THE ROMANCE OF LEAD BELLY: RACE AND ACTIVISM IN AMERICAN BLUES MUSIC

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On January 16, 1925 Texas Governor Pat Neff signed a full pardon for Huddie 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, 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.¹

This was the first of two pardons Ledbetter received, the first in Texas and later in Louisiana, presumably rewarding his sublime talent on the twelve-string guitar.

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

John Lomax as his manager and sponsored by 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 consciousness. This thesis will weave Lead Belly’s lyrics and music along with contemporary and modern sources to examine his role in African American social activism.

Ledbetter gained his mythic status from his two prison releases achieved by his singing. It was the stories of prison and murders that audiences in the north heard long before he played his twelve-string guitar and sang for them. The mythical side of Ledbetter preceded his true self. Folklorist and Lead Belly manager John Lomax’s publicity campaigned for Lead Belly “depicted him as a savage, untamed animal and focused endlessly on his convict past.”² The 1935 March of Times newsreel captures this, constructing a tale of the prison songster Lead Belly begging the prison warden to release him, then asking Lomax for a job as his driver, before he even plays music during the reel, which then depicts him singing to other inmates in prison. Stories like these, and others like Richard M. Garvin and Edmond G. Addeo’s The Midnight Special, Samuel Charters blues biographies, or even a 1976 film Lead Belly spend more screen time on

his life before he became a successful blues musician, casting Ledbetter in the mythical aura of the “murderous singer from the swamplands.”

Historians like Lawrence Levine, Amiri Baraka, and Sterling Brown began to look deeper into the early music of African Americans. Blues music was much more outspoken than the minstrel tunes that came before them, as Levine writes “white southerners delighted in such harmless and amusing” minstrel songs, but the blues allowed them to “criticize, parody, and sharply comment on their society and their situation.” The blues represented a new voice in the black community from reworking traditional folk songs to commenting on society. The early 20th century blues songs gave African Americans an expressive outlet to combat their romantic perceptions by folklorists and race records. Music allowed musicians to chastise white society openly through song where their “pretensions, hypocrisies, fragilities were revealed and mocked.” Baraka argues that black music reveals African American culture and society as a whole. Musicians like Ledbetter used music to express themselves, their culture, and their complaints about the society they lived in. It was the ideas like these that motivated contemporary scholars to begin including music into the voice of the blues. Historian R. A. Lawson, for example, argues that blues musicians were often countercultural voices who used their music as an escape from economic and social

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5 Ibid, 309.
subservience. Others like Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff and Patrick Mullen encouraged historians to analyze how these musicians used music to navigate segregated society. While these authors have begun to acknowledge the social activism within the music, there is a dearth of analyses on individual musicians like Ledbetter. Mullen argues that while scholars have begun to describe the counterculture of blues music and the convoluted cultural values of early 20th century folklorists, he also points out that “not enough, however, has been written about specific relationships with black people and how they helped create, maintain, and alter worldviews.” In Segregating Sound Karl Hagstrom Miller shows how the record industry and folklorists fabricated their own forms of black music reinforcing cultural isolation and segregation. “Black and white southerners were defined by their differences,” Miller writes, “rather than their common histories, sounds, and relationships to American popular music.” Yet, Miller neglects the voice of the musicians themselves and focuses on racial divides between whites and blacks in the music world. Benjamin Filene is the first author to specifically analyze the relationship between Lead Belly and his discoverer and manager, John Lomax. But while Filene plumbs deeply into this convoluted association he does not investigate Ledbetter’s role as an active social activist in the music community, instead focusing on perceptions of Ledbetter’s subordinate and subservient relationships with

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Lomax and the record industry. This thesis seeks to ask such questions and paint a more rounded painting of Huddie Ledbetter.

Many writers of the blues simply present the contested narrative of Ledbetter’s life and career without analysis. What makes the story of Ledbetter difficult to fully analyze is the fact that he left very few personal letters or interviews, contrary to the prolific writing of Lomax and folklorists. Therefore, authors like Miller and Filene, who have attempted to separate the myth from the man, have little to work with. This study supplants the lack of Ledbetter’s personal voice with the vast amounts of lyrics he left behind. Levine wrote that song lyrics “locate black culture and black consciousness. Black music and lyrics are precisely what makes it such an important medium for getting at the thought, spirit, and history of the very segment of the Negro community that historians have rendered inarticulate through their neglect.”\(^{10}\) It is this neglect that has led to the mythical creation of Ledbetter’s life. In *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* by Kip Lornell and Charles Wolfe suggest that Ledbetter was not openly political and thus perpetuate the tired narrative of Ledbetter’s extraordinary past. Ledbetter may not have been openly political, but that was the point of his songs, which were dominated by themes of social activism and racial equality. It was through his politically charged lyrics that Ledbetter attracted leftist organizations and followers in the late 1930s until his death in 1949. The duality between musician and man absolved him from the repercussions of lyrics like “damn that Jim Crow” or “I heard a white man say, no niggers

\(^{10}\) Levine, *Black Culture*, 202 – 203.
in here. Lord, this is a white bourgeoisie town.” Authors like Miller, Filene, and Mullen fail to recognize the social activist that Ledbetter advocated long before it was acceptable for black musicians to openly sing songs against lynching or segregation. Ledbetter’s disparate identity needs to be investigated through both sides of the Ledbetter duality; the simple, folk artist and the socially conscious bluesman. Ledbetter’s association with leftist political organizations like People’s Songs and critics like Pete Seeger, the Weavers and Woody Guthrie document his political colors. These white artists used his songs to achieve popularity and raise social consciousness by combining Lead Belly’s folk tradition with the Popular Front idealism. Bands like the Almanac Singers and the Weavers owe their popularity and activism to the music of Lead Belly. It also enabled white and black listeners to navigate a more diverse culture of politics and music.

It was the politically conscious lyrics that caught the attention of artists and bands like Seeger and the Weavers and they provide a glimpse of Ledbetter’s political ideology. This side of Ledbetter fits his social activism that historian Robin Kelley writes was an early 20th century “movement rooted in a variety of different pasts, reflecting a variety of different voices.” Ledbetter does this by playing such eclectic styles of music and crossing racial boundaries. His music and lyrics united race and class. Music has long been regarded as folklore and can be best understood as a text to be analyzed. Lead

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Belly’s lyrics thereby become a primary source of this study, which involves unpacking the meanings that are located in these lyrical texts to reveal the politically active nature of Ledbetter where he promoted racial equality, working-class reforms, and sang out against African American lynching years before anyone else. Ledbetter’s story is rooted in the long struggle of racial equality and his lyrics gained him pardons and their countercultural tropes illuminated a racial power structure, both were paths to freedom.

