'.

He died three years later back in New York.

The Lead Belly Letter, the mouthpiece of the Lead Belly Society, tells in its Spring/summer 1996 edition of Leadbelly's last days. He had begun to experience numbness in his legs in 1948 and started to use a walking cane and to perform sitting down on occasions.

He died of ALS, a condition sometimes called Leo Gehrig's disease, [16] in December 1949, yet in the spring of that year he had still been making plans to revitalize his career. He even traveled as far as Paris for the May Jazz festival despite the fact that by that stage he was losing control of his muscles in both fingers and feet. He played his last concert in June of that year. His planned European tour was cut short abruptly and he returned to America. He did manage a few more performances, ill as he was, but was soon bedridden.

He is buried in the cemetery of Shiloh Baptist Church, Mooringsports, Louisiana. He had previously joined the Baptist church in Shreveport ' for about a week' according to a conversation with John Lomax.[17]

In 1950 , only months after Leadbelly's death, Pete Seegar, who had lived with the Ledbetter family for a time and who had great respect for Leadbelly's talents, recorded , with his group ' the Weavers' Leadbelly's song ' Goodnight Irene' and sold a million copies. ' Irene' was a song he had been taught by his uncle Terrell. The song in its original form was published in 1886 by African-American songwriter Gussie Lord Davis under the title " Irene, Good Night." but Leadbelly's version was considerably altered from the 19th century original. This and other titles have continued to sell down the years to people who never had the opportunity to see him in the flesh.

The Weavers were prompted by this success to record more of his songs such as ' Rock Island Line', and ' Kisses Sweeter than Wine' which was originally an Irish song called ' If it wasn't for Dicky'.

Pete Seegar who had such influence on folk music in the 1960's said :-

It's one more case of black music being made famous by white people. It's a pure tragedy he didn't live another six months, because all his dreams as a performer would have come true.[18]

In the 1950's Lonnie Donegan and his skiffle group had a hit record with ' Rock Island Line' a song that was an influence on many rock stars who followed including a young John Lennon. As his recordings have gradually

come into the public domain they are found on mor eand more labels as c. ds.

In 1994 the city of Shreveport unveiled a bronze life sized statue of Huddie Leadbelly. He is depicted as wearing hi s usual double breasted suit and bow tie and holding his famous 12 stringed guitar. His arm is raised, pointing to the area where he first really learnt his early musical skills. The area around Fannin Street, until then known as St Paul's Bottoms, a district of brothels, saloons and dancehalls and had been renamed Ledbetter Heights in 1983 as part of an effort to improve the area.. The following year

the same area was designated a national historic district. The citation said ' The area is significant in Blues Music in that it was where Huddie Ledbetter spent his formative years.' [19]

Frank Gill, a fellow musician, had this to say:-

He could sing and play till you didn't know where you were at. You'd have thought he had a set of drums hidden in his guitar. [20]

Hi s most recent accolade was in 2004 when Lead Belly was again honored at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Museum's American Music Masters series.

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[1] As quoted on Huddie Leadbetter aka Leadbelly <http://leadbelly.lanl.gov/leadbelly.html>

[2] Lawrence Cohn quoted by Alan Pert <http://www.harbour.sfu.ca/~hayward/van/glossary/ledbetter.html>

[3] Rock and Roll Hall of Fame <http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/lead-belly/>

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[6] Artists A-Z, Leadbelly http://www.vh1.com/artists/az/leadbelly_1/bio.jhtml

[7] According to Lead Belly Letter, summer 1993, page 10

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[8] According to Lead Belly Letter autumn 1990, page 11

[9] Shreveport Journal , December 1st 2007

[10] Shreveport Journal, 1st December 2007

[11] Huddie Leadbetter aka Leadbelly <http://leadbelly.lanl.gov/leadbelly.html>

[12] Lead Belly Letter, Summer 1993, page 9

[13] ' The Life and Legend of Leadbelly' page 219

[14] ' Goodnight Irene' page 241

[15] The Life and Legend of Lead belly, page 218

[16] Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, a neurological disease that causes paralysis.

[17] Noted in Shreveport Journal, December 1st 2007

[18] quote by Pete Seeger in 1988 when Leadbelly was inducted into the rock and roll Hall of Fame

[19] Lead Belly Letter, Fall 1994, page 7

[20] quoted in Lead Belly Letter , Fall 194, page 7