

# **The Bourgeois Blues: Representations of Race and Authenticity in the songs of Lead Belly**

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On January 16, 1925, Texas Governor Pat Neff signed a full pardon for Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter’s life sentence. Ledbetter recalled the day the governor visited Imperial Farm prison at Sugarland to hear the famous inmate songster. “Finally, I started my song,” he stated. “I put Mary in it, Jesus’ mother, you know. I took a verse from the bible, around about the twenty second chapter of Proverbs, around the fourteenth verse: if you forgive a man his trespasses, the heavenly father will also forgive your trespasses. Then I started singing,”

“In nineteen hundred and twenty three,  
When the judge taken’ my liberty away from me.  
Say my wife come, wringing her hands and crying,  
Lord, have mercy on that man of mine.”<sup>1</sup>

This was the first of two pardons Ledbetter received, the first in Texas and the second in Louisiana, presumably rewarding his sublime talent on the twelve-string guitar as time-spent. Ledbetter’s second release came after he was recorded by John Lomax for the Library of Congress in 1934, with a similar song entitled “Governor O. K. Allen.” A few months later, Lead Belly was on a tour of northeastern universities and academic conferences with

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*. (New York: De Capo Press, 1992).

his manager John Lomax and the sponsorship of the Library of Congress' Archive of American Folk Song. Ledbetter achieved remarkable success navigating depression-era society's economic hardships and Jim Crow segregation. His charisma and musical ability allowed him to escape prison and earn a living as a performer. His guitar playing and lyrical imagery gained him not only freedom but also an identity and a dual-consciousness.

Ledbetter gained his mythic status after receiving two prison releases due to his sublime musical talent. The stories of prison and murder captivated audiences in the north long before Lead Belly played his twelve-string guitar. John Lomax, a folklorist and Lead Belly's manager, organized a publicity campaign for the musician that "depicted him as a savage, [an] untamed animal and focused endlessly on his convict past."<sup>2</sup> This romanticization of Ledbetter fell in-line with similar racialized perceptions of black southern folk music.

Ledbetter was born around the late 1880s to a sharecropper family in rural Texas. Much of his life was spent working long hours as a field hand or laborer in a strictly segregated world. His music allowed him a modicum of income and a respite from labor, although he would not become financially successful as a musician until after he was released from prison. The representations of Lead Belly during his tour with Lomax cast him either as a farmer or an inmate. Defying these stereotypes, he became a professional musician touring the country with a respected academic. Yet, he was still a black man in a white world. We can gain insight into this duality by exploring Lead Belly's relationship with the white John Lomax.

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000): 59.

Within the literature surrounding Ledbetter's duality, much of it is based solely on the racial aspects of his time with Lomax. His participation in social activism often goes overlooked. Ledbetter was aware of both his popularity and ability to influence – he capitalized on both. The other side of the Lead Belly/Ledbetter duality casts him in the light of a social activist that captures Robin D. G. Kelley's definition of a social "movement rooted in a variety of different voices...molded by their race, class, gender, work, community, region, history, upbringing, and collective memory."<sup>3</sup> Ledbetter's countercultural blues expressed African American heritage, while voicing critiques of segregation and racial difference. He crossed color lines by using music to become the first black man to play for white affluent audiences like the Modern Language Association and the Utah Humanities Research Foundation, while also having one of the first racially integrated ensembles during his northeastern tour in the mid-1930s. The accumulation of Ledbetter's influence with the People's Songs and other leftist organizations in the 1940s and into the folk revivals of the 1950s and 1960s cemented his influence on American society and social protest.

*It was the fall of 1946. Huddie Ledbetter arrived to perform at a local university. When a hotel refused to give him a room he found himself lodged in a Japanese-operated place across the tracks on the west side of town. "This proved to be the best possible hotel for our guest," the director of the Utah Humanities Research Foundation at the University of Utah Hector Lee remembered. Ledbetter quickly made friends with the locals and his cheerfulness carried over to Lee's first meeting with the*

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<sup>3</sup> Robin DG Kelley. *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*. (UNC Press Books, 2015): xii.

famed Lead Belly who was scheduled for a concert series during the following days.

When Lee walked into the small hotel room he paused, looked Ledbetter over and reflected "he was not as tall as I had expected and his speaking voice was soft – a gentle purring." The singer introduced himself with a clear pronunciation that Lee had not noticed in his earlier recordings. He wondered, "How could this be the fearless singer of 'Bourgeoisie Blues' – the strong worker from the chain gang?" This was not the reflection of a killer Lead Belly's image rendered.

"Say," Ledbetter exclaimed when his eyes registered Lee's son's shy curiosity from across the room, "I'll dedicate a song for your boy." The willing performer picked up his 12-string guitar and sang a song that duplicated his evening concert the audience likely never forgot.

His performance for the children later that night was equally memorable. "He sang, and they sang with him," Lee said. He was a natural storyteller with his guitar as a puppet. "For those who understood and loved his kind of music, the evening was a great success and their appreciation knew no bounds."<sup>4</sup>

Like Lead Belly, the audience was responsive and congenial, although many left the show without confronting the complex issues a popular black musician represented to the status quo of white America. Ledbetter's early concerts with Lomax only hinted at the black experience in America. Unlike the audience's ears, tuned to hear good music, the distinctions between white and black, folk and blues, or racial citizenship never registered over the P.A. speakers. Huddie Ledbetter was Du Bois' divided man, "One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two

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<sup>4</sup> Hector Lee. "Some Notes on Lead Belly." *The Journal of American Folklore* 76, no. 300 (1963): 135-138.

souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>5</sup> This duality becomes transparent by pitting the racially constructed Lead Belly to his double-self, Huddie Ledbetter, juxtaposing this “two-ness” – a primitive, culturally isolated African American or a socially conscious, modern black musician. The dichotomy of Lead Belly/Ledbetter shows he was not just John Lomax’s servile entertainer or a simple folk musician. The merging of the fabricated Lead Belly and the self-aware Huddie Ledbetter elucidates a “better and true self,” Du Bois said.

“In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and sit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”<sup>6</sup>

The music and performances of Lead Belly showcased his African and American heritage and voiced social and racial protest while attempting to maintain a personal identity, career, and marriage. Ledbetter was a major voice in the civil rights and leftist movements. Amiri Baraka wrote, “what is so apparent in the classic blues is the sense for the first time that the Negro felt he was part of the

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<sup>5</sup> William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Oxford University Press, 2008): 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3.

superstructure.”<sup>7</sup> Lead Belly certainly felt he was part of the American superstructure. His talents and social activism allowed him to be both a member of the nascent New Negro campaign and a founder in the Black Arts Movement years before it began, as well as an unsung hero of the long Civil Rights campaign.