This exegesis of Lead Belly’s music and lyrics reveals the duality of his identity and can be used to better understand race and activism in African American blues music culture. Ledbetter used his music to traverse segregation in society and become a productive musician and voice of social protest. Along with an examination of Lead Belly’s lyrics, this thesis will evaluate his close relationship with folklorist John Lomax and his son Alan through personal letters, popular music culture, and other sources to assess their role in the construction of Ledbetter’s dual identity. Chapter one outlines the Ledbetter/Lead Belly duality, discussing blues music culture and their contributions to civil rights movements. This chapter will investigate the deeper world of blues musicians in terms of protest culture. Chapter Two then dissects how folklorists and the record industry crafted their representations of Lead Belly as a pre-modern black man, illuminating how the segregated Depression era society restricted African American consciousness. Folklorists constructed an image of Ledbetter that fit his convict past to conform to their southern traditionalism reinforced by minstrel-like folk songs, while the
record industry maintained segregation to enforce their control of the emerging race records genre. Finally, Chapter Three explores another side of Ledbetter that projected his own understanding of social protest and black identity. Lead Belly was depicted as a traditional black folk singer, subservient and uncivilized, but a closer examination reveals a more complex picture. Here, themes of racial difference and Du Bois dual-consciousness will be discussed. In the face of American segregation and economic hardship, Ledbetter became a voice of black consciousness and protest through his music and shows how the combination of music and politics influenced pop music culture of the 1940s and 1950s. Ledbetter was part of the lefts movement that used the “texts and contexts of popular music” as political demonstrations, which cultural historians Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison write has been “primarily through music and song that social movements have exerted their main influence on the wider American culture.”

Ledbetter’s relationship with People’s Songs and white countercultural folk musicians captures this. Exposing both sides of Lead Belly’s dual-consciousness creates a more nuanced picture of how black musicians presented a broad range of American social thought through blues music culture in the modern era. Despite the Ledbetter narrative dominated by racism he held a much more active political role in society. By contrasting both sides of the Ledbetter duality his role in the longer civil rights movements and folk revivals becomes apparent.

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Huddie Ledbetter’s music career juxtaposes a simple, rural folk musician to that of a social critic. Despite the usual narrative of Ledbetter, cast as a subservient tool of folklorist John Lomax and the nascent recording industry, he was a much more socially active member of society even before he teamed with leftist organizations in the late 1930s as African Americans began to feel they had a voice in society. While themes of primitivism and southern traditionalism dominate the Ledbetter story, leaving little room for a larger picture, one could paint Ledbetter as a vocal activist for racial change. During the early 20th century many African American musicians, like Ledbetter, felt they had a voice and used music as an outlet for expression, both personal and communal. As this opening vignette displays, Ledbetter navigated the boundaries of Jim Crow to become a world-famous blues musicians and a nationally recognized leader for racial and social change during the Great Depression. This chapter lays the foundation for Ledbetter’s duality weaving two stories that must be understood to place his contributions into the larger civil rights’ narrative.

*It was hot; Mississippi hot. The sweat of the Parchman Farm prisoners fell to the dirt faster than the fall of their hammers. The sounds of the surly guards mixed with th*
call and response of Lead Belly’s work song. As the cruel attention of a white guard was received by a slacking chain gang worker Ledbetter straddled his legs to see how much of a stride he could make without drawing the guard’s ire. There was just enough room for Ledbetter to step out of the foot shackles while the other prisoners feigned ignorance.

The guard turned his back to the gang and yawned. In seconds Lead Belly was over the fence tearing across the plowed field. Fifty yards separated him from the guard before the chains clinked and the guard whirled his horse whipping his Winchester from its scabbard and began to fire. Lead Belly ran. The bullets whizzed around Lead Belly’s ears as he plowed ground. A few seconds more and he was safe in the woods.

The sparse Delta forests held more than trees. Ledbetter came to a man plowing a field. “Will you cut my chains” he asked? “Nawsuh!” came the response, “pass by, nigger, pass by!” He kept running. Over the next plowed field he found a group of black men and women hoeing. They cut his chains and Ledbetter quickly said “good bye.”

Lead Belly waded creeks to elude the hounds. Crossing forests and fields he spent the night concealing and crossing his tracks. As the morning sun sapped all the dew from leaves and blades of grass, the sound of the tracking party shifted away into the night. Ledbetter rose and feeling pleased with himself, began the long trek to his father’s farm.

Old Wess Ledbetter hid his son in the haystack for three days. By then the itch of the traveling musician burnt a hole through his long guitar picking fingers and he grabbed his twelve-string box and rambled into New Orleans with women, whisky and
blues on his mind. The chain-gang and Mississippi sheriffs were only seventy-five miles away. His time on the run was short, but he had many tales to tell audiences of the Big Easy.¹⁴

In 1889 Huddie Ledbetter was born to a Louisiana sharecropping family on the outskirts of Shreveport. Before Ledbetter had picked up his 12-string guitar he picked cotton as a farmhand during the day. He played country tunes on the accordion and sang spirituals in the dusty fields. In the evenings he performed at local dances. It was in the segregated section of Dallas, Texas called Deep Ellum where Lead Belly became a musician. Ledbetter and his new wife Lethe moved to Dallas around 1910 where they both worked as day laborers and Ledbetter performed at parties and clubs around the city at night. “I learned by listening to other singers off phonograph records…I used to look at the sheet music and learn the words of a few popular songs.”¹⁵ This certainly counters John Lomax’s descriptions of Lead Belly’s rural isolation. By this time Ledbetter had picked up the guitar and befriended the blind Dallas bluesman Lemon Henry Jefferson. But the hot east Texas lumber mills and cotton fields were not make-shift stages surrounded by eager ears. The fields began to hold Ledbetter’s attention less and less and soon they both took to the road.

“We used to play all up and around Dallas, Texas-Fort Worth. We’d just get on the train. In them times, we’d get on the Interurban line that runs from Waco to Dallas, Corsicana, Waxahachie, from Dallas. I’d get Blind

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¹⁵ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 71.
Lemon about on and we’d get our two guitars, ride anywhere and didn’t have to pay no money in them times.”

If performing music was Ledbetter’s dream he would have to play for Texas’ convicts at the Sugar Land Penitentiary beginning in 1918. Lead Belly immortalized this place in his version of “Midnight Special” performed for the March of Time newsreel for *Time* in 1935. Ledbetter was pardoned from prison by Governor Pat Neff in 1925. But his time on the outside was brief when he was arrested for knifing a man. In 1930, John Lomax and his son Alan met Ledbetter for the first time at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, nicknamed “The Farm” by the prison laborers. Ledbetter was released again for good behavior in 1934. In less than a year later much of the country knew him simply as Lead Belly.

Integral to the popularity of blues music during the early 20th century was the expanding American music marketplace. “Mass culture,” Lizabeth Cohen writes, “offered blacks the ingredients from which to construct a new, urban black culture.” It also allowed African American musicians to gain greater independence and influence.

In the late 1920s, as Ledbetter was wandering across the dusty east Texas fields in search of barrel houses and juke joints to perform in, Mamie Smith recorded “Crazy Blues” and not only opened the music industry to African Americans, but challenged the popularity of the pervious market featuring Tin Pan Alley hits, European ballads, and

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18 Ibid.
Minstrel songs. “Crazy Blues” sold over 20,000 copies in the first week and 75,000 in the first month. During the Great Depression black-inspired jazz and classic blues was what historian William Kenney called the “hot music” of American society. *Time* magazine reported that swing music alone accounted for 25 percent of popular record sales. Popular music played a significant role in the acceptance of African Americans into the mass culture of early 20th century American society. New York City clubs like the Apollo, the Savory and the Cotton Club featured African American musicians like Cab Calloway, marketed to a white audience. While the Cotton Club and others employed black performers and staff, it catered to a white clientele (see Fig. 1).

