

# Lead Belly

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia  
(Redirected from Huddy Ledbetter)

**Huddie William Ledbetter** (January 1888 – December 6, 1949) was an iconic American folk and blues musician, notable for his strong vocals, his virtuosity on the 12-string guitar, and the songbook of folk standards he introduced.

He is best known as **Leadbelly** or **Lead Belly**. Though many releases list him as "Leadbelly," he himself spelled it "Lead Belly." This is also the usage on his tombstone,<sup>[1][2]</sup> as well as of the Lead Belly Foundation.<sup>[3]</sup>

Although he most commonly played the twelve string, he could also play the piano, mandolin, harmonica, violin, concertina, and accordion. In some of his recordings, such as in one of his versions of the folk ballad "John Hardy", he performs on the accordion instead of the guitar. In other recordings he just sings while clapping his hands or stomping his foot. The topics of Lead Belly's music covered a wide range of subjects, including gospel songs; blues songs about women, liquor and racism; and folk songs about cowboys, prison, work, sailors, cattle herding and dancing. He also wrote songs concerning the newsmakers of the day, such as President Franklin Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler, Jean Harlow, the Scottsboro Boys, and Howard Hughes.

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## Lead Belly



Lead Belly playing his twelve string guitar

### Background information

<b>Birth name</b>	Huddie William Ledbetter
<b>Also known as</b>	Leadbelly
<b>Born</b>	January , 1888 Mooringsport, Louisiana, USA.
<b>Died</b>	December 6, 1949 (aged 61) New York, New York, USA.
<b>Genres</b>	Folk blues, songster, country blues, folk revival
<b>Occupations</b>	Musician, songwriter
<b>Instruments</b>	Vocals, guitar, accordion, piano, lap steel guitar
<b>Years active</b>	1936 - 1949
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.leadbelly.org">www.leadbelly.org</a> ( <a href="http://www.leadbelly.org/">http://www.leadbelly.org/</a> )
<b>Notable instruments</b>	Stella 12-string guitar

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## Biography

### Early life

Lead Belly's date of birth is uncertain. He was probably born in January 1888, although his gravestone gives his year of birth as 1889. The earliest year given for his birth has been 1885. According to the 1900 census, Hudy (the spelling given in the census) is one of two listed children (the other is his stepsister, Australia Carr), of Wes and Sallie (Brown) Ledbetter of Justice Precinct 2, Harrison County, Texas. Wesley and Sallie were legally wed on February 26, 1888, shortly after Lead Belly's likely date of birth, even though they had lived together as husband and wife for years. The 1900 census, differing from the usual census in that it lists the month and year of birth, rather than just the age, states the birth year of 'Hudy' Ledbetter to be 1888 and the month listed as January; Huddy's age is listed as twelve. The census of 1910 and the census of 1930 confirm 1888 as the year of birth.

The day of his birth has also been debated. The most common date given is January 20, but other sources suggest he was born on January 21 or 29. The only document we have that Ledbetter, himself, helped fill out is his World War II draft registration from 1942 where he gives his birth date as January 23, 1889.

Lead Belly was born to Wesley and Sallie Ledbetter as Huddle William Ledbetter in a plantation near Mooringsport, Louisiana, but the family moved to Leigh, Texas, when he was five. By 1903, Lead Belly was already a 'musicianer', a singer and guitarist of some note. He performed for nearby Shreveport, Louisiana audiences in St. Paul's Bottoms, a notorious red-light district in the city. Lead Belly began to develop his own style of music after exposure to a variety of musical influences on Shreveport's Fannin Street, a row of saloons, brothels, and dance halls in the Bottoms.

At the time of the 1910 census, Lead Belly, still officially listed as 'Hudy', was living next door to his parents with his first wife, Aletha "Lethe" Henderson, who at the time of the census was 17 years old, and was, therefore, 15 at the time of their marriage in 1908. It was also there that he received his first instrument, an accordion, from his uncle, and by his early 20s, after fathering at least two children, he left home to find his living as a guitarist (and occasionally, as a laborer).

Influenced by the sinking of the *RMS Titanic* in April 1912, he would go on to write the song "The Titanic",<sup>[4]</sup>



Lead Belly playing an accordion.

which noted the racial differences of the time. "The Titanic" was the first song he ever learned to play on a 12-string guitar, which was later to become his signature instrument. He first played it in 1912 when performing with Blind Lemon Jefferson (1897-1929) in and around Dallas, Texas. Lead Belly noted that he had to leave out the verse about boxer Jack Johnson when playing in front of a white audience.