Much of the scholarly work regarding Ledbetter concerns itself with the analysis of John and Alan Lomax’s financial exploitation and racial prejudice against Ledbetter. Karl Hagstrom Miller illuminated segregation in America’s early music but does not carry this theme into the realm of class or Ledbetter’s identity. Many analyses rely on the actors surrounding Lead Belly instead of the musician himself. Huddie Ledbetter was not an isolated African vernacular singer, nor was he a voiceless black actor of the depression era. Patrick Mullen states that many scholars created images of blackness and whiteness that revealed a white dominant power structure. Houston Baker Jr. believed black expressive culture came essentially from “the vast fluid body of Black song – spirituals, shouts, jubilees, gospel songs, field cries, blues, and pop songs by Blacks.”<sup>8</sup> All of these perspectives highlight the “difference” between races linking racial oppositions to, “[B]lack to white, African to European, abnormal to normal.”<sup>9</sup> Scholars divide music, culture, or heritage to race; equating Ledbetter to a unitary black voice, one that was dominated by John Lomax’s ideologies. But Ledbetter had another voice, one that was an icon for racial and social unity. His deep grumble was not just an African American moan, but it was an American cry – one that crossed racial and class divisions. It was in his similarities that brought

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<sup>7</sup> Amiri Baraka and LeRoi Jones. *Blues People*. (Rabén & Sjögren, 1974): 87.

<sup>8</sup> Houston A Baker Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. (University of Chicago Press, 2013): 80.

<sup>9</sup> David Brackett. "James Brown's 'Superbad' and the double-voiced utterance." *Popular Music* 11, no. 3 (1992): 123.

black and white together – similarities of music culture and human expression. “Black music reveals black thought,” Baraka wrote.<sup>10</sup> While this is true, American music also reveals the similarities of white and black thought together. Ledbetter was just one means of this transmission. Lead Belly’s music navigates both black *and* white thought as a form of cultural revitalization in the black community “which embraced rather than repudiated the organic metaphor of race.”<sup>11</sup> Black and white perceptions of Americans during the depression can “only be examined with simultaneous attention to the ways in which...black American understood race as a concept.”<sup>12</sup> To find any truth in the duality of Lead Belly’s authenticity one need only to look at what he represented – an alternative story to the narrative of the fabricated African American authenticity propelled by folklorists and the record industry. The discussion must begin with racial difference and social critiques.

One result of analyzing the difference in African American peoples in North America is the romanticization of the division in the form of “blackness.” Toni Morrison said this division between blackness and whiteness enabled Africanism to “become the operative mode of the new cultural hegemony.”<sup>13</sup> While this is true, black music as a mode of communication often used blackness to their advantage or used allegorical or metaphorical representations of African American culture. African American musicians have been stereotyped throughout

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<sup>10</sup> Baraka and Jones, ix.

<sup>11</sup> Mia Bay. *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925*. (Oxford University Press, 2000): 189.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 220.

<sup>13</sup> Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark*. (New York: Vintage, 1992): 8.

history, as the working relationship of John Lomax and Huddie Ledbetter shows. One song Lomax often had Lead Belly perform was the folk work song “Dis Ole Hammer,” another song that equates African American industriousness with the blue-collar working man. “Dis ole hammer – hunh. Ring like silver – hunh. Shine like gold, baby – hunh. Shine like gold, baby – hunh.” The vocal “hunh” mimicked the swinging of the axe keeping the timing of the railroad gang. This type of analysis was typical in early black music research, “Widely spread and known are the Negro work songs.”<sup>14</sup> While work songs certainly follow the call and response form seen in African tradition, by the 1930s chain gangs in the south were singing work songs written by blacks and whites. Both races met at work, ate together, and sang together. Otto and Burns point out that Jimmy Rodgers “worked as a white water boy for black section gangs on the M&O Railroad, also learning many of his lyrics from black work gangs.”<sup>15</sup> So the cultural transmission worked both ways; Rodger’s sang work songs and Lead Belly yodeled. Many styles of ethnic music flowed through both sections of town. The great bluesmen Charlie Patton performed for Caucasians after a dinner party and then headed to a rural blues juke joint on the edge of town.<sup>16</sup>

Southern whites and blacks are often viewed as culturally dissimilar, which perpetuates a strict black/white dichotomy. This depiction was exacerbated by emphasizing the difference between white and black music rather than the process of creativity. African American musicians were often classified by race, subjecting their music to a label of blackness. While Patrick Mullen gives many examples of

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<sup>14</sup> Sterling Brown. "Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs." *Phylon* (1940-1956) 14, no. 1 (1953): 57.

<sup>15</sup> John S. Otto and Augustus M. Burns. "Black and White Cultural Interaction in the Early Twentieth Century South: Race and Hillbilly Music." *Phylon* (1960-) 35, no. 4 (1974): 410.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 411.

the primitive image of bluesmen, he also states that this was reciprocally exchanged by black performers manipulating white music producers to gain advantages.<sup>17</sup>

Ledbetter often used the racialized image of blackness to delude Lomax. At a hotel in Montgomery, John Lomax recalls Ledbetter asking him for money while he continued to resist. “Boss, I’s e nothin’ but a nigger,” Ledbetter said. “There never wus a nigger whut would keep his word – leastwise I never knowed none. I thought you knowed dat. I’s e hungry, boss. Ain’t you gwine to give me no money? I’ll never do this way no mo’.” Lead Belly got his money, Lomax finishes.<sup>18</sup> Ledbetter addressed his letters “Dear Boss Man” and signed them “i’m your Servan, Huddie Ledbetter,” throughout the years Ledbetter and Lomax corresponded.<sup>19</sup> He knew early on in his life what particular racial traits to play-up or romanticize for personal gain, both with Lomax and performing on stage. This was already evident in African American performers who donned blackface. Ellis Cashmore believes they “may have been consciously playing the roles whites had created for them; they may also have been manipulating images for expedient purposes.”<sup>20</sup> Ledbetter’s moniker played to the image of a violent, primitive ex-convict who was unnaturally talented on the guitar. There are many myths in the naming of Lead Belly. One suggests he was stabbed

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick B. Mullen. *The Man who adores the Negro: Race and American folklore*. (University of Illinois Press, 2008): 128.

<sup>18</sup> John Avery Lomax, Huddie Ledbetter and Alan Lomax. *Negro Folk-Songs as Sung by Lead Belly [ie Huddie Ledbetter]... Transcribed, Selected and Edited by JA Lomax and A. Lomax.[With a Portrait, and Musical Notes.]*. (Macmillan Company, 1936): 41.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfe and Lornell, 123.

<sup>20</sup> Ellis Cashmore. *Beyond Black: Celebrity and Race in Obama's America*. (A&C Black, 2012): 105.

while another is attributed to laziness.<sup>21</sup> Music professor Adam Krims believes that place became the geographic equivalent of identity.<sup>22</sup> This equates southern musicians to a generalized rural southern farming community or a violent prison complex (as seen with Ledbetter). The photograph of Lead Belly dressed in overalls and a do-rag followed him throughout his career with Lomax. All of these forms were racialized stereotypes of the southern African American. The false heritage of the servile black man enjoying field work is satirized in Lead Belly's "Pick a Bale of Cotton."