Lawson writes that “the quick rise of the race record industry in the Roaring Twenties made it a breakout decade for many musicians,” and Lead Belly was just one example of this. This carried over to the Depression era when an estimated 5,500 blues recordings were made by about 1,200 different artists all classified as race records. While Ledbetter did not achieve the commercial success of classic blues icons like Smith or W. C. Handy during the 1930s, by the time of his death in 1949 his songs had been covered and recorded by white and black artists, selling millions of records across the globe. Blues music had become a market force and its success reveals the

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20 Ibid., 172.
complex development of American music in the early 20th century that both included and excluded African American musicians. How black musicians navigated the segregated world of music and society, while being revered for their talents, but segregated by the color of their skin, helps explain how a bluesman like Ledbetter could be accepted by black and white alike.

The phonograph and the radio were two momentous innovations to the music world that played an instrumental role in the rise of blues. Together they disseminated and propagated a distinct African American voice through music. Kenney’s description
of black music as “hot music” is no misnomer. In 1926 blues records were selling between five and six million albums annually by 1941 over 30 million were sold each year. During the mid-1930s college-age record collectors were targeted by record labels like Decca Records, who announced that “new customers were responsible,” specifically naming white college students and women. Race records were so popular that white artists began to mimic black jazz and blues music. The advertisement below, taken from African American owned and operated Black Swan Records suggests the duality of this; on one hand acceptance, on the other fear. (See Fig. 2).

Blues, swing and jazz sold well in the African American markets as well, but for the first time black music, as Amiri Baraka once acknowledged, was crossing the color line. Lawson suggests that the advent of the recording industry allowed blues musicians to sing “their stories for the audiences of southern black workers – cash-strapped, vote-less sharecroppers, stevedores, domestics, levee-camp workers, and loggers.” The musical and lyrical creations of black music reflected the division within American society and offered a countercultural voice for African Americans. Yet what makes the blues even more significant is how it came to be accepted by other races as

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24 Kenney, Recorded Music in American Life, 172 – 173. Also see Kenneth Bindas’ Swing: That Modern Sound, where he writes black music like “swing began to attract large audiences, especially in the 40 percent youth market. Sales skyrocketed to $30 million in 1936, nearly seven times the 1932 level...By 1939 swing made up 85 percent of all record sales” (5).
26 Lawson, Jim Crow’s Counterculture, 1.
well. In this way, the recording studio “permitted indirect exchange” of black music and culture through “chain stores, local distributors and mail order houses” across the nation.²⁷

Blues music challenged the dominant culture’s understanding of race and segregation in 1934 when Ledbetter walked into the all-white, affluent Modern Language Association’s (MLA) annual meeting to sing African American blues and folk songs, thus becoming the first black person to ever take the stage at an MLA conference, causing an immediate sensation. The event could not have taken place without the phonograph’s influence that helped black music to “intersect with the

emergent national consumer culture and become a pathway to freedom and inclusion.” Lawson writes, “All while maintaining its original countercultural stamp.” Like many musicians Ledbetter was able to cross racial lines to promote black consciousness and critique.

The musician’s path to inclusion and equality was restricted at nearly every stage of the process, beginning with the reality of Jim Crow they faced throughout everyday society as well as the music industry. Even, President Roosevelt was indecisive about major civil rights legislature, resulting in his veto of the Anti-lynching bill and abolition of the poll tax. Historian Rebecca Sklaroff attributes this to a “powerful southern congressional bloc” that influenced race relations throughout the nation. While Roosevelt did incorporate African Americans into his New Deal programs, such as the Work Progress Act’s Federal Music Project, these workers often faced obstacles that limited their power. In “WPA Blues” Lead Belly sings, “Early in the morning I was lying in bed, I heard a mighty rumbling and the bricks came down on my head. They was tearing my house down on me, ooo, that crew from that WPA.” For many African Americans music became an outlet for dissatisfaction and critique. “Even within this restrictive atmosphere,” Sklaroff continues, “African Americans seized the opportunity to write their own history.”

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28 Ibid, 22.
29 Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009, 1. Sklaroff goes on to state that “New Deal programs never reached the potential that black participants and political leaders hoped for (7).”
30 Sklaroff, Black Culture and the New Deal, 32.
nature of many New Deal programs like the WPA, African Americans were still deemed by American society as second-class citizens, but this did not silence them.

Roosevelt’s veto of the Anti-lynching bill resulted in rising African American fear and outrage. Social psychologist John Dollard, in his 1937 study of race relations wrote “Every Negro in the South knows that he is under a kind of sentence of death; he does not know when his turn will come.” While Billie Holiday is credited with opening the eyes of audiences with the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit” in 1939, as early as 1920 Lead Belly had been singing anti-lynching songs like “Hangman’s Blues” and “Gallis (Gallows) Pole” across the south. Racial violence was a real threat to blacks in the north and south. Between the years 1930 and 1935 there were a reported 103 lynchings in the United States. Lead Belly asks in “Gallis Pole” “What did you bring me, to keep me from the gallows pole?” This song acknowledges that compassion alone will not save the doomed man, only bribery. There seemed few options for African Americans in the present society. Smith’s “Crazy Blues” contains the lines “get myself a gun and shoot myself a cop,” which historian Karl Hagstrom Miller suggests points to “black violence [as] a way of resisting white violence and unsettling a repressive social order.” This was reality for many African Americans and music became an outlet for non-violent self-expression.

31 Find, see Lawson, 50.
32 Tuskegee Institute Archives (fix).
It was also the violent descriptions found in many blues and folk songs that allowed folklorists and record companies to cast black musicians as violent and primitive. This perpetuated the stereotypical, racist minstrel tunes that mocked African Americans as comical and childish, unable to be civilized and therefore longing for the old days of the plantation. Minstrel songs linked African American culture with the past, the south specifically and this enabled white listeners and producers to conjure African American identity within their own romantic memories of the old south without openly addressing themes of segregation and violence against black citizens. When folklorists began recording black singers and musicians, they readily accepted traditional folk songs as modern authentic black culture. Ledbetter sang traditional songs like “Ol’ Dan Tucker,” that affirmed black primitiveness and the traditional plantation system with lines like “Ol’ Dan Tucker clomb a tree, his Lord an Master to see. De limb it broke an’ Dan got a fall, never got to see his lord at all.” And “Pick a Bale O’ Cotton” which perpetuated the image of simple slave doing his master’s will, “Jump down, turn around, pick a bale o’ cotton. Me an’ my wife can pick a bale a day.” Some black folk music came out of the minstrel tradition where African Americans were depicted as childish and uncivilized. John Lomax once described Ledbetter as “a simple, emotional, imitative human being...with a child’s eager and willing adaptableness.”34 The folk song “Bad Man Ballad,” later recorded by a variety of artists for race records and popular records, signified the perceived violence inherent of African Americans. “Late las’ night, I

was a making my rounds. Met my woman an’ I blowed her down.” The singer, later that night in bed, takes his own life.

