

Leadbelly



Born circa 1885, Moringport, Louisiana; died December 6th, 1949, New York City

IN A 1965 ISSUE OF 'SING OUT!' FOLKLORE RESEARCHER FREDERIC RAMSEY Jr. wrote of a man called Leadbelly: "The miracle is that he survived and endured so much for forty-nine years; that he lived to sing uninhibitedly for fifteen more years; and that he died peacefully in a bed. The odds against this survival were nearly incalculable in the frame of the period and the place to which he was born." In the course of a life alternately tragic and triumphant, Leadbelly became one of America's greatest folk singers and composers as well as its leading exponent of the twelve-string guitar. Among his most familiar and best-loved songs are "Rock Island Line," "Good Night, Irene," "Cotton Fields," "Take This Hammer," "On a Monday," "Boll Weevil" and "The Midnight Special." Whether his own compositions or intensely personal reworkings of traditional themes, these songs would not be known today had Leadbelly not lived to sing them.

Circa 1885, in the Caddo Lake district of northwestern Louisiana, Huddie Ledbetter, known as Leadbelly, was born to a rural life of unrelenting racial oppression and physical toil. At sixteen, he left home to ramble across Louisiana, Texas and Oklahoma. He picked cotton, cut cane and timber, drove mules and oxen, even herded cattle. He taught himself guitar, mandolin, harmonica, string bass, piano and accordion. He absorbed a vast and eclectic repertoire of music that included dance tunes, the blues, cowboy songs, ballads, ragtime favorites and boogie-woogie.

Leadbelly was a short but very muscular and powerful man who lived by strength, instinct and the rural code of survival that governed black life in the Deep South. He was not one to be crossed or trifled with, and on June 7th, 1918, he entered the Shaw State Prison Farm, in Bowie County, Texas, to begin a thirty-year sentence for murder and assault.

"In the Texas penitentiary," Alan Lomax once said, "Leadbelly was the number-one man on the number-one gang on the number-one farm in the state – the man who could carry the lead row for twelve to fourteen hours each day under broiling July and August sun, then cut the fool for the guards all evening."

In 1923, Leadbelly composed a song for Governor Pat Neff in which he pleaded for his release from prison. Neff pardoned Leadbelly two years later, and the singer resumed his life of wandering until 1930, when he was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to a ten-year term in Louisiana's Angola penitentiary.

Once again, he sang his way to freedom. Folk scholar John A. Lomax (father of Alan), on a field trip of Southern prisons, recorded Leadbelly singing a new version of the song he had sung to Pat Neff a decade earlier. Lomax played it for Governor O.K. Allen, who, taking into account the "good time" Leadbelly had already served, had his sentence commuted in August 1934. In December he arrived in New York City as Lomax's chauffeur.

Cut off from Southern life and the working-class black constituency that was his birthright, Leadbelly found a new and initially enthusiastic audience among the white leftists and bohemians of the North. They favored the image of the "pure Negro folk artist" or, better yet, that of the untutored protest singer decrying discrimination – an image reinforced, early on, by Lomax's requirement that Leadbelly perform in convict stripes. But these notions could not be reconciled with the singer's immense repertoire or his honest pursuit of fame and financial security. His soft, deferential Louisiana manner drew accusations of "Tomming" from more militant Northern blacks.

In early 1935, Leadbelly made his first recordings for the American Records Company. But of the forty-five songs he cut for the label, only six were commercially released in his lifetime, and none sold well. Later sessions for the Musicraft and Victor-Bluebird labels also fared poorly in the marketplace. And the demons of his past life would not lie down: in 1939, Leadbelly served a year on Riker's Island for third-degree assault.

In the Forties, Leadbelly was to play himself in a Hollywood production of John Lomax's life, but the project fell through. He continued to play the downtown clubs (once sharing a Village Vanguard bill with young Carol Channing) but never made it uptown to places like the Blue Angel.

And yet "when he had his guitar in his hands, he seemed happy," wrote Hector Lee in *The Journal of American Folklore*. "Even his songs of bitterness, like 'The Gallows Pole,' were for Leadbelly songs of fighting strength, of glory, of triumph, with him as the champion. He seemed proud that he had the means at his command of expressing the sadness of his people. It was then that he sang and spoke as an artist."

In the last years of his life, all of the prefab images dropped away, along with the cherished hopes of success. Now, wrote Frederic Ramsey, Leadbelly "began to play, not as a big-time professional, but as a man with some sort of message to get across in the time left to him. He played for rallies and labor unions. He played at parties. He played for children in public squares. And he played at home, tirelessly, joyously, indestructibly, for all who could come and listen or play along with him. . . . He wanted to share something that music had given him. Those who heard him then can never forget it."