This double consciousness, in the form of whiteness and blackness, weighed upon Lead Belly as a form of racialized self-identity – "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world," according to Du Bois.<sup>23</sup> People like John Lomax promoted this traditional image of Lead Belly's identity, but it was undergirded by the social structure around him. The effect of blackness socially inculcated a belief in white social and musical superiority, likewise problems that stemmed from racial discrimination, both in music ownership and social status created a sense of second-class citizenship. Musicians, like Ledbetter, had the opportunity to voice this in song. Blues lyrics contained images of social malaise and critiques on the dichotomy of whiteness and blackness. Lead Belly used the image of disease to represent racial and social oppression. Songs like "Good Morning Blues" illustrate how the disease of racism affected both black and white. It emphasizes morals and sympathy for the audience, while invoking a sense of shame.

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<sup>21</sup>These many references refer to Ledbetter being stabbed in the neck during a prison fight and his ability to lie around as if a weight were on his stomach found in a number of Huddie Ledbetter stories.

<sup>22</sup> Adam Krims. "Music, Space, and Place." *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction* (2012): 141.

<sup>23</sup> Du Bois, 2.

“Now this is the blues  
There was a white man had the blues  
Thought it was nothing to worry about  
Now you lay down at night  
You roll from one side of the bed to the other all night  
long  
Ya can’t sleep, what’s the matter; the blues gotcha  
May have a sister a mother a brother n’ a father  
around  
But you don’t want no talk out of em  
What’s the matter; the blues gotcha  
When you go in put your feet under the table  
And look down at ya plate got everything you wanna  
eat  
But ya shake ya head you get up you say  
“Lord I can’t eat I can’t sleep, what’s the matter”  
The blues gotcha  
Why not talk to ya  
Tell what you gotta tell em.  
Well good morning blues  
Blues how do you do?”<sup>24</sup>

This song questions white insecurities about racial equality and leads to a final confrontation of blackness and whiteness. It can be seen in the African American desire for full citizenship, as Lead Belly’s “Equality for Negroes” sings, “Negroes fought in World War One and Two, why can’t we get some equal rights.”<sup>25</sup> Both songs questioned the divisions that were essential to American segregation, tackling the “images of inferiority” that white American

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<sup>24</sup> Huddie Ledbetter, “Good Morning Blues.” Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. <https://folkways.si.edu/lead-belly/bourgeois-blues-legacy-vol-2/american-folk/music/album/smithsonian>.

<sup>25</sup> Wolfe and Lornell, 245.

emphasized as one of the black race's deficits.<sup>26</sup> This song dwells on white regret at the treatment of African Americans and implores the listener to ask questions through Lead Belly's thoughtful lyrics: "blues got ya, why not talk to them." Ledbetter felt he was on the same social and racial plane as any white citizen and expressed such themes in his music.

John Lomax and the white-dominated music industry presented Lead Belly as a simple fool who was continually taken advantage of, both financially and within the business itself. The few personal statements Ledbetter made throughout his life have limited his voice and led to a one-sided analysis of his career. Despite this, Ledbetter maintained his own voice, capturing himself as a conscious African American musician crossing racial and social boundaries when it was necessary and playing the role of servant when it was not. An example of this awareness can be seen early on in the John Lomax and Ledbetter relationship. While Lomax believed he needed to guide Ledbetter along, Ledbetter often resisted when pushed too far: "I ain't goin' to sing no mo' for you neither lessen I wants to; an' I ain't goin' nowha lessen you bring Marthy along, too."<sup>27</sup> Ledbetter knew the only thing keeping Lomax and himself together was his music, and his wife was the only person he truly trusted.

Even at Lead Belly's performances the main attraction was always John Lomax, who interpreted Lead Belly's identity for the audience. One of the first stops on their tour was in Philadelphia at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 1934 where Lomax translated Lead Belly's songs because of his "dramatic rendition of raw folk songs."<sup>28</sup> It was the MLA

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<sup>26</sup> Bay, 77-78.

<sup>27</sup> Lomax, Ledbetter, and Lomax, 59.

<sup>28</sup> John Avery Lomax Collection. Library of Congress. *Modern Language Association*, 1934. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/lomax/>.

who urged John Lomax, not Huddie Ledbetter, “to set down the story of my experiences.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, John Lomax is often the source of historical analysis. Even the official program for their performance at the Crystal Ballroom at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel excluded Ledbetter’s name and read:

*Negro Folksongs and Ballads, presented by John Lomax and Alan Lomax with the assistance of a Negro minstrel from Louisiana.*

While Ledbetter was treated as a primitive historical artifact, Wolfe and Lornell note this “was the first time that recordings of black vernacular music had been heard at an MLA meeting.”<sup>30</sup> This bold move legitimized a black voice in the studies of American language and literature. With just his voice and guitar, Lead Belly transcended race and class barriers, becoming a legitimate voice of the racially disenfranchised. At the MLA concert he sang the folk ballad “Frankie and Albert” and the cowboy song “When I Was a Cowboy.” Despite Lomax’s insistence that Lead Belly play only folk songs and change any risqué language, the concert promoted black vernacular music to much of the audience’s enjoyment. “His singing and playing while seated on the top center of the banquet table at the smoker before a staid and dignified professional audience smacked of sensationalism,” Lomax remembered. “Nothing like this had ever before happened. And the delighted listeners filled his hat with silver and with dollars.”<sup>31</sup> More significantly though, Ledbetter was the first black man to play for the

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<sup>29</sup> John A. Lomax. *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*. (University of Texas Press, 2017): ix.

<sup>30</sup> Wolfe and Lornell, 130.

<sup>31</sup> Lomax, Ledbetter, and Lomax, 45.

all-white MLA crowd as well as many universities and lecture halls across the northeast during their tour. Some of his concerts were racially integrated, marking another music industry first. This is the duality of Ledbetter that has been largely ignored.

The most studied aspect of early African American music is its heritage to Africa. Much of Lead Belly's music showcases African musical styles. The structure of Lead Belly's music had its origins in African polyrhythms. Music critics like Samuel Charters and Amiri Baraka have pointed out these connections in a number of publications and lectures. "Drums! Drums! Drums!" Charter reiterates again and again, "the sound throbbing and pulsing through the steaming night air."<sup>32</sup> Similarities to Blues, Ragtime, and Jazz rhythms are the first similarity to African American culture researchers point out. Alan Lomax noted the "complex polyphony of the blacks" throughout his folk collecting trips, equating this to a "primitive" music.<sup>33</sup> Amiri Baraka explains the link of slaves' call and response singing to early 20<sup>th</sup> century African American spirituals and seculars:

"Rhythmic syncopation, polyphony, and shifted accents, as well as the altered timbral qualities and diverse vibrato effects of African music were all used by the Negro to transform most of the 'white hymns' into Negro spirituals...The models for the 'riffs' and 'breaks' of later jazz music...contained the same 'rags,' 'blues notes' and 'stop times.'"<sup>34</sup>

The western pentatonic scale did not fit theoretically into African musical styles. Aberrations of melody and

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<sup>32</sup> Samuel Charters. *The Roots of the Blues: an African search*. Vol. 1. (Boston: M. Boyars, 1981): 66.