Record companies created racial divisions in their race records suggesting that black and white music was not compatible with one another. Folklorists and race records constructed forms of cultural isolation to separate black and white artists and thought to enforce racial division. It was the themes of African American primitiveness and isolation that justified biological and cultural difference for many white Americans. Ethnomusicologist Erich von Hornbostel’s 1928 article on “African Negro Music” asks the question “What is [Negro] music like compared to our own?” He responds with “African and modern European music are constructed on entirely different principles” of race and music culture. Racial difference legitimized the color division in music. John Lomax used similar ideals of paternalism and cultural evolution to showcase Ledbetter as a primitive black folk musician who existed outside of society in order to reassure critics like the New York Evening Post that states “we need reassurance that ballad [folk] singing is not dying.” To many folklorists the world of African Americans existed outside of their modern society and could only be preserved by musical reproduction. Fellow folklorist Newbell Niles Puckett complained “line by line, increasing knowledge

and pride of race are erasing forever these records of folk-thought.”³⁷ Racial difference allowed segregation in music and society; it also reinforced racist stereotypes.

In order to sell records the recording industry employed racial stereotypes and limited the potential of African American musicians. Miller writes, “to make the shift from local to national markets, they discovered that their best chance involved conforming to the prevailing stereotypes of southern culture.”³⁸ Record companies marketed race records to a black and white southern audience that thrived on music. Paramount Records founded in Grafton, Wisconsin began recording southern African American artists for their newly minted race records genre in 1922, followed by Okeh Records in 1924 and Vocalion Records and Victor in 1925. Soon Paramount followed the others deep into the south in search for race music. The rising popularity of blues music, driven by the initial success of Smith’s “Crazy Blues,” propelled the recording industry’s “frantic quest for market share opened the door to the race record trade and the creation of modern recording company giants like Columbia.”³⁹ While race records had originally represented around 5 percent of the companies’ overall sales, by 1927 that number had jumped to 20 percent. The records sold in shops, through mail-order catalogues, in saloons, book stores, barber shops, drug stores, and even furniture stores. Between 1925 and 1932, historian Benjamin Filene estimates, “probably as many as sixty-five million old-time songs [blues and country-blues]...flooded into the

³⁸ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 122.
³⁹ Ibid, 155.
southern culture.” \(^{40}\) The south enjoyed its music, building on the success of traveling theatre shows that were an early stable of southern rural life. With the advent of the phonograph, southerners began to purchase commercial songs in mass that catered to the southern segregated history of the region, revealing racial separation and inaccurate descriptions and portrayals of African Americans. \(^{41}\) Popular minstrel songs like “The Whistling Coon” and “My Mammy” were simply renamed and remarketed as race records. These modern blues songs contained many of the same themes of racial difference promoted by folklorists and society itself with lyrics like “free and easy, bad and greasy, with a cranium like a big baboon. He’s happiest when he whistles in tune.” Record companies fell into line with folklorists and traditional southerners in attempting to maintain the past and resist racial equality.

The musical color line seeped into every layer of the music industry. African Americans were subjected to racial segregation in nearly every representation of their music, but also in the profession itself. Record producer Ralph Peer pioneered the leasing copyright method for Victor in 1927, assuring that “the music business was driven by copyrights on songs.” \(^{42}\) Royalty payments were often more lucrative than record sales fueling music companies to control the artists’ copyrights to assure that all future profits were acquired by the company rather than musician. Copyrights were also a way to censor African American musicians.

\(^{40}\) Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 34 - 36.
\(^{41}\) Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 24.
\(^{42}\) Ibid, 235.
Folklorists followed suit in controlling copyrights. John Lomax published nearly every song of Lead Belly under his own name as composer, ensuring that he was the only person who could control and disseminate Ledbetter’s music. The race record genre allowed record producers to sever any link between black music and popular music in order to not compete with themselves; but it also was a way to closely monitor the types of songs and lyrics musicians used. American Recording Company (ARC) marketed Lead Belly as an old-time folk singer, rather than a popular musician despite performing modern blues songs. Ledbetter originally recorded “Tom Hughes Town” for John Lomax in 1935 complete with forceful guitar and sensual lyrics but the version recorded for RCA in 1948 slowed the tempo and smoothed his moan into a sweet hum. The lyrics describing the red-light district of Fannin Street in Houston, Texas was altered to attract a larger, white audience with less sensual lyrics. ARC changed the words “I got a woman, makes an honest living by working up her tail,” to “I got a woman, makes a living dancing” among other lyrical changes. Alterations like this were commonplace in the recording of race records, as producers wanted to retain the romantic pastoralism of the southern black man, which according to Jerrold Hirsh, reflected “a desire not to confront the image of the black city.”

Ledbetter understood that when the record producers chose his more rural “downhome blues” to record for release, it slowed his commercial career until the start of World War II because of the contradictory role folk

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music played in his perceived identity. Jazz musician Benny Carter recalled that “What was holding us back was not just the individual differences, but a whole system of
discrimination and segregation involving musicians, audiences, bookings, productions
and so on.” Copyrights followed the American system of racism, perpetuating divides
between white and black audiences and restricting the musician’s voice.

The irony is despite folklorists and record companies division of race, Ledbetter
performed almost exclusively for white audiences upon his prison release and
throughout his career with Lomax. It was here that Ledbetter navigated the color line,
playing up the southern, primitive exslave at times, but also providing biting critiques
on society when the opportunity was presented. The chorus of Ledbetter’s Library of
Congress recording in 1935 “Grey Goose” begins with “we’ll he pulled the trigger, but he
was six weeks a fallin.” Ledbetter stated the song was used by Louisiana convicts, like
himself, to express defiance of their jailers, who represented whites’ inability to
maintain control over blacks. The goose takes six weeks to fall, six weeks to be plucked,
six weeks to boil and yet the hunters still cannot penetrate his skin and off it flies into
the sky. The goose’s perseverance becomes a metaphor to the long journey of the
disenfranchised African American. It is Ledbetter’s countercultural lyrics like this that
resonated in the consciousness and through lyrics Ledbetter can be best understood.
Even when his lyrics fall into traditional folk song idioms they help reveal identity. Ron
Eyerman and Andrew Jamison suggest that, “It has been perhaps primarily through

\[44\] Filene, Romancing the Folk, 71.
\[45\] Denning, 336, find.
music and song that social movements have exerted their main influence on the wider American culture.” Eyerman and Jamison bolster their studies by using popular music as “illustrative material.” African American musicians used lyrics to get around the music color line to survive as a musician and challenge racism. The blues that began taking shape amidst the race record era was often a “countercultural escape from economic and social subservience,” Lawson writes and while African Americans found themselves behind a veil, constantly dancing between accommodation and resistance, blues music became an avenue of liberation.

The narrative that historians Benjamin Filene and Karl Miller weave illuminates much of the injustices African Americans faced by the record industry and folklorists, but spend the majority of their time discussing how blacks accommodated to white producers and folklorists. Miller writes that he will “show how performers and thinkers combined notions of authenticity into a series of mongrels that often tendered authentic minstrel deceits as authentic folkloric truths. The blues and country records...were but two of the results.” This suggests that African Americans had little or no control of their own music. Certainly not all blues and folk records were “deceits of folkloric truths.” Much of the scholarship on Ledbetter’s music career focuses almost exclusively with his time Lomax served as manager and promoter, dwelling on the inaccuracies and racism of the record industry and folklore. Lawson attempts to tease out the other side to the narrative – that of resistance. “The blues,” Lawson writes,

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“were conceived, inherited, and reshaped by aspiring professional musicians who saw music as a countercultural escape.” African American musicians like Ledbetter did not sit idly by as a vassal of white control, but used their music to define themselves and disseminate their struggle.