Leadbelly died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease) in New York's Bellevue Hospital on December 6th, 1949. His body was returned to Louisiana for interment in a segregated cemetery. Within a year of his death, the Weavers' recording of "Good Night, Irene" became a best-selling pop hit. ■

FOLK MUSIC: 1958-63

By Arthur Levy

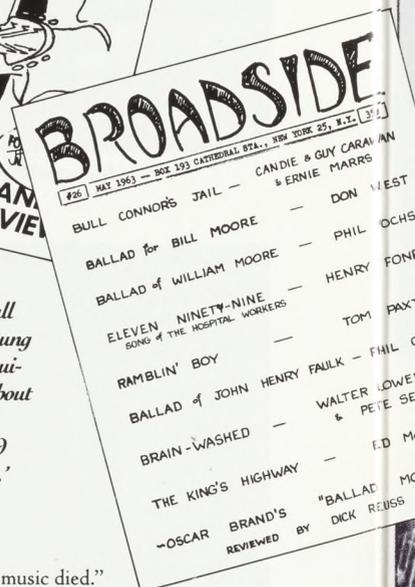
THERE'S A HOOTENANNY COMIN' EVERY week on ABC/Starrin' folk music singers from the mountains to the sea."

In 1963, Jack Linkletter presented the latest entry in the Saturday-night variety-show sweepstakes, ABC-TV's *Hootenanny*. The timing couldn't have been better: Peter, Paul and Mary had just notched up three consecutive Top Ten singles in less than six months: "Puff the Magic Dragon," "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." To see how far folk music had come in five years, consider that "Puff" was a thinly veiled pot smoker's jingle and "Blowin' in the Wind" had been adopted as the rallying song for Martin Luther King's August March on Washington and soon became the unofficial theme song of the entire civil-rights movement. Did TV programmers need more justification to throw folk music into the lineup?

Clearly, the advent of the *Hootenanny* series, along with an avalanche of *Hootenanny* one-off albums (one favorite was by jazz vibraphonist Terry Gibbs) and even a short-lived magazine named after the show, signaled some epochal change about to take place. The folk boom soon affected food (ethnic cuisine was in), fashion (who dared go without Al Block sandals or Fred Braun shoes?), dance, arts and crafts, summer camps, even college curricula. If the music itself hadn't made such a leap in popularity, perhaps its chances of surviving unspindled and unmutated would've been better. But once it became an important part of the entertainment business, with its requisite support systems of records, concert tours and media exposure, folk music would never be the same.

To understand folk's appeal at the close of the 1950s, one must appreciate a certain disenchantment with pop music that was felt by a specific segment of America's youth. Such now widely heralded developments as the Brill Building phenomenon, the surf bands, even the flowering of New Orleans, were all seen by the early devotees of folk music as frivolous diversions in the face of the revolution that was on its way. These young people had fallen under the spell of Woody Guthrie and Jack Kerouac, Bergman and Fellini, Kafka and Camus, Seeger and Salinger, Gandhi and Ginsberg. Alienation, anomie and relevance were on the agenda, ramalama-dingdong was not.

Nor were socially conscious young people the only ones disenchanted with the evolution of pop in the late Fifties. There is a hard-core school of rock and roll purists who insist that the great groundbreaking work of Elvis Presley (and, by extension, all of the first-generation rockers) began with Elvis's first Sun records in 1954 and ended abruptly with his army induction in the spring of 1958. As perceived by these hard-core purists, rock's wild, untamed nature began to slide hard and fast after the King's departure, and its magic fire



The actions of a small but vocal group of young bloods, armed with guitars, could be read about in the pages of 'Sing Out!', 'Broadside' and 'Little Sandy Review.'

was snuffed within a year, on "the day the music died."

It is precisely within that year that we see the emergence of the Kingston Trio, who were soon followed by an entire new generation of young folk personalities. In 1959 folk singers poured out of every nook and cranny of North America and the British Isles. For them, John Jacob Niles and Burl Ives were no less influential than Maybelle Carter and Bill Monroe.

The new folk singers drew from traditional forms and from fresh musical ideas. And there were enough pop-music fans searching for something new to assure folk music the modest popular support it needed. The key was coexistence with rock and roll, an issue with which the folk community would grapple for the next two decades — and then some.

The commercial folk-music boom started with the Kingston Trio's Number One song of 1958: "Tom Dooley," the first folk hit truly to coexist with rock and roll. The isolated hits of such disparate entertainers as Harry Belafonte ("Banana Boat") and Scottish skiffle man Lonnie Donegan ("Rock Island Line") had been regarded as little more than novelties. But with "Tom Dooley," the San Francisco-based trio's honest and simple performance struck a do-it-yourself nerve that intrigued susceptible youth. The Kingston Trio's studious appropriation of songs and arrangements from the workbooks of the Weavers and the New Lost City Ramblers represented pop homage at its most earnest.