<sup>33</sup> Alan Lomax. *The Land where the Blues Began*. Vol. 36. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993): xii – xiii.

<sup>34</sup> Baraka and Jones, 47.

harmonies became known as blue notes. Blue notes were simply songs written with minor notes. The banjo was an African instrument often called the Kora, while the African xylophone could be mimicked on the European piano. While Lead Belly's music borrowed western musical stylings, other cultural connections link African American musicians to African heritage.

Samuel Charters went as far as to claim modern African American musicians were a re-envisioned African griot. The griot was a West African traveling musician "who served as a community spokesman" and oral historian.<sup>35</sup> Depression-era black musicians were contemporaries to the griot. Griots brought with them their traditions, beliefs, and myths, as well as their music. It is through the myths and motifs blues musicians sang about that their history now unfolds. As early as colonial times, slaves and freedmen had mastered European instruments but performed in a stylistically unique fashion.<sup>36</sup> What is significant to this analysis is the cultural conveyance of African heritage carried by instruments and words. Because of these cultural connections to Africa, African American musicians like Lead Belly were not only transmitting African heritage but creating their own culture across the Atlantic Ocean. Despite these connections, Baraka explains that African music is not African American music, "even though ragtime, Dixieland, and jazz are all dependent on blues for their existence in any degree of authenticity, the terms themselves relate to a broader reference than

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<sup>35</sup> William Ferris. "Blue Roots and Development." *The Black Perspective in Music* (1974): 122.

<sup>36</sup> See Olly Wilson's "The Significance of the Relationship between Afro-American Music and West African Music." *The Black Perspective in Music*. (1974) and Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. (New York: Norton, 1997).

blues.”<sup>37</sup> Lead Belly played music that was not African or American; it was African American. American music is an ever-changing black and white musical tradition.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, when analyzing early black music one must acknowledge the difference of form, but refrain from regionalizing the artist and racializing the music by connecting African culture to a nascent African American culture. This emerging culture created a new style of music by combining European, American, and African forms. While Baraka contends that the blues are a Negro experience, they are also a duality. Blues music was an American experience as much as it was an African American one.

One early similarity between Western music and African American music can be seen in spirituals. The call and response nature of spirituals, along with the harmonies are distinctly African, but the musical content borrowed elements of Western philosophy and religion. Christianity’s influence on African American music has been thoroughly explored. Stories about Moses and the Promised Land held significant importance to their heritage of captivity.<sup>39</sup> Christianity influenced many of Lead Belly’s songs, such as “Amazing Grace” and “Laz’us” seen in John Lomax’s collections. Here, Lomax acknowledges the “difference” by categorizing the spirituals into separate racial categories, just as the recording industry had done. Taking both songs into consideration, Western religious themes were

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<sup>37</sup> Amari Baraka, “Classic Blues.” in *Popular Music: Music and Society*. Ed. Simon Frith. (New York: Routledge, 2004): 71.

<sup>38</sup> Ira Berlin states that black music evolved “from shouts and hollers into spirituals, spirituals into gospel, and country blues into rhythm and blues...without presuming these genes had distinctive lineages” but fails to acknowledge any western influence on black music. Ira Berlin. *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations*. (Penguin, 2010): 36.

<sup>39</sup> Reference Ira Berlin for the parallels of Moses and African Americans as “modern counterparts to the Children of Israel.” Berlin, 128-129.

revamped to fit the slaves' current bondage. This clearly shows how African forms combined with Western themes to become a distinctly American culture. For example, Lead Belly's version of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" includes the verse, "Yuh see dem sisters dress so fine? Well, dey ain't got Jesus on dey min'. Ef Salvation wuz a thing money could buy, den de rich would live an' de po' would die."<sup>40</sup> In this version Lead Belly exemplifies the divides between rich and poor, black and white, and contrasts this with Christianity. Ledbetter concludes the song absolving these divides, "But Ah'm so glad God fix it so. Dat de rich mus' die jes' as well as de po'!"<sup>41</sup> This variation of the adopted black anthem "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" suggests that the elite and the commoners will all be judged together, regardless of class or race. Lead Belly was a product of his antebellum past. He was also a captive of the prison labor system predicated on race rather than the nature or circumstance of the crime. Examples of cunning over strength can be seen in Lead Belly's folk version of "Ol' Rattler" where the fleeing prisoner, Riley, outwits the guards and their hounds. "Riley walked the water. Ol' Rattler couldn't walk it. Bye, bye, Rattler."<sup>42</sup> Ledbetter attempted a number of prison breaks. None of them found the success of Ol' Riley.

Finally, the story of the devil and the crossroads repeated throughout blues lore is another adaptation of black and white culture. The elements originate from an African American mix of the Christian devil and the

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<sup>40</sup> Archie A. Searcy, Houston, Texas, collected by John A. and Alan Lomax. *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. (Houghton Mifflin: New York, 1934): 608-610.

<sup>41</sup> Lomax, *American Ballads*, 610.

<sup>42</sup> Lomax, Ledbetter, and Lomax, 108.

African crossroads' god Esu.<sup>43</sup> The trickster Esu was the guardian of the crossroads - the symbolic juncture that represents choice. Henry Louis Gates described Esu as individual and loyal:

The guardian of the crossroads, master of style and stylus, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane. Frequently characterized as an inveterate copulator possessed by his enormous penis, linguistically Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understand, the sacred with the profane.<sup>44</sup>

In African-American society the trickster "provides an outlet for the expression of socially unacceptable themes" such as segregation in both American society and the professional music business.<sup>45</sup> But the cultural similarities do not end there. Segregation's attempt to separate white and black was largely a failure in the music world, as James Otto and Augustus Burns argue "despite segregation, white and blacks met at work...heard each other's lyrics, vocal styles, and tunes."<sup>46</sup> The colorblind nature of music allowed for the assimilation, reconfiguration and authentication of African and European music and the culture resulting in nascent American music. The contact between Africans and Europeans in America resulted in a new musical creation seen in Lead Belly's eclectic music catalog. It also created a social dialogue in the midst of racial segregation.