Many black performers saw themselves as messengers of a counter-culture that threatened the dominate white power structure. Black musicians masked their lyrics in order to employ what W. E. B. Du Bois labeled double-consciousness. “One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings.” African American musicians used both sides of the color line to achieve success, which also showcased opposing identities. Their double-consciousness allowed for a black consciousness that was not apolitical or infantile, but socially charged. Lawson suggests interpreting the blues as counterculture allows modern evaluators “to understand that blues musicians were necessarily accepting of prevailing Jim Crow social norms while at the same time hoping to evade or subvert them.” Historian Paul Gilroy writes musicians derived “their special power from a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which periodise modernity.” The modern blues musician was confined to racial stigmata, but many of their lyrics countered traditional African American stereotypes,

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revealing a black consciousness of protest rather than the primitive, subservient representation constructed by folklorists and the record industry.

Opportunities for African Americans in the workforce were hard to come by and by the mid-1930s, effects of the depression and segregation drastically limited black employment. Cohen writes that “[r]ace, ethnicity and jobs served as boundaries, not bridges.”\textsuperscript{52} The \textit{American Journal of Sociology} pointed out that African American unemployment in 1935 was between 30 to 60 percent greater than white workers. Despite the continued migration of African Americans to the north during the depression, fortunes for black workers were slim north or south of the Mason-Dixon Line. During an era of vast white and black unemployment, African Americans took the brunt of job losses. Charles Johnson reported that “In the North, such as hotels and light manufacturing plants and laundries, entire Negro crews have been released and all whites employed.”\textsuperscript{53} By the end of the nineteenth-century 90 percent of black lived in the south, but by the Great Depression 1.5 million southern blacks had moved to places like Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Los Angeles and New York City. The blues followed these roads north as well, “blues music...took root in Chicago and by the 1930s, as more southern blacks moved to the North to become popular with some of the transplanted.”\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} Cohen, \textit{Making a New Deal}, 11.
Music was a release for northern or southern blacks, but more importantly it was a job for many African Americans. Chicago’s *Down Beat* Magazine “devoted to jazz, blues, and beyond” attempted to connect success with musicianship in advertisements throughout the 1930s. The ad for Bundy Band Instruments featured a well-dressed musician proudly carrying his instrument with a banner at the top that read “He got his start from a Music Dealer.”⁵⁵ Music was not just an artistic outlet, but it could also be a job in tough times. The Depression era folk song “Times is Getting Harder” encouraged blacks to forsake their southern homes and follow the lure of the Great Migration. “Times is getting harder, money is getting scarce. Soon as I gather this cotton and corn, I’m bound to leave this place. White folks sitting in the parlor, eating their cake and cream. Nigger’s way down in the kitchen, squabbling over turnip greens.” What is significant is the number of professional musicians rose during Depression, in both the north and the south. According to statistics by the Census Bureau in 1934 the majority of African American professions were clergymen and musicians. In the north and west professional musicians outnumbered all other documented professions. In the south it was second to clergymen.⁵⁶ By 1941 over 130 million records were sold, nearly a quarter were found on ethnic or race records.⁵⁷ Despite the claims by *Variety* that 80 percent of African Americans on radio and television were portrayed as maids and butlers, black musicians represented a large portion of the working population. A vast number of

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⁵⁵ *Downbeat*. 8 (February 1941): 4.
⁵⁶ *Literary Digest*, May 12, 1934.
them were carrying their music up and down the Mississippi River and across the east into New York City and not all of the songs were innocent entertainment.⁵⁸

Blues musicians were keepers and transmitters of their people’s culture revealing a subversive attack on racial and social injustices, despite the efforts of folklorists and record companies to construct and produce their own versions of black music. Musicians still found ways to protest and critique the segregated society that they lived and worked in.⁵⁹ It was these very racial divides that prompted black musicians to speak out. Bluesman Josh White sang “Trouble” as a reaction to both the devastating effects of the Depression and segregation. “Well I’ve always been in trouble cause I’m a black-skinned man,” White sings after the character in his song had been accused of hitting a white police officer, “they took me to the stockade, didn’t give me no trail.” Ledbetter sang a song aptly titled “Jim Crow Blues” sometime in the early 1940s, well after Lomax manipulated the performance’s song selection, “I’m gonna sing this verse, I ain’t gonna sing no more. Until you get together and break up this Jim Crow.” Erich Nunn has written that the divide of white and black restricted the music business, but more importantly allowed for a “response to the threat of segregation.”⁶⁰ Because the very nature of blues musicians as oral communicators and their high rate of employment as musicians they became the vehicle of African American protest and the source of social activism.

⁵⁹ Lawson, Jim Crow’s Counterculture, 21.
Music offered blacks a way to earn a living, but also voice their people’s concerns. Black Swan Records declared that they employed only African Americans and produced genuine black race records. New York City’s Black Swan Records was co-operated by the early jazz great W. C. Handy. While Black Swan Records catered to African Americans, both music creators and listeners, advertisements were placed throughout northern cities in newspapers like The Crisis and The Chicago Defender (See Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Advertisements in Crisis and The Chicago Defender.

Race Records were successfully being sold to whites and blacks despite their segregated marketing ploys, effectively spreading black thought and culture. Black Swan’s best seller, Ethel Waters, had her own television show debut in 1939, The Ethel Waters Show. Water’s song “Suppertime” was actually an anti-lynching song that passed as a traditional heartbreak song with the haunting chorus “I should set the table because its
suppertime, somehow I’m not able because that man of mine ain’t coming home no more.” While swing dominated the radio, blues songs of the south could be even more scathing of society. The country-blues of Ledbetter came from the rural south and followed the trains north into New York City carrying with him protest songs like “Bollweevil Blues” which glorified in the vast damage the invasive Mexican beetle caused along southern plantations during the Depression and then reveled in the owners’ inability to destroy the pest. Music became an outlet for black expression; it was one of the only ways to promote African American culture and voice social protest. For southern musicians like Ledbetter, music allowed him to travel to the north and still lament the injustices of the south, and the country at large.