The prospect of a career in folk had presented itself to those kids who were proud to thumb their nose at rock and roll, which had become big business by the end of the Fifties. The gates of folk Eden may have opened, but the lines of demarcation were just as swiftly being drawn.

On the one side were the purists who were uncompromisingly devoted to Appalachian ballads of English and Celtic origin. Since they held day jobs, they didn't fear any commercial exploitation of the music. At their most expansive, they might let a song from Hank Williams or the Delmore Brothers into the

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The finale of the 1963 Newport Folk Festival

repertoire; otherwise, they clung steadfastly to a traditional form of song that hadn't been much tampered with for, say, 200 years. Folk purists regarded the advent of Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash as nothing more than a ripple that would soon go away.

On the other side was a network of outcasts to whom the notion of straight employment was preposterous. This colorful subculture of pickin' and singin' "fellow travelers," as the House Un-American Activities Committee pegged them, comprised disenfranchised college students like Cambridge's Eric Von Schmidt, Brooklyn cowboys like Ramblin' Jack Elliott, art-school hell raisers like Bob Neuwirth, well-bred and gifted singers like Joan Baez, classical buffs like Paul Rothchild, expatriates, beat poets, novelists, journalists, photographers, political organizers — and more than a few rank opportunists.

Their role models came from many sources, but all converged into a single incandescent image: the lone singer onstage, a one-man (or one-woman, more often than not) band, with an acoustic guitar slung proudly — preferably a Gibson J-50 or Martin D-28. They were separated from the folk purists by their musical sources, for they drew upon not only traditional balladry but also the rich reserves of immediate forebears like Woody Guthrie and the Almanac Singers, the New Lost City Ramblers, Leadbelly, Cisco Houston, Pete Seeger and the Weavers.

Into this eclectic mix was poured Bill Monroe's bluegrass and the hillbilly of Dock Boggs and the Carter Family, children's sing-alongs learned at the feet of Guthrie, Seeger and Elizabeth Cotten, the house-rockin' hymns of the Reverend Thomas Dorsey and Clara Ward, the white-hot gospel of the Stanley Brothers and the Sacred Harp Singers, Roger Sprung's old-timey banjo, the Landreneau Cajun Band's Creole swing and more — Tin Pan Alley, Dixieland, ragtime and Caribbean, Spanish, Yiddish, Israeli, French and African songs.

Best of all, there were the city and country bluesmen, whose influence was part



Lightnin' Hopkins

and parcel of folk music long before it was acknowledged on the rock and roll side. The deaths of Big Bill Broonzy (1958) and Blind Willie McTell (1959) were felt most strongly in folk circles and led to a time of feverish re-discovery. The legacy of recording from the Twenties and Thirties left by country and Delta bluesmen like Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Sonny Boy Williamson, Peetie Wheatstraw, Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell were a treasure-trove for the tough young performers in 1960.

At the same time, the careers of living bluesmen were experiencing a revival greater than anything since John Hammond's Spirituals to Swing concerts in 1939. The Newport Folk Festival exulted in the newly discovered sounds of Lightnin' Hopkins, Son

House, Skip James, Mississippi John Hurt, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Bukka White, Jesse Fuller, Furry Lewis, Big Joe Williams, Memphis Minnie, Sippie Wallace, Mance Lipscomb, Sleepy John Estes, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee and the greatest teacher of them all, the Reverend Gary Davis, from whom a generation of singers learned "Samson and Delilah" and "Candyman."

It was only a short jump from the rough-hewn Delta blues to the gritty electrified Chicago, Memphis and Detroit styles of Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, Elmore James, John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, Otis Spann, Willie Dixon and B.B. King. Most folk musicians eagerly adapted the songs to acoustic and National steel guitar. But in 1960, electrification was out of the question in even the most liberal folk camps. The closest acceptable hybrid forms were the washboard and jug bands (skiffle bands, in England) that popped up at beach-party hoots and at late-night jam sessions in college dorms and dressing rooms. Still, the image of the vagabond bluesman provided a viable role model for yet another breed of alienated youth.

The bluesmen found their audience on white college campuses and the bur-

geoning coffeehouse scene. Without exception, they were shunned by the urban black community, whose embrace of R&B had already reshaped the commercial Top Forty. Nonetheless, the bluesmen were always an integral part of the folk scene – in fact, they were integrated into the fabric of the folk movement in a way that presaged the coming of a more resounding kind of integration.