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<sup>43</sup> There are various names for the trickster Esu throughout Africa and the Americas. The name Legba can be found in Benin, Exu in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba and Papa Legba in Haiti.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A theory of African American Literary Criticism*. (Oxford University Press, 2014): 5-6.

<sup>45</sup> Ayana Smith. "Blues, criticism, and the signifying trickster." *Popular Music* (2005): 180.

<sup>46</sup> Otto and Burns, 410.

It is these connections between Africa and America that resulted in an American heritage that was both black, white, and otherwise. The meeting of African *and* American heritages voiced the question of African American identity and citizenship, as well as social divides between the rich and poor during the interwar period. This question could not be more forcefully expressed than Lead Belly's most politically charged song, "Bourgeois Blues" recorded in 1937 and performed during his MLA tour.

Lord, its a bourgeois town  
     It's a bourgeois town  
     I got the bourgeois blues  
     Gonna spread the news all around  
     Home of the brave, land of the free  
 I don't wanna be mistreated by no bourgeoisie  
     Lord, in a bourgeois town  
     Uhm, the bourgeois town  
     I got the bourgeois blues  
     Gonna spread the news all around  
 Well, me and my wife we were standing upstairs  
 We heard the white man say "I don't want no niggers up  
     there"  
     Lord, in a bourgeois town  
     Uhm, bourgeois town  
     I got the bourgeois blues  
     Gonna spread the news all around  
 Well, them white folks in Washington they know how  
 To call a colored man a nigger just to see him bow  
     Lord, it's a bourgeois town  
     Uhm, the bourgeois town  
     I got the bourgeois blues  
     Gonna spread the news all around

I tell all the colored folks to listen to me  
 Don't try to find you no home in Washington, DC  
   `Cause it's a bourgeois town  
   Uhm, the bourgeois town  
   I got the bourgeois blues  
 Gonna spread the news all around.<sup>47</sup>

Here, Ledbetter equates class and race together, as he did in many of his songs to suggest that black citizenship and equality should exist for African Americans as well. As he does with “Equality for Negroes,” Ledbetter asks his audience to “spread the news” of racial and class divides to the masses. Author Richard Wright interviewed Ledbetter a few months later where he expressed respect for the song “Bourgeois Blues.” Wright wrote in the *Daily Worker* in 1937, that Lead Belly was “a people’s artist,” in which the “entire folk culture of the American Negro has found its embodiment.”<sup>48</sup> Wright and even John Lomax’s son Alan encouraged this song to be showcased because it was reality.

Not all of Lead Belly’s lyrics were so transparent. The role of language and performance reflected a subculture of social protest. The folk songs Lead Belly sang live identified him as a spokesperson. The music, lyrics and performances of Lead Belly were often critiquing society or signifiers of the African American culture of protest. Lawson writes that blues musicians were seen as a facsimile of the interwar counterculture who expressed experience through vocal signifiers.<sup>49</sup> A song like

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<sup>47</sup> Huddie Ledbetter, “Bourgeois Blues.” Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. <https://folkways.si.edu/lead-belly/bourgeois-blues-legacy-vol-2/american-folk/music/album/smithsonian>.

<sup>48</sup> Wolfe and Lornell, 200.

<sup>49</sup> See James Lawson. *Jim Crow’s Counterculture: The Blues and Black Southerners, 1890 – 1945*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010) and Sean Cubitt. “‘Maybellene’: Meaning and the Listening Subject.” *Popular music* 4 (1984): 207-224.

“Bourgeois Blues” was a subversion of social norms. A musician’s ability to “communicate publicly through veiled and coded language” was perhaps their most unique advantage.<sup>50</sup> Performers like Lead Belly entered the public forum when they entered the recording industry culture. This allowed for a public voice that was normally limited through various Jim Crow laws. Lead Belly’s music allowed for personal and cultural expression without openly antagonizing the norm. Sociologist Jason Toynbee stated, “Quite simply, music needs to be understood as an ensemble of coded voices.”<sup>51</sup> Not only can the words and music be a social dialogue, but they allow for the transcendence of the norm. In this way, Ledbetter’s singing becomes a dialogue with its audience, reflecting a black collective identity that challenged the American racial dichotomy. West African musical tradition relies on the social experience; everyone is a participant. Both Lead Belly’s folk songs and blues tunes consider the “we” as an integral part of the music.<sup>52</sup>

The artist’s performance is the vehicle that communicates a consciousness to the community. Backstage at the University of Utah’s concert series Hector Lee saw Lead Belly’s performance and thought, “Even his songs of bitterness like ‘The Gallis Pole,’ and others that are the ultimate in disillusionment, were for Lead Belly songs of fighting strength, of glory, of triumph, with him as the champion.”<sup>53</sup> Lee continued, “He seemed proud that he had the means at his command of expressing the sadness of

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<sup>50</sup> Lawson, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Jason Toynbee. "Music, Culture, and Creativity." *The Cultural Study of Music* (2003): 164.

<sup>52</sup> Wilson, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Lee, 138.

his people.”<sup>54</sup> The forceful and passionate delivery of Lead Belly’s final verse elicited a response of remorse and determination that even the white audience understood as the hanged man swung from the gallows’ pole. Despite bribes of money and work, the hangman’s friends and family could still not save him. “Brother, I brought you some silver, I brought a little gold, I brought a little of everything, to keep you from the gallows’ pole. Hangman, hangman, upon your face a smile, pray tell me that I’m free to ride, swinging from the gallows’ pole.”<sup>55</sup>

While being a musician allowed for interaction with vast groups of people, it also allowed the performer to release their own fears, joys, desires, and social critiques. When Ledbetter saw the Manhattan skyline after thousands of miles performing through the southern states he proclaimed, “New Yawk! Capital of all de states in de world! Run under a mile of water to git in it! Subways up in de air, on de ground and under de ground through a solid rock! It scares me! Fifth Avenoo! New Yawk! New Yawk!” The Song “New York, New York” rarefies the Lead Belly duality.<sup>56</sup> John Lomax attributed the song’s primitive vernacular to Lead Belly’s primitiveness. He saw Ledbetter’s trip to New York City as a testament to the childlike recklessness of the African American. Upon arrival, Ledbetter had to stay in Harlem as no other part of town would lodge him. There he walked from music club to music club, free to roam and mingle with people and alcohol. The Harlem morning found him hung over, but he had found the city of the black renaissance that he told his fellow southerners about through song. “If I ever go down to Georgia I’, gonna walk and talk and tell everybody about the city of New York. New York City! Woo! Ain’t that a

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<sup>54</sup> Lee, 138.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Lomax, Ledbetter, and Lomax, 47.

city.”<sup>57</sup> Lead Belly’s song then encourages the black southerners to settle in the African American renaissance borough of Harlem. “Train’s a runnin’ in the ground and it won’t keep still, when I catch me a train to ride to Sugar Hill.”