Ledbetter used his music to critique society, even as he was promoted by Lomax and white society as uncivilized; he was a social activist through music contrary to his perceived popular identity and historians’ narratives. The duality of his double consciousness is evident in his name. Ledbetter is foremost known as Lead Belly, a nicknamed that Lomax so favored he never used “Ledbetter” in print or on tour. It is this duality that has muddied the water of Ledbetter’s narrative. Folklorists and the record industry painted a picture of Ledbetter as a rural, simpleton with no understanding of the complex society he lived in. Lomax perpetuated this throughout their time together and historians have become so enamored with the Lomax/Lead Belly relationship that Ledbetter’s songs of protest and social activism are ignored. Filene suggests that it was Pete Seeger, a folksinger and leftist activist, took Ledbetter’s songs and made them
political even as their time together was brief. Yet Seeger went on to cover a wide range of Ledbetter’s catalog, including “Midnight Special,” “Goodnight Irene,” Rock Island Line” and “Bourgeoisie Blues.” Ledbetter’s music had inspired the Weavers, Seeger, and the Almanac Singers even before the creation of People’s Songs. Miller does an excellent job exploring the early 20th century segregated world of music, but hesitates to illustrate Ledbetter as anything more than Lomax’s abused, servant. Filene and Miller argue that white’s relations with blacks always took place in a power hierarchy in which whites are always dominant; but Mullen writes that not enough has been written about “relationships with black people and how they helped create, maintain, and alter worldviews.” Miller identifies folklore and record companies’ attempts to “define black inferiority and control African American artists,” yet does not suggest that black musicians subverted these white methods of control to voice social critique and stir-up community activism. Finally, Wolfe and Lornell state Ledbetter “seldom spoke out publically about [civil rights]” even though he sang protest songs like “Bourgeoisie Blues” and “Jim Crow Blues” throughout the north and south, invoked communal participation with the Wobblies theme song “Joe Hill” and united Popular Front musicians like Seeger and the Weavers. He told white college students after a show in Greenwich Village that “I’m proud of my race and think everyone should be

61 Refer to Wolfe and Lornell’s The Life and Legend of Lead Belly, 123.
63 Miller, Segregating Sound, 272.
proud of their race.” Ledbetter’s protest songs and calls for social action were
accepted into the rhetoric of the Popular Front during the 1940s.

The Popular Front was a leftist organization that thrived in the late 1930s comprised of liberals, socialists and other political groups like the United States Communist Party (CPUSA), who took an open stand on civil rights. Ledbetter fit the CPUSA and the Popular Front model of activists “who made up this movement constructed a culture and a social world that tried to reproduce, in microcosm, the kind of interracial democracy...focused on civil rights and full citizenship for African Americans,” historian Robin D. G. Kelley writes. At CPUSA meetings Seeger often sang the Ledbetter song “If You Miss Me at the Back of the Bus” that included the words “If you miss me in the cotton fields, you can’t find me nowhere. Come on over to the courthouse, I’ll be voting right there.” Historian Harvard Sitkoff states that the left functioned as an irritant to the American conscience, promoting racial and class equality, “discrimination – economic, political and social – was not only unjust in itself, but fraught with menace to the country.” Likewise, historian Robbie Lieberman writes that the Popular Front’s use of folk music, through People’s Songs “helped lay the foundations for the culture of protest that developed in the 1950s and 1960s.” It was

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64 Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend*, 249.
66 Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 140 – 141, 162.
the link of folk and blues songs of the 1930s that provided this connection with People’s Songs which “relied on folk songs to express discontent and solidarity.”

Like the Popular Front’s eclectic mix of races and political ideologies, People’s Songs declared they were for “the people,” which included mostly the working-class and its allies. But more importantly to African American musicians, People’s Songs wanted their music. According to People’s Songs “they believed the songs of any people truly express their lives, their struggles and their highest aspirations...Songs must be used to enrich the lives of common people everywhere and disseminate all people’s songs to new and broader audiences.” In the late 1930s Ledbetter joined People’s Songs that included Seeger, the Almanac Singers, the Weavers, Josh White and Woody Guthrie. In 1940 CBS radio aired a folk music program called “Back Where I Come From” that propelled Ledbetter into immediate fame with the working-class movement with covers like “John Brown’s Body,” “Joe Hill.” Later he sang “The Free and Equal Blues” with Josh White for the 1941 Writer’s Congress presentation of Negro Songs of Protest. “Free and Equal Blues” is a clever song that finds a man at St. James Infirmary for a blood transfusion, “I up and ask the doctor, was the donor dark or fair? He said a molecule is just a molecule, the damn thing has no race.” Lieberman states that “clearly songs are effective in providing internal cohesion for a movement culture by reaffirming beliefs,

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68 Ibid,
building confidence and unity, providing historical memory, and an alternative vision.”

Even before the Popular Front used Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” as Café Society in the spring of 1939, which Cultural Historian Michael Denning states was the emergence of the Popular Front’s use of music, Ledbetter had already been singing songs of racial justice and community activism. “[T]he Almanac Singers, People’s Songs, and the Weavers – have often received more attention than the vernacular musicians they labored to promote,” Denning writes. By the 1940s Ledbetter was a primary artist featured by the Popular Front and People Song’s, but remained in the background by historians and music critics. The Daily Worker’s music critic Martin McCall remarked that Billie Holiday sang the first song against lynching, yet Ledbetter was a link between early blues culture of protest and its connections with the Popular Front until his death in 1949, effectively merging the Popular Front with black concerns. Ledbetter used music to cross color lines and link social and racial change with both races. “Good Morning Blues” one of Ledbetter’s most requested live songs, asked the audience “The Lord have mercy, I can’t eat and I can’t sleep. What’s the matter? The blues has got you and they want to talk to you.” Ledbetter used various songs to present social issues and instigate communal response.

Ledbetter’s used socially conscious lyrics throughout his career made him a social activist in the long civil rights movement years before he was recruited by leftist

69 Lieberman, My Songs if my Weapon, 164.
71 Ibid, 323.
Pete Seeger and welcomed by People’s Songs and the Café Society. The popular Café Society and leftist, folk magazine *Sing Out!* often featured Lead Belly’s music and socially charged lyrics. Guthrie and Ledbetter performed “I Ain’t Going Down” in Greenwich Village in 1940 that solidified both white and black struggles during the Depression, “I’m Gonna hold on, cause what I believe in is so strong.” (See Fig. 4).

![Sing Out Magazine Cover, 1941.](image)

Figure 4. *Sing Out* Magazine Cover, 1941.

Ledbetter’s use of protest songs mobilized a social movement. American social movements “reinvent and actualize the myth of the people...create an alternative kind of popular culture, a folk culture, in which music song and dance play a defining role." Ledbetter was one of the most significant innovators in the Popular Front era. He was part of the first wave of the Popular Front movement in the 1930s because of his use of music to promote social activism, which allowed white, leftist musicians like the

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72 Refer to Denning’s chapter “Cabaret Blues” in *The Cultural Front.*
73 *Everyman and Jamison, Music and Social Movements,* 49.
Weavers to record their most popular hit—Ledbetter’s “Goodnight Irene.” Pete Seeger recorded an entire album of Lead Belly songs in “Pete Seeger Sings Leadbelly.” Ledbetter’s music provided a mediator between the white and black liberal consciousness of the Depression era. Like the Popular Front, Historian Harvard Sitkoff wrote Communists “bent over backwards in the twenties to try to capitalize on the nationalist sentiment of blacks.” But Ledbetter’s social activism began long before “Goodnight Irene,” which sold two million copies in the United States and Europe for the Weavers.