All this was being transmitted in the spirit of “the folk process,” a cross-fertilization of ideas that, as 1960 rolled around, reflected the expanding world view of a minority of the new players. The narrow position of the purist elite was being challenged on musical grounds, and the controversy was vigorously debated wherever folk music got a toehold. Over the next three years, in Greenwich Village, Philadelphia, Coconut Grove, Berkeley, Chicago, Minneapolis, Toronto,



The New Lost City Ramblers

Los Angeles, Kansas City, Cambridge and London, the conscience of the younger practitioners continuously tested the patience of the elders; it is to their eternal credit that, in one of Western music’s rare moments of cooperative nurturing, the old embraced the young.

That set folk music apart from any movement that came before, ensured its growth and set its path for the future. Given this blessing, the movement’s priorities quickly revealed themselves, propelled by the promises of the New Frontier, as the Kennedy administration’s agenda was nicknamed. In the pages of *Sing Out!*, *Broadside* and Paul Nelson’s *Little Sandy Review*, on radio programs hosted by Oscar Brand in New York and Studs Terkel in Chicago, in the cluttered storefront headquarters of Israel Young’s Folklore Center in Greenwich Village, a curious scenario was playing itself out for all to see and hear.

The action centered around a small but vocal group of young bloods, armed with guitars, typewriters and – by 1962 – a respectable number of recording and publishing contracts. They also had well-connected and influential managers and producers and the means to turn their thoughts into deeds. Chief among their many concerns was the stalled civil-rights movement. “Which Side Are You On?” was as applicable to their fellow singers and songwriters as it was to the world at large. Sparked by fierce determination and quixotic devotion to the human spirit, the words and music of the folk singers identified the issues and then rallied public commitment where it was needed.

However quaint (or threaten-

ing) the notion of idealism and morality must have seemed to pop-music observers, it was the sole *raison d’être* for singer-songwriters, whose numbers flourished. The recordings of Bob Dylan, Peter LaFarge, Malvina Reynolds, Guy Carawan, Bob Gibson and (soon after) Eric Andersen, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton and Buffy Sainte-Marie provided a Top Forty of their own. Inevitably their concerns roamed beyond the confines of the conscience-bound folk movement. After all, songwriters are romantics too, and beside the all-consuming problems of



Cisco Houston

the bomb, desegregation, strip mining, the welfare state, political corruption, free speech, apartheid, death and taxes, there’s always room for a love song.

The first golden era (all five years’ worth) of the modern, commercial folk-song movement was heading for its denouement. New singer-songwriter albums were few and far between in 1962, and each one was considered a mini-manifesto in its own right. In the following year, the number of new recordings skyrocketed, with Elektra, Vanguard, Folkways, Prestige, RCA, Mercury and especially Columbia actively courting young performers. While many deny it, a subtle competition had taken shape, and a hierarchy was establishing itself.

The power of folk music was displayed for all to see when Peter, Paul and Mary sang “Blowin’ in the Wind” at the March on Washington. For young people whose social and political convictions may not yet have solidified, it was a time for heart and mind to come together. The powerlessness of youth in the Forties and Fifties gave way to a positive feeling of strength and identity in the Sixties. And folk music provided the marching beat for this transformation.

Hootenanny, which refused to allow Pete Seeger and the Weavers to appear, became the white elephant of folk music when Bob Dylan, the Kingston Trio, Carolyn Hester, Joan Baez and others agreed to boycott it. The show didn’t miss a beat though, filling its ranks with the Chad Mitchell Trio, Hoyt Axton, the Tarriers, Mike Settle and the New Christy Minstrels. The viewing public, generally unaware of the boycott and its attendant controversies, supported the show for one season before it was canceled. Folk music had rid itself of an albattross and, in the process, safeguarded its roots.

The final two events that signaled the end of this magical era of folk music were the assassination of John F. Kennedy and, soon after, the coming of the Beatles, when the country lifted its veil of mourning and radio’s frozen playlists were thawed. It was time for the music to move on. Woody would have been the first to warn his children about staying in one place too

long, but the warning wasn’t really necessary. No one wanted to go back to 1962, and nobody ever did.



Reverend Robert Wilkins, Gaither Carlton, Skip James, Arnold Watson, Mississippi John Hurt, Yank Rachel, Hammy Nixon, Doc Watson (standing, from left) and Sleepy John Estes

Read more about it: This era and the years before and after it are capsulized by Lenny Kaye (a.k.a. Doc Folk) in his liner notes to his indispensable four-volume folk series on Elektra Records: *Bleecker and MacDougal: The Folk Scene of the 1960’s*; *Crossroads: White Blues in the 1960’s*; *O Love Is Teasin’: Anglo-American Mountain Balladry*; and *Elektrock: The Sixties*. After twenty years, *The Face of Folk Music*, by David Gahr and Robert Shelton, has retained its value as a primary source material for this era.