In this song, there is an obvious infatuation with New York City that Lead Belly shares with his fellow southerners. But there are other subtleties that the lyrics convey. Harlem represents southern manumission. The chugging of Lead Belly’s guitar suggests riding the rail, while his vocal “Woo” represents the train’s whistle. The connections to the Manhattan subway line that runs from central station to Harlem is as accessible to travelers as the southern trains that will carry the black southerners north. Lead Belly makes another social statement when he refers to “catching a train ride to Sugar Hill.” The northern district of Harlem’s Hamilton Heights was named Sugar Hill, which by the 1920s and 30s came to represent the upward mobility of African Americans.<sup>58</sup> “New York, New York” showcases an exciting modern black city, but really represents the long train ride from share-cropper shacks in the Mississippi Delta to the upscale row houses of Sugar Hill neighborhood.

Lead Belly’s music also allowed for a communal call and response. In “Alabama Bound” Lead Belly invokes his African heritage with his call of “I’m Alabama bound,” the chorus repeats “I’m Alabama bound.” This response represents the multitude of black southerners singing along with Lead Belly, all of which are afraid to enter the state of

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<sup>57</sup> Lomax, Ledbetter, and Lomax, 47.

<sup>58</sup> Langston Hughes wrote about Harlem and Sugar Hill in 1944 for *The New Republic* (March 27, 1944), “There are big apartment houses up on the hill, Sugar Hill...nice high-rent houses with elevators and doormen, where Canada Lee lives, and W. C. Handy.”

Alabama. But it also held meaningful content in the context of the Jim Crow south. “I’m Alabama bound if the train doesn’t stop and turn around. Oh, don’t you leave me here.”<sup>59</sup> Alabama was notorious for its slavery-like prison system that Ledbetter must have feared even while spending time in Parchman Farm.<sup>60</sup> As a slave, convict, or black man, Alabama was the antithesis of the New York City that Lead Belly sings about. This version of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century folk song based in early American call and response connects folk with modernity, a leader with community, and performer to audience. Like “New York, New York” and “Alabama Bound,” “Scottsboro Boys” is a call to vacate the south and escape to the north.<sup>61</sup> “Go to Alabama and ya better watch out. The landlord’ll get ya, gonna jump and shout.” Again Ledbetter equates Harlem to freedom and black culture, “I’m Gonna tell all the colored people. livin’ in Harlem swing. Don’t ya ever go to Alabama.” Finally, the hit song “Midnight Special” was about a Texas train that left Houston for the West Coast, passing by Sugarland Penitentiary, a jail where Ledbetter could formerly see the train’s lights cast across his cell. Like the north, the west held the allure of freedom and safety.

Hector Lee described Lead Belly during the Salt Lake City performances: “He asked the audience to join him in song. He called them in. He waved them in.”<sup>62</sup> The

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<sup>59</sup> Huddie Ledbetter, “Alabama Bound,” Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. <https://folkways.si.edu/lead-belly/bourgeois-blues-legacy-vol-2/american-folk/music/album/smithsonian>.

<sup>60</sup> See Mary Ellen Curtin “Black Prisoners and Their World.” *Alabama 1900* (1865): 156-58, for an in-depth analysis of the convict-lease system the folk song “Alabama Bound” references. Curtin states “freedom left black Alabamians vulnerable to new forms of legal repression...like white control and forced prison labor.” Ledbetter understood this system well and often sang prison folk songs.

<sup>61</sup> The Scottsboro Case can be examined here: Carter, Dan T. *Scottsboro: A tragedy of the American South*. (LSU Press, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> Lee, 137.

performances of Lead Belly elucidated a response. Lead Belly was a performer who knew how to draw his audience into the show, encouraging them to take a walk in his shoes. Songs like “Scottsboro Boys” merged personal fears with other black concerns. During the modern blues period of the 1930s, Lawson states, “‘me’ – centered musical form increasingly reflected the collective identity ‘we.’”<sup>63</sup> The polyphonic nature of African rhythm translated into the lyrics creating a community dialogue.<sup>64</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale wrote, “Segregation’s performances erased African American identity” and it was blues music that “announced the possibility of an individual black identity.”<sup>65</sup> Self-expression in the form of first-person affirms an identity authentic to each individual that we can see in “I’m Alabama bound.” The act of community comes in the chorus “I’m Alabama bound.” The same can be seen in the chorus of “New York, New York.” Toynebee believes “social authorship also implies a social semiotics in that creation is a matter of selecting from a pool of coded voices that are shared within a given musical community.”<sup>66</sup> The sharing of music in the form of the folk or blues songs created an evolving heritage that ensures Lead Belly’s version would not be the last or only voice. This means that

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<sup>63</sup> Lawson, 198.

<sup>64</sup> Fred Hay uses a similar analysis for Lead Belly’s song “Keep Your Hands Off Her” in the article, “Blues What I Am’: Blues Consciousness and Social Protest.” *America’s Musical Pulse: Popular Music in Twentieth Century Society*. Ed. Kenneth J. Bindas. (Westport: Greenwood, 1992): 17.

<sup>65</sup> Hale, Grace Elizabeth. “Hear me talking to you: The blues and the romance of rebellion.” *Beyond blackface: African Americans and the creation of American popular culture 1930 (1890)*: 253. Hale also states, “the blues stylized presentation of individualism almost always occurs through the use of first person,” 246.

<sup>66</sup> Toynebee, 169.

the folk songs Lead Belly sang became an outlet for continuing communal response. Many of Lead Belly's songs reflected social critiques such as in "Bourgeois Blues," "New York, New York," and "Scottsboro Boys."

Alternative forms of communication are often more effective than mere speech. Historians Shane and Graham White wrote that "over more than two centuries, ordinary black men and women developed a style that did indeed affirm their lives."<sup>67</sup> White and White argue that the way in which African American wore their clothes, styled their hair, and danced were cultural imperatives that linked them together. While White and White give the illustration that jazz musicians lifestyles were "highly visible and influential," they do not explain how the audience was affected through the music and lyrics.<sup>68</sup> It was the songs Lead Belly sang, as well as his dress, that expressed his consciousness to listeners. Ledbetter was an immaculate dresser who believed dress was a sign of success. African American style or music was communicable to races other than their own despite White and White's claims of the differences in their language, style, and manners. The black and white demand for race records show that white listeners sought African American music.<sup>69</sup> While segregation attempted to keep the races apart, socially and culturally, it was music that brought blacks and whites together. The difference explains the uniqueness of the two races, but the similarities between black and white bridge them together as Ledbetter's early tours with Lomax achieved. Ledbetter crossed race lines by singing a selection of politically conscious songs to white audiences at the MLA performance, along with forty two shows at black and white universities (featuring black and white

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<sup>67</sup> Shane and Graham White. *Stylin': African American Expression from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*. (London: Cornell University Press, 1998): 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 240.

