

And somehow, he'll always be there whenever you see a group of children dance while singing:

*You gotta jump down, turn around*

*To pick a bale of cotton*

*You gotta jump down, turn around*

*To pick a bale a day...*

Then you'll begin to realize how Lead Belly's own voice and music has travelled and spread right along with our own aural tradition to somehow transcend time, race, religion, culture and class; and you'll find yourself wanting to make up the songs that Lead Belly made up. Songs that for generations have been considered nothing more than old folk songs; songs that might at first appear dated but are actually stubbornly timeless; songs that will forever breathe with life so long as humans gather to sing about their trouble, joy and hope.

And if you listened to the records that many times, you would soon find yourself wanting to get as close as you could to the place where Lead Belly's amazing journey through time began.

And how many more times would you listen before you found yourself actually walking along through the paved and cobblestone streets of old Shreveport? Or driving the back roads of northwest Louisiana; looking and listening on the wind, believing that you might catch a glimpse of the ghost you first heard on the records?

You wouldn't find him, of course. All that is really left are the records. And all you could really do is stop to pay your respects.

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chasing the great  
**LEAD BELLY**  
by mark dvorak



To get there, you must follow Interstate 20, going west out of Shreveport. It is a good highway and new. Then head north on Greenwood-Mooringsport Road on up through Longwood. Up there it won't seem much like Louisiana; or at least like the Louisiana a northern person might already have pictured in their mind.

As you drive, you'll see oil derricks scattered across the grassy fields. Their greasy, boney frames slowly bob, pulling crude from beneath the Louisiana soil. You'll pass through some patches of piney woods and if you listen, you'll hear birds singing in the trees. There'll be some sawmills around, and you'll see farms that grow mostly cotton, and corn that dries and yellows early; compared to the corn crop in the north.

Travel in the morning while the sun is low in the east and it's still cool. You'll see ripples of light flicker through the webbing of the tall pine trees that line the roadside.

When you reach Blanchard-Latex Road, that's where you have to head back out west. And then you only have to go a mile or two before you come to Shiloh Baptist Church. It's on the south side of the road and it's one of the nicest churches you'll see. It's big. And made out of yellow brick with a wide dirt driveway that swings all the way around to the side of the building. There is a locked barrier meant to keep cars and trucks from driving up to the building, but it's easy enough to step over; if you want to leave your car parked along the road.

Further back, behind the church is the graveyard. It's quite a big graveyard, and it's fenced in, but the gate won't be locked. Straight down the center, almost all the way back, that's where Mr. Ledbetter rests; right beneath the big tree. It's as quiet as can be, and the thick bed of fallen pine needles and soft red earth will make it easy for you to walk back there without making much noise. He's got a big granite headstone that marks the spot, and if you look around some, you'll find that he sleeps in the company of a good number of his family.

They say he was born near Mooringsport, which is a little farm town just north and west of Shiloh Church; on the south side of Caddo Lake, near the Texas line.

Some say he was born in 1889. Others say 1885. The headstone says 1889. His name was Huddie Ledbetter and he was the greatest American folk singer, song collector and folk song composer that ever lived.

Folks called him "Lead Belly" and of course, there's not too many still around that knew him when he was alive. And of those few who did know him, and were there to hear him sing and play, they are now getting up in years. There's not much written about him either. And when you read what little has been written about him, and hear what has been told of him; it gets pretty hard to decide exactly what is true and what's been made up. There's just not much left to go on. Except what those who knew him can recollect. And the records.

If you listen to the records, the first thing you'll hear is his voice. It's not a pretty voice. It's rough and grainy and sounds as if some of the raw tones have been scraped right up out of his throat. And of course you'll hear his guitar; the driving, chomping munch of his big twelve string guitar.

It's sometimes difficult to understand exactly what old Lead Belly is singing about on the records. He speaks and sings with the slurred and rhythmic inflection of one who was born and lived a long time in the deep south. And if you wanted to play along, you'd have to string your own guitar up with extra heavy gauge steel strings and tune them four or five notes low to imitate the sounds and voicings of the "boogie-woogie" piano. That's how Lead Belly played it. The records will tell you that.

After four or five listenings, you'll begin to measure the beautiful cadence of his language and you'll find your foot tapping right along to the driving pulse of his guitar music. You'll begin to hear him and you'll begin to understand some of the things that he is singing about.

After a dozen or twenty listenings, you'll begin to realize that the things he sings about are the very things you might sing about; had you half a mind to make-up your own song or remake and fashion some old tune into a brand new piece - with your own words, about your own place; about your own feelings, about your own vision for a world that might someday be better than the one you're in right now.

After fifty, or a hundred listenings, his world and a whole culture of people will begin to unfold. You'll begin to imagine some of the places where Lead Belly lived, worked, travelled - and played music.

He'll take you back to the prison camps and work farms, where he spent almost a quarter of his life, toiling under the blistering Texas sun for twelve or

fourteen hours by day and coming back to camp in the evening to entertain the convicts until the late hours of the night.

You'll begin to imagine sounds and smells of Fannin Street, the red light district of Shreveport, where he first began to play music in the dance halls, saloons and whorehouses. Listen to Lead Belly. He sings as he talks and he talks as he sings.

And if you listen to him on the records, you might begin to get an idea of the tragic poverty and punishing circumstances under which southern black people had to live and work.

You'll hear him sing about New York City, where he moved with his wife Martha Promise, to record and to find a new, and politically progressive audience who loved and glorified him.

He was a survivor; a tenacious competitor who was determined to become a success in the music business. But in those days, not only was it difficult for a black man to become a successful recording star; but especially so for a black man who played the blues, ballads and spirituals of the poor south; whose topical material was adamantly critical of Jim Crow.

In New York, he became friends with and would forever influence the music of Woody Guthrie, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, Cisco Houston, a very young Pete Seeger and countless others. You can hear them all making music together on the records.

He blazed a trail to Europe that black blues singers and musicians would follow for generations to come; singing for the foreign audiences who fell in love with his warmth, his characteristic intimacy and his stories and songs from the southern United States. But back home fame and commercial success somehow always escaped him.

After hundreds of listenings to the records, you'll find yourself wishing to talk to someone who actually heard and saw Lead Belly play. Someone who might be able to describe and show you exactly how to imitate the pounding, chattering and explosive guitar style that was Lead Belly's alone.

And after hundreds of listenings you'll begin to see his music in the music of others. You'll find his weave of story, song and opinion, in the delivery of others. And from then on, you'll start hearing him in every chorus of "Irene Goodnight;" and he'll be in the wail and moan of every lonesome and battered voice that you'll ever hear crying out the blues.