## Prison years

Lead Belly's volatile temper sometimes led him into trouble with the law. In 1915 he was convicted "of carrying a pistol" and sentenced to do time on the Harrison County chain gang, from which he miraculously escaped, finding work in nearby Bowie county under the assumed name of Walter Boyd. In January 1918 he was imprisoned a second time, this time after killing one of his relatives, Will Stafford, in a fight over a woman. In 1918 he was incarcerated in Sugar Land, Texas, where he probably learned the song "Midnight Special".<sup>[5]</sup> In 1925 he was pardoned and released, having served seven years, or virtually all of the minimum of his seven-to-35-year sentence, after writing a song appealing to Governor Pat Morris Neff for his freedom. Lead Belly had swayed Neff by appealing to his strong religious beliefs. That, in combination with good behavior (including entertaining by playing for the guards and fellow prisoners), was Lead Belly's ticket out of jail. It was quite a testament to his persuasive powers, as Neff had run for governor on a pledge not to issue pardons (pardon by the governor was at that time the only recourse for prisoners, since in most Southern prisons there was no provision for parole). According to Charles K. Wolf and Kip Lornell's book, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (1999), Neff had regularly brought guests to the prison on Sunday picnics to hear Lead Belly perform.

In 1930, Lead Belly was back in prison, after a summary trial, this time in Louisiana, for attempted homicide — he had knifed a white man in a fight. It was there, three years later, that he was "discovered" by musicologists John Lomax and his 18-year-old son Alan Lomax during a visit to the Angola Prison Farm. They recorded hundreds of his songs on portable aluminum disc recording equipment for the Library of Congress. They returned to record in July of the following year (1934). On August 1, Lead Belly was released (again having served almost all of his minimum sentence), this time after the Lomaxes had taken a petition to Louisiana Governor Oscar K. Allen at Lead Belly's urgent request. The petition was on the other side of a recording of his signature song, "Goodnight Irene." A prison official later wrote to John Lomax denying that Lead Belly's singing had anything to do with his release from Angola, and state prison records confirm that he was eligible for early release due to good behavior. A descendant of his has also confirmed this. For a time, however, both Lead Belly and the Lomaxes believed that the record they had taken to the governor had hastened his release from Angola.

Bob Dylan once remarked, on his XM radio show, that Lead Belly was "One of the few ex-cons who recorded a popular children's album."<sup>[6]</sup>

## Moniker

There are several, somewhat conflicting stories about how Ledbetter acquired his famous nickname, though the consensus is that it was probably while in prison. Some say his fellow inmates dubbed him "Lead Belly" as a play on his last name and reference to his physical toughness; others say he earned the name after being shot in the stomach with shotgun buckshot.<sup>[7]</sup> Another theory has it that the name refers to his ability to drink

# Motherless Child Blues

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**"Motherless Child Blues"** (or, in dialect, **"Motherless Chile Blues"**) is the name of two distinctly different traditional blues songs. They are different melodically and lyrically. One was first popularized by Robert "Barbecue Bob" Hicks—the other by Elvie Thomas.

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## "Motherless Child Blues" (*Hicks*)

The "Motherless Child Blues" recorded by Hicks in 1927 tells of the singer's lack of respect for, and disenchantment with, women in general. The song begins with the lyrics that give it its name:

*If I mistreat you gal, I sure don't mean you no harm.*

*I'm a motherless child and I don't know right from wrong.*<sup>[1]</sup>

This song was later adapted by Eric Clapton on his album *From the Cradle* and retitled "***Motherless Child***".

This song has also been performed by octogenarian jazz legend Jimmy Scott and in a drum n' bass re-working by Scottish electronic artist Colin Waterson.

## "Motherless Child Blues" (*Thomas*)

Elvie Thomas first recorded her "Motherless Child Blues" with Geeshie Wiley in 1930. This song tells of a daughter not following her dead mother's advice:

*Mother told me just before she died,*

...

*Oh daughter, Oh daughter, please don't be like me,*

*To fall in love with every man you see.*<sup>[2]</sup>

## Endnotes

## Rock Island Line (song)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**"Rock Island Line"** is an American blues/folk song performed and first recorded by Kelly Pace in the 1930s, but later popularised by Leadbelly. Many versions have been recorded by other artists, most significantly the world-wide hit version in the mid-1950s by Lonnie Donegan. The song is ostensibly about the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad.