<sup>69</sup> Refer to Kenney's *Recorded Music in American Life*, Chapter Six.

performers) across the United States from 1934 to his death in 1949. A 1947 performance at New York University used a concert flyer with the message, “An alert and open mind,” as the only admission requirement.<sup>70</sup> It was perhaps these concerts with working-class songs like “Joe Hill” that caught the attention of leftist groups. With lyrics like “what they could not kill, went on to organize” captured in *Work Songs of the U.S.A. Sung by Lead Belly*, the song was endorsed by Pete Seeger and People’s Songs, a leftist, grassroots organization that equated the black struggle with working-class struggles.

In the early 1940s, Lead Belly’s folk music became part of the American Popular Front in the form of People’s Songs, a group founded by Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger.<sup>71</sup> According to the *People’s Songs Bulletin*, their mission was to “create, promote, and distribute songs of labor and the American people” regardless of race or political affiliation.<sup>72</sup> Lead Belly’s folk songs like “John Henry” expressed a wider lens of reality. Songs about powerful workers fighting against the machine, as in “John Henry,” linked the working class together regardless of race. “John Henry, gonna bring me a steam drill round, gonna take dat steam drill out on de job, gonna whop dat steel on down.”<sup>73</sup>

John Henry was a hard-working man, appearing as a white man or a black man in various folk songs, fighting

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<sup>70</sup> Steidl Publications. *Lead Belly: A Life in Pictures*. (New York: Steidl, 2008): 47-49.

<sup>71</sup> Robbie Lieberman, “*My Song Is My Weapon: People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930 – 1950*.” (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

<sup>72</sup> “Sing Out!” Last modified 2000.

<http://www.singout.org/sohistry.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Huddie Ledbetter, “John Henry.” Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. <https://folkways.si.edu/lead-belly/bourgeois-blues-legacy-vol-2/american-folk/music/album/smithsonian>.

for every last dime to feed his family and keep a shirt on his back like many of the people Lead Belly sang for in rural juke joints and folk hootenannies. The John Henry Lead Belly sang for at elite universities with Lomax across the Northeast showcased a down-trodden, but industrious commoner fighting their modern machines. Lastly, the vernacular Lead Belly uses for the Captain and the worker are the same suggesting there is little difference between master and man. Charles Nanry wrote, “American music often bridged the cultural gap between the races.”<sup>74</sup> Many in People Song’s hoped music like Lead Belly’s would bridge the gap between performer and the audience, as well as bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Lead Belly’s music allowed for the transmission of culture through performance. “Musical experience...belongs not just to musical work, composer or accredited ‘expert,’” Ruth Finnegan said, “but also to the variegated practitioners and audiences.”<sup>75</sup> Lead Belly’s MLA concert with John Lomax in 1934 provides an example of the audiences’ reaction to this type of cultural transfusion. The Modern Language Association was the nation’s largest organization of literary scholars. Here, for the first time at an MLA meeting, black vernacular music was heard, to an audible success, or as Wolfe and Lornell called it, “an immediate sensation.” MLA organizer Thomas Scudder III said, “it occurs to me that if you’re negro, with his folk songs...will have furnished for them a treat of uncontaminated ‘original’ music which should live in their memories.”<sup>76</sup> While the “hot music” of the blues was being marketed to the working-class and white women,

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<sup>74</sup> Charles A. Nanry, “Swing and Segregation.” In *America’s Musical Pulse: Popular Music in Twentieth-Century Society*. Ed. Kenneth Bindas (London: Praeger, 1992): 185.

<sup>75</sup> Ruth Finnegan, “Music, Experience, and Emotion.” in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 2012): 355.

<sup>76</sup> Wolfe and Lornell, 130; 135.

Lead Belly's tunes were reaching out to the academic upper-class, legitimizing him not only as a popular musician but as a transmitter of cultural identity linking the white working-class with the African American working man as seen in the lyrics of "John Henry." The extent at which musical participation confronted the division between white and black and rich and poor can be seen with the juxtaposition of blackness and whiteness in Lead Belly's career.

Much of the literature concerning Ledbetter suggests he was superficially political; a New York journalist wrote all of the leftist People's Songs artists were "politically conscious...with the exception of Leadbelly."<sup>77</sup> Ledbetter's association with People's Songs shows this was not the case. During Ledbetter's time with social activists like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, he did not display his political colors, despite songs like "Bourgeois Blues." "I think he was just glad to fit in with people who enjoyed his music," Ledbetter's friend Richard Nickson said.<sup>78</sup> But it seems naive to suggest that Ledbetter himself was apolitical. Ledbetter sang "We Shall Be Free" with Guthrie on the Down Home Radio Show for WKNY in 1940, a song which encouraged racial equality and workers' rights.<sup>79</sup> While Ledbetter may not have openly voiced his politics because of the racial divides in the 1930s, the songs that Lead Belly often performed were politically conscious, resulting in a critique of American issues like segregation

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<sup>77</sup> See Wolfe and Lornell's, 209-210. See also: Miller, Karl Hagstrom. *Segregating sound*. (Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> Wolfe and Lornell, 210.

<sup>79</sup> Eli Smith, "Leadbelly & Woody Guthrie Live! On WNYC 1940," Down Home Radio Show, January 20, 2007, <http://www.downhomeradioshow.com/2007/01/leadbelly-woody-guthrie-live-on-wnyc-1940/>.

and disenfranchisement. It was a form of Lawson's "blues counterculture...that were necessarily accepting of prevailing Jim Crow social norms while at the same time hoping to evade or subvert them."<sup>80</sup> Ledbetter went as far as to criticize social norms as an early civil rights activist. In the end, it did not matter whether he was political or not, "all us niggers is communists," Ledbetter joked at a party.<sup>81</sup> Ledbetter was singing about society in a country where his voice was not supposed to count for anything. Simply performing politically conscious songs like "Bourgeois Blues" publicly invited communal participation and in this way forever associated Lead Belly with political and social reform. Social participation, in this case in song, broke the barrier between audience and performer.

Many of Lead Belly's songs were, in fact, political according to John Greenway's definition of protest songs. "These are the struggle songs of the people...they are songs of unity." Greenway goes on to state protest music is "class conscious...for economic protest is often synonymous with social protest."<sup>82</sup> The union folk song about Joe Hill Lead Belly sang for People's Songs spoke to the common working man. "Says Joe, what they can never kill, went on to organize (chorus). From San Diego up to Maine, in every mine and mill, where working men defend their rights, its where you'll find Joe Hill. It's where you'll find Joe Hill (chorus)."<sup>83</sup> Many of Lead Belly's songs fit the criteria as seen in the group lyrics, "went on to organize and working men defend their rights." Other applicable tenets associated

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<sup>80</sup> Lawson, 17.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> John Greenway. *American Folksongs of Protest*. (New York: Octagon Books, 1971): 10.