There were various moments when Ledbetter subverted established social norms through lyrics and performances, effectively establishing a voice of black counterculture and activism throughout his career, as the blues developed a culture of resistance that grew out of southern segregation and economic turmoil. Ledbetter experienced this first hand and sang about the inequalities. Songs like “Equality for Negroes” and “Bourgeoisie Blues” captured American racial and social division. “Equality for Negroes” asks “If the Negroes were good enough to fight, why can’t we get some equal rights.” Ledbetter’s ability to cross music lines allowed him to perform in places that normally prohibited black musicians and he used these opportunities to challenge the all-white well-to-do audiences, such as his concerts at the Modern Language

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75 Wolfe and Lornell, The Life and Legend. 16.
76 Ibid, 245.
Association and northeastern universities. Ledbetter appeared a subservient black man, but sang about class-related accommodation and racial integration.

Ledbetter’s socially charged lyrics identified the concerns of the black community. W. Fitzhugh Brundage suggests that the quest for African American identity during this time centered on the desire “to create an expressive culture that acknowledged, in ways that were previously inconceivable, their full and complex humanity.” An evaluation of Lead Belly’s life and influence reveals that while he operated under the system of segregation, he was politically and socially conscious about racism in America. Many of his lyrics were critical of the segregation found in the music industry and the nation in general like “Bourgeois Blues” and “National Defense Blues.” Other songs attacked Lomax’s notions of culturally primitive African Americans. “Grey Goose” juxtaposed the subservient ex-slave with the resilience of the modern African American. Ledbetter questioned the racial and social divides found in modern America and did so by using music to criticize “the commonplaces of the minstrel idiom to criticize, parody, and sharply comment on their society and their situation,” according to Levine. Ledbetter did this with his own blues and folk music.

African American music, like Ledbetter’s was an outlet for repressed emotion and a chance to vent their complaints against the established social system. Lawson points out that “the blues was conceived, inherited, and reshaped by aspiring

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professional musicians who saw music as a countercultural escape from economic and social subservience." These musicians spoke to their listeners through a double consciousness to reflect a broad range of social thought. Lead Belly signifies how the blues started as a countercultural trope that negatively symbolized black culture vis-a-vis the white power structure but then intersected with consumer culture and became a social pathway to freedom and inclusion. 

Ledbetter was effectively using Du Bois metaphor of double-consciousness or Gilroy’s doubleness, while he sang songs like “Old Dan Tucker” that reaffirmed black primitiveness of the traditional plantation system, in the same set Lead Belly could play a song like “Po’ Farmer” that addressed the inadequate salary the planting class received. “Work all week, don’t make enough, to pay my board and my snuff. It’s a hard, it’s a hard, it’s a hard on we po’ farmers.” “Pay Me” expressed inequalities between black and white workers with the lines “Pay me mister stevedore, pay me my money down. White man gets a dollar, black man gets fifteen cent.” All three songs provide three different perspectives of black life. Ledbetter used a variety of forms of double consciousness in his performances, voicing a number of African American concerns. These lyrics give a glimpse of black perception of white Americans which Mia Bay argues “can be examined only with simultaneous attention to the ways in which nineteenth-

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79 Lawson, Jim Crow’s, xi.
80 Ibid, 22.
century black Americans understood race as a concept” and vice versa. Bay goes on to say that African Americans were forced to redefine both themselves and their racial counterparts as modern Americans going through a redefinition of national culture. By the outbreak of World War II white and black Americans were going through a redefinition of national culture, one that was accepting of race and social change.

Americans began the early 20th century by searching for a distinct national identity. As the mobilization of the Popular Front and People’s Songs documents, Americans were seeking a redefinition of modern culture. Industrialization and urbanization ushered in new perspectives of American culture, while immigration and the African American Great Migration forced a reevaluation of the American common man. Modernity represented the growing city-scape, redistribution of ethnic residency, and the mass, commercial market. Society was changing and with it, their citizens. New Deal scholars agree that “the collapse of the stock market in 1929 signaled more than an economic disaster. It also marked the beginning of an era in which America itself underwent redefinition.” The reformation of American cultural values contained voices that had previously been largely ignored, or marginalized. During the Depression era Americans used a variety of new commercial mediums to express their identity. The rise of original American music, owing much to the phonograph and record industry, became a central outlet for American cultural expression.

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The redefinition of American identity labeled as the New Negro and Black Renaissance movements was just one part of the Long Civil rights and other social equality campaigns using music as protest. Lawson states “blues musicians were planting the seeds of collective resistance – seeds that would come to sprout in the 1940s and 1950s” seen in the acceptance of blues and folk songs by the Popular Front.  

As the acceptance of Lead Belly’s folk songs into the music and culture of People’s Songs and the Popular Front movement show, he was much more competent than the subservient nature he has been reduced to. Ledbetter made claims to citizenship and social equality through his music. He saw America defined as white and black - rich and poor. Ledbetter played a major role in the social movements of the depression era, both civil rights and populist campaigns. The actors in social movements are articulators and transformers of culture. They reinterpret and transmit a “common culture that comprises many levels and dimensions and takes on many specific forms, which can be broadly specified as national, regional, religious, class – and age-related, ethnic, and ideological.” Just as Ledbetter employed a variety of musical styles he used a number of methods to express black thought across social lines.

Du Bois declared that the African American “will enter modern civilization here in America as a black man on terms of perfect and unlimited equality with any white

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84 Lawson, Jim Crow’s, 62.
85 Ibid, 4.
86 Everyman and Jamison, Social Movements, 160.
man, or he will not enter at all.” Lead Belly’s music echoes much of the same sentiments. Ledbetter often wore masks to cross color lines, but more often than not, his music was an overt protest of American social norms. The subservient side of Lead Belly illustrates oppression, while the consciousness of Ledbetter shows resistance. His lyrics, regardless of folk or blues authenticity, were the expressive medium to an African American subculture of protest.

The segregated nation Ledbetter lived in allowed him to employ a dual personality. Historians have ignored the duality of Ledbetter’s life and career, exhausting their focus on the persona of Lead Belly, the artist with no first name, rather than seeking to uncover the more socially and politically conscious Huddie Ledbetter. He could play up the role of servant while also vocalizing African American consciousness. The use of Du Bois and Gilroy’s notions of “doubleness” allowed Ledbetter to define his own identity amidst the currents of Jim Crow. It is only by juxtaposing both Lead Belly and Ledbetter that his true consciousness of an early civil rights pioneer can be revealed.

By comparing the two sides of Ledbetter a more rounded picture of his identity can emerge. Ledbetter was a social activist despite how scholars, folklorists, and the record companies’ depicted him as subordinate and subservient. The end of this career reveals that a close relationship with both black and white civil rights activist in the Popular Front and CPUSA. The lack of personal letters from Ledbetter distracts

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historians from the larger picture; with the use of lyrics and the popularity of his protest songs with leftist organizations offer a more illuminating narrative. Ledbetter’s life tells two stories that must be set side by side to fully understand the contributions he made in the civil rights movement. The first side of the Lead Belly/Ledbetter duality tracks how folklorists and record companies’ created their own version of the African American folk singer.
CHAPTER III

JIM CROW BLUES

Much of the Ledbetter literature focuses on how folklorists and the record industry attempted to preserve folk music to fit into segregated society, but this neglects how he navigated Jim Crow to become a prominent social critic. As the memorable story of Lead Belly and Lomax’s partnership was romantically captured by the March of Times newsreel, John Lomax’s retelling in 1935 captures the romantic duality of Lead Belly much more succinctly. Both sides of this duality must be revealed to understand the complexity of Ledbetter’s activism. This chapter shows how folklorists and the record industry fabricated the public persona of Ledbetter to match their obsession with racial division. Despite this Ledbetter was able to successfully navigate the segregated world of music and society to achieve lasting popularity and a political identity with leftist groups like People’s Songs and musicians like Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and the Weavers.