The chorus to the old song reads:

*The Rock Island Line is a mighty good road  
The Rock Island Line is the road to ride  
The Rock Island Line is a mighty good road  
If you want to ride you gotta ride it like you find it  
Get your ticket at the station for the Rock Island Line*

The verses tell a humorous story about a train operator who smuggled pig iron through a toll gate by claiming all he had on board was livestock.

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### History

- In 1964, "The Penguin Book Of American Folk Songs", compiled and edited, and with notes, by Alan Lomax, was published in Britain; it was subsequently reprinted in 1966 and 1968. On page 128 it includes the song "Rock Island Line" with the following footnote: *"John A. Lomax recorded this song at the Cummins State Prison farm, Gould, Arkansas, in 1934 from its convict composer, Kelly Pace. The Negro singer, Leadbelly, heard it, rearranged it in his own style, and made commercial phonograph recordings of it in the forties. One of these recordings was studied and imitated phrase by phrase, by a young English singer of American folk songs [referring to Lonnie Donegan], who subsequently recorded it for an English company. The record sold in the hundreds of thousands in the U.S. and England, and this Arkansas Negro convict song, as adapted by Leadbelly, was published as a personal copyright, words and music, by someone whose contact with the Rock Island Line was entirely through the grooves of a phonograph record."*

According to Harry Lewman Music,

“ Lead Belly and John and Alan Lomax supposedly first heard it from [a] prison work gang during their travels in 1934/35. It was sung a cappella. Huddie sang and performed this song, finally settling on a format where he portrayed, in song, a train engineer asking the depot agent to let his train start out on the main line.<sup>[1]</sup> ”

- Lonnie Donegan's recording, released as a single in late 1955, signalled the start of the UK "skiffle" craze. Donegan "did nothing to credit Lead Belly as the author, even though he simply copied Huddie's entire arrangement".<sup>[2]</sup> This recording only featured Donegan, Chris Barber on double bass and washboard player (Beryl Bryden), but as it was part of a Chris Barber's Jazz Band session for Decca Records, Donegan received no royalties from Decca for record sales, beyond his original session fee. However, over the years, indeed until his death, Donegan received considerable music publishing royalties from "Rock Island" simply by claiming the British copyright on an unregistered song which was considered to be in the Public Domain. This led to the peculiar situation that any "cover" version of

### "Rock Island Line"

Song first recorded by Lead Belly

<b>Recorded</b>	1937
<b>Genre</b>	Blues, Folk, Skiffle, Country
<b>Length</b>	2-4 minutes
<b>Label</b>	Asch Recordings
<b>Writer</b>	Lead Belly



Cover of the Leadbelly compilation *Rock Island Line: Original 1935-1941 Recordings*



Johnny Cash's 1970s album, *Rock Island Line*

# Alan Lomax

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Alan Lomax** (January 31, 1915 – July 19, 2002) was an American folklorist and ethnomusicologist. He was one of the great field collectors of folk music of the 20th century, recording thousands of songs in the United States, Great Britain, Ireland, the Caribbean, Italy, and Spain.

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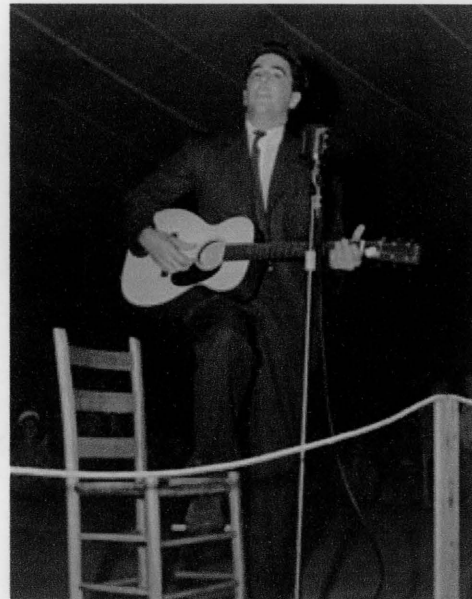
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## Biography

Lomax was the son of pioneering folklorist and author John A. Lomax, with whom he started his career by recording songs sung by sharecroppers and prisoners in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Because of frail health he was mostly home schooled but for one year attended The Choate School (now Choate Rosemary Hall) in Wallingford, Connecticut. He enrolled at the University of Texas in 1930 at the age of fifteen and the following year studied philosophy at Harvard but upon his mother's death interrupted his education to console his father and join him on his folk song collecting field trips. He subsequently earned a degree in philosophy from the University of Texas at Austin and later did graduate studies with Melville J. Herskovits at Columbia University and with Ray Birdwhistell at the University of Pennsylvania. To some, he is best known for his theories of Cantometrics, Choreometrics, and Parlametrics, elaborated from 1960 until his death with the help of collaborators Victor Grauer, Conrad Arensberg, Forrestine Paulay, and Roswell Rudd.