<sup>83</sup> Refer to the many versions of the song "Joe Hill" at *Song of America* <https://songofamerica.net/song/joe-hill/> and "Article Songs of Unionization" through the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197381/>.

with protest music are also seen, namely racial equality and full citizenship.

Lead Belly sang about other principles associated with protest music, like racial equality and African American citizenship. Houston Baker Jr. uses DuBois's metaphors of veils and masks to represent racial segregation that "keeps Afro-Americans always behind a color line...prey to divided aims, dire economic circumstances, haphazard educational opportunities, and frustrated intellectual ambitions."<sup>84</sup> Lead Belly presents these disadvantages to blacks and whites, seen in the song "Joe Hill" or the lyrics of "Jim Crow Blues," "These old Jim Crowisms, dead bad luck for me an' you."<sup>85</sup> He merges racial barriers with social barriers, in effect articulating both the social ills of the common man and societies' prejudice to African Americans. In this sense, he united the New Negro movement with that of the Common Man and connected social equality with racial equality.

Alain Locke described the New Negro as "self-respecting, self-dependent and demanding full citizenship."<sup>86</sup> Ledbetter can be seen as a modern New Negro who represented modernity despite being entrenched in various Jim Crow restrictions. He used DuBois's "veils" of the New Negro and Populist propaganda to cross the Mason-Dixon Line shown in James Lawson's statement: "Having no vote, black southerners expressed their political identity in the forms of personal behavior and culture."<sup>87</sup> Music was another form of African American political expression. In the song "Equality for Negroes," Lead Belly

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<sup>84</sup> Baker Jr, 57.

<sup>85</sup> Wolfe and Lornell, 244.

<sup>86</sup> Alain Locke, ed. *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. (New York, 1925): ix.

<sup>87</sup> Lawson, 198.

associated racial equality with religious morals and patriotic sacrifice. Lead Belly asks, “if the Negroes were good enough to fight, why can’t we get some equal rights”. “Equality for Negroes” reaches out to Jews and Christians, as well as fellow African Americans with the words, “why don’t you folks realize, love thy neighbor.” Just as Lead Belly demanded to be heard by John Lomax, he also demanded that a national black voice be heard as well.<sup>88</sup> “Now listen up, Negroes fought in World War One and Two. The blues is like now, the blues at hand, fighting for a United Nations.” Ledbetter speaks to the loyalty and courage African Americans displayed in previous wars and asks, “If the Negroes were good enough to fight, why can’t we get some equal rights, for God made us all, and in Him we trust.” Again, Ledbetter affirms his social criticism with religion and the indiscriminate nature of death. “One thing, folks, you all should realize, six foot of dirt makes us all one size, for God made us all, and in Him we trust.” Finally he laments past and present injustices, “All and all, it’s a rotten shame, like they’re wanting to bring back slavery again.”<sup>89</sup> Lead Belly’s “Equality for Negroes” and a song about Jackie Robinson, absent from commercial records and Lomax’s songbooks, were intended for mostly white audiences. Wolfe and Lornell said he recorded the song only for Mary Barnicle and Tillman Cadle after hearing the 1948 Democratic convention broadcast nominating South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond for president.<sup>90</sup> Songs

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<sup>88</sup> Ledbetter and Lomax had many contract and relationship disputes. The first time Ledbetter sued Lomax was over the issue of post-dated checks, he received most of the money due to him. Wolfe and Lornell, Chapter 19.

<sup>89</sup> Wolfe and Lornell, 244.

<sup>90</sup> During the 1948 democratic convention many southern conservatives, angered over Harry Truman’s stand on civil rights formed the Dixiecrat Party. “None of this sat well with civil rights advocates and Huddie reflected this in his song”. Wolfe and Lornell, 244.

like these showcased Lead Belly's knack for speaking across race and class divides. It was the alternating masks that made him hard to read. Wolfe and Lornell suggest many African Americans referred to Lead Belly as an Uncle Tom because of his servile background with John Lomax. Ledbetter was well aware of such rumors, "These are good songs, they are my songs," he responded, "don't tell me I'm an Uncle Tom."<sup>91</sup> But the utilization of his dual-consciousness allowed Ledbetter to navigate the surging tide of Jim Crow. W. Fitzhugh Brundage said black musicians shaped public identity and their status as citizens.<sup>92</sup> Ledbetter utilized music to express his part the civil rights struggle as a self-respecting African American musician demanding full citizenship. Music can heighten an understanding of the musician, in this Ledbetter transmitted an image of a modern black man concerned with social and civil rights of the common man and the so-called "New Negro."

The musical career of Lead Belly presents an early representation of a populist, leftist, artistic voice for African American citizenship, equality, and national identity. While the issue of citizenship affected African Americans, the blues and folk music culture of the 1930s and 40s exposes a variety of marginalized people's social struggles. The music of Lead Belly was a call for both social and racial equality. Since musical performances and politics often take place in social settings, music became an outlet of cultural transformation. It was social movements, like the Popular Front's use of folk music, that questioned politics and promoted civic solidarity and commitment, which in turn "helped build bridges between class and

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<sup>91</sup> Wolfe and Lornell, 246.

<sup>92</sup> Brundage, "Working in the 'Kingdom of Culture'." in *Beyond Blackface*, 2.

status groups, between blacks and white supporters, and between rural and urban and/or northern and southern blacks.”<sup>93</sup> Lead Belly did this by breaking through the concept of whiteness and blackness. Lead Belly’s lyrics gave agency to African American calls for citizenship. The combination of politics, music and social movements’ united race and class as black music came to represent mainstream American popular music for all races and classes. When Ledbetter freed himself from the lopsided relationship with John Lomax, he joined the folk community in New York City. In the late 1930s, Ledbetter sued Lomax for copyright and royalty infringement, effectively severing their troubled partnership. After Ledbetter’s death, Moe Asch, founder of Folkways Records, forever immortalized Lead Belly’s protest songs in Leadbelly’s Last Sessions. A three double-album release featuring him at his most influential peak, 1947 to 1949, the collection put Folkways Records on the map for folk music, and eventually made bands like the Weavers popular through Lead Belly covers.<sup>94</sup> Through his relationships with Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie and Folkways Records, Lead Belly’s music spread across race and class. Ledbetter, like many African American musicians, found his voice in music. Ledbetter’s lyrics questioned racial difference while promoting African American heritage and activism. The popularity of protest songs like “Bourgeois Blues” granted him access to the growing circle of folksingers in Greenwich Village and the white working class. By the time the Weavers began singing Lead Belly’s “Goodnight Irene” in 1949 Lead Belly’s music could be heard all over Europe, Canada, the Caribbean and beyond.

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<sup>93</sup> Mullen, 98.

<sup>94</sup> Tony Olmstead, *Folkways Records: Moses Asch and His Encyclopedia of Sound*. (New York: Routledge, 2003): 36.