From 1937 to 1942 Lomax was Assistant in Charge of the Archive of Folk Song of the Library of Congress to

**Alan Lomax**



Lomax playing guitar on stage at the Mountain Music Festival, Asheville, North Carolina, sometime during the early 1940s.

### Background information

<b>Born</b>	January 31, 1915
<b>Died</b>	July 19, 2002 (aged 87)
<b>Occupations</b>	Folklorist, ethnomusicologist, musician

which he and his father and numerous collaborators contributed more than ten thousand field recordings. During his lifetime, he collected folk music from the United States, Haiti, the Caribbean, Ireland, Great Britain, Spain, and Italy, assembling a treasure trove of American and international culture.

A pioneering oral historian, he also recorded substantial interviews with many legendary folk musicians, including Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, Muddy Waters, Jelly Roll Morton, Irish singer Margaret Barry, Scots ballad singer Jeannie Robertson, and Harry Cox of Norfolk, England, among many others. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor he took his recording machine into the streets to capture the reactions of everyday citizens. While serving in the army in World War II he made numerous radio programs in connection with the war effort. The 1944 "ballad opera," *The Martins and the Coys*, broadcast in Britain (but not the USA) by the BBC, featuring Burl Ives, Woody Guthrie, Will Geer, Sonny Terry, Pete Seeger, and Fiddlin' Arthur Smith, among others, was released on Rounder Records in 2000.

He also produced recordings, concerts, and radio shows, in the U.S and in England, which played an important role in both the American and British folk revivals of the 1940s, '50s and early '60s. In the late 1940s, he produced a highly regarded series of folk music albums for Decca records and organized a series of concerts at New York's Town Hall and Carnegie Hall, featuring blues, Calypso, and Flamenco music. He also hosted a radio show, *Your Ballad Man*, from 1945-49 that was broadcast nationwide on the Mutual Radio Network and featured a highly eclectic program, from gamelan music, to Django Reinhardt, to Klezmer music, to Sidney Bechet and Wild Bill Davison, to jazzy pop songs by Maxine Sullivan and Jo Stafford, to readings of the poetry of Carl Sandburg, to hillbilly music with electric guitars, to Finnish brass bands – to name a few.<sup>[1]</sup>

Lomax spent the 1950s based in London, from where he edited the 18-volume *Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*, an anthology issued on newly-invented LP records. For the British and Irish volumes, he worked with the BBC and folklorists Peter Douglas Kennedy, Scots poet Hamish Henderson, and with Séamus Ennis in Ireland, where they recorded Irish traditional musicians, including some of the songs in English and Irish of Elizabeth Cronin in 1951. He also hosted a folk music show on BBC's home service and organized a skiffle group, Alan Lomax and the Ramblers (who included Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger, and Shirley Collins, among others) which appeared on British television. His ballad opera *Big Rock Candy Mountain* premiered December 1955 at Joan Littlewood's Theater Workshop and featured Ramblin' Jack Elliot.

Lomax and Diego Carpitella's survey of Italian folk music for the *Columbia World Library*, conducted in 1953 and 1954, with the cooperation of the BBC and the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, helped capture a snapshot of a multitude of important traditional folk styles shortly before they disappeared. The pair amassed one of the most representative folk song collections of any culture. From Lomax's Spanish and Italian recordings emerged one of the first theories explaining the types of folk singing that predominate in particular areas, a theory that incorporates work style, the environment, and the degrees of social and sexual freedom.

Upon his return to New York in 1959, Lomax produced a concert, *Folksong '59*, in Carnegie Hall, featuring Arkansas singer Jimmy Driftwood; the Selah Jubilee Singers and Drexel Singers (gospel groups); Muddy Waters and Memphis Slim (blues); Earl Taylor and the Stoney Mountain Boys (bluegrass); Pete Seeger, Mike Seeger (urban folk revival); and The Cadillacs (a rock and roll group). The occasion marked the first time rock and roll and bluegrass were performed on the Carnegie Hall Stage. "The time has come for Americans not to be ashamed of what we go for, musically, from primitive ballads to rock 'n' roll songs," Lomax told the

audience. According to Izzy Young, the audience booed when he told them to lay down their prejudices and listen to rock 'n' roll. In Young's opinion, "Lomax put on what is probably the turning point in American folk music . . . . At that concert, the point he was trying to make was that Negro and white music were mixing, and rock and roll was that thing."<sup>[2]</sup>

Alan Lomax married Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold in February 1937. They were married for 12 years and had a daughter, Anna. Elizabeth assisted him in recording in Haiti, Alabama, Appalachia, and Mississippi, and wrote radio scripts of folk operas featuring American music that were broadcast over the BBC home service as part of the war effort, as well as conducting lengthy interviews with folk music personalities including Reverend Gary Davis. He also did important field work with Elizabeth Barnicle and Zora Neale Hurston in Florida and the Bahamas (1936); with John Work and Lewis Jones in Mississippi (1941 and 42; with folksingers Robin Roberts and Jean Ritchie in Ireland (1950); with his second wife Antoinette Marchand in the Caribbean (1961); with Joan Halifax in Morocco; and with his daughter, Anna L. Wood. All those who assisted and worked with him were accurately credited on the resultant Library of Congress and other recordings, as well as in his many books and publications.

Alan Lomax met twenty-year-old English folk singer Shirley Collins while living in London. The two were romantically involved and lived together for some years. When Lomax obtained a contract from Atlantic Records to re-record some the U.S. artists he had recorded in the 1940s, using improved recording equipment, Collins accompanied him. Their folk song collecting trip to the Southern states lasted from July to November 1959 and resulted in many hours of recordings, featuring performers such as Almeda Riddle, Hobart Smith, Wade Ward, Charlie Higgins and Bessie Jones and culminated in the discovery of Mississippi Fred McDowell. Recordings from this trip were issued under the title *Sounds of the South* and some were also featured in the Coen brothers' film *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou*. Lomax wanted to marry her but when their trip was over, Collins returned to England and instead married Austin John Marshall. In an interview in *The Guardian* newspaper, Friday March 21 2008 (<http://music.guardian.co.uk/folk/story/0,,2266935,00.html>) , Collins was miffed that Alan Lomax's 1993 history of blues music, *The Land Where The Blues Began*, barely mentioned her. "All it said was, 'Shirley Collins was along for the trip'. It made me hopping mad. I wasn't just 'along for the trip'. I was part of the recording process, I made notes, I drafted contracts, I was involved in every part". Collins decided to rectify the perceived omission in her memoir *America Over the Water*, published in 2004.

Collins described her arrival in America 1959 in an interview with Johan Kugelberg <sup>[3]</sup>:

Kugelberg: Lomax met you?

Collins: He was on the dockside with Anne, his daughter. . . . I think I arrived in April and I don't think we went south until August. It took quite a long time to get the money together; it kept falling through. I think Columbia was going to pay for it at one point, but they insisted he have a union engineer with him and someone extra like that -- that in situations we were going to be in would have been hopeless. So he refused, and they withdrew their funding. It was very last minute that the Ertegun brothers at Atlantic gave us the cash and we were gone within days of getting that money. Alan had wanted to do it earlier, but there was just no money to do it with. He had no money, ever. He was always living hand to mouth.

Kugelberg: That's the nature of somebody who is making the path as he's going along. Also as a sidebar, considering who the Ertegun brothers were at that point in time, it's surprising to me that they greenlighted that project at that point in time. I love that series, I think it's one of the great series of albums ever. It's



~~Grandma told me that her sons used to send away for free mailings and give put down grandiloquent return addresses: Sagebrush Avenue or Jackrabbit Street. I tried it a few times, and it made the day, all right.~~

Living in Ringling was like carrying on your life behind a pane of glass. Since every house ~~sat out~~<sup>stood off</sup> by itself, with the ~~land~~<sup>slope</sup> rising enough to give each site a clear view, everything was seen, more than everything was known. I was in a period when I wanted to bat a ball by the hours, but it was embarrassing to be playing in front of the whole town. When Angus and my older cousins might drive by, I would let the bat trail behind me as if it unexpectedly had flipped into my hand and give a vague half-wave as if I weren't sure who they were and <sup>so</sup> thus they couldn't be sure who I was.

There was always a large gray canker a few feet from the front step where we threw wash water and ashed, I think even emptied the slop pail. The chickens ~~took away the~~<sup>pecked away the</sup> slops, but the lye of the soap and ashed had killed the ground for good.