On Sunday, September 16, 1934 Huddie Ledbetter walked up to the Plaza Hotel John Lomax was staying in near the dusty east Texas town of Marshall wearing an old tattered cap, blue shirt, and a patched pair of overalls. In one hand he held a beat-up Stella twelve-string guitar and in the other were his few accoutrements in a brown
paper sack. John Lomax stood, dropping his newspaper, shocked to see Lead Belly out of the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

“Boss, here I is,” said Ledbetter. “I’se come to be your man, boss: to drive yo’ car and wait on you.”

Lomax replied that he was indeed looking for a driver and what’s more, someone to work his 315-pound recording machine taking up the trunk of his Library of Congress supplied Ford. The interview concluded right there with a single question. “First Lead Belly, I’d like to know if you are carrying a knife?”

This exchange in many ways became the representation of Lead Belly: A sublime artistic talent for fingerling the strings in one hand; the other hand wrapped around the handle of a knife. Lomax saw Lead Belly as both a talented folk genius and a savage, capable of wanton murder. After this brief exchange, according to Lomax, Ledbetter took the wheel and with Lomax headed out of the flat plantation fields of Texas for the black prison camps of Arkansas. In the coming years Ledbetter’s identity always confronted this duality of being: a violent, black peasant who sang his way to freedom and fame through black folk music. In this romanticized context Lead Belly personified the meaning of authentic black music for many collectors, folklorists, and even the recording industry.

John Lomax played a key role in the legitimation of African American folk music, which was supported by his romantic vision of black culture and informed by his

southern heritage.\textsuperscript{89} Lomax applied the duality of folk and country-style blues onto Lead Belly and his music to conform to his idea of African American culture. The creation of a distinct black folk music enabled Lomax to portray Lead Belly as a traditional southern ex-slave that historian Benjamin Filene describes as a “savage, untamed animal...focused endlessly on his convict past.”\textsuperscript{90} Historians like Karl Hagstrom Miller note that this romantic spin on the black folk music of Lead Belly was “shaped by minstrel stereotypes of black male violence and primitivism.”\textsuperscript{91} Ledbetter’s portrayal was what Miller calls deceits of folk truths because folklorists employed minstrel and primitive stereotypes in nearly every aspect of their reflection of black musicians.\textsuperscript{92}

Lomax, however, was not unique in this quest for black folk music. “Southern music was reduced to...genres associated with particular racial and ethnic identities,” Miller argues.\textsuperscript{93} Both folklorists and the recording industry failed to accurately reflect the music played and heard by black southerners. Folklorists and record companies defined their own black folk music using the music and allure of Lead Belly. At the same time, this music color line allowed for a Ledbetter duality to emerge. By juxtaposing


\textsuperscript{92} Ibid, 6.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid, 2.
both images, the folksong and African American social and political consciousness, the voice of Ledbetter himself is exposed.

The early 20th century saw the establishment of the modern recording industry and machine reproductions of music in the form of 78 rpm phonographs. By the time Ledbetter began recording, the phonograph had help dub the 20s the jazz age, which by the 1930s only grew in terms of various new musical stylings. Folklorists and record companies and began to search for reproduced ethnic music not yet recorded or fabricated. Many folklorists like Lomax sought to document this music they felt would soon be lost to the machine-age. It was almost as if John Lomax assumed the role that the New York Evening Post declared was looking for in 1934 as “reassurance that ballad singing is not dying.”

In doing so, Lomax struggled to find his version of authentic black folk music – a romanticized African primitive sound hidden in the modern music world.

The story of Lead Belly and John Lomax begins well before their 1934 union. In the late 1920s, while Ledbetter was traveling the southern music circuit performing in rowdy juke joints and Saturday fish fries, John Lomax was busy collecting American music across the west. Lomax was a ballad collector, spending time between English positions and folklore societies. He was a traditional southerner, born in Goodman, Mississippi in December of 1869. After a bleak youth in a down-trodden farming family, Lomax went on to graduate from The University of Texas and co-found the Texas ...
Folklore Society in 1909. By the 1930s he had served at both Texas A&M and the University of Texas as an English professor. A published folklorist and father of four, John’s lifestyle was seeped in traditional southern values. Historian Patrick Mullen explains that John Lomax held a grossly stereotypical view of black culture in general, detailing the connections between John’s upbringing in relation to his representation of black musicians “as a pastoral ideal and black performers as representatives of a simpler rural time and place.”

John Lomax’s biographer, Nolan Porterfield, aptly titled his book *The Last Cavalier*, underscoring how Lomax felt he was a southern gentleman gallantly saving endangered folk traditions. Porterfield attributes Lomax’s cavalier notions to his faith in traditional southern values. Mullen agrees the romanticizing of Lead Belly’s music and life was due to John Lomax’s sense of traditionalism, paternalism and cultural evolution to justify racial differences and white supremacy. Many folklorists like John Lomax “were grounded in the nineteenth-century pseudoscience of cultural evolution [that] used race as a cultural metaphor, sometimes unconsciously, for American identity.”

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ideal thought to be disappearing because of social change.”

Lomax believed he was courageously saving an endangered form of cultural music.

This suggests what John Lomax was really looking for was a rural American folk musician who showcased a past threatened by modernity and the machine-age, particularly that of produced popular music. Yet there was a flaw in this, as Ethnomusicologist George Herzog of Columbia University wrote, for “more than half of [Lomax’s] melodies and texts have been published in other collections.”

Thus, Lomax had to find a fresh supply of undocumented black folk music.

So by the time Ledbetter entered the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola in 1930 for murder, Lomax was crisscrossing the seemingly endless cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta in the hopes of finding traditional African American folk music. “The main objective of this journey,” Lomax wrote in his 1936 book *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, “was to record on aluminum and celluloid disks, for deposit in the Library of Congress, the folk songs of the Negro – songs that, in musical phrasing and in poetic content, are most unlike those of the white race, the least contaminated by white influence or by modern Negro jazz.” He felt prisons held just the music to fill this role.

John Lomax was drawn to southern prisons to document the “purest expression of black tradition,” which is why he found himself at Angola prison in 1933 in search of

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98 Ibid, 120. Patrick Mullen attributes these characteristics to many folklorists like Mack McCormick, Dorothy Scarborough, Roger Abrams, and Newbell Niles Puckett among the Lomaxes.


an isolated Negro folk song.\textsuperscript{101} John Lomax’s son Alan often accompanied his father on these ballad collecting trips and by 1935 shared his father’s ambition to collect “the richest stores of Negro material.”\textsuperscript{102} The father and son team traveled the south “to find the Negro who had the least contact with jazz, the radio, and the white man.”\textsuperscript{103} Together, they scoured southern black prisons in search of authentic all-black music, which they connected to African American music’s African or ethnic roots. Yet, as music critic Amiri Baraka wrote in the 1963, “pure African sources grew scare in a relatively short time after the great slave importations of the eighteenth century.”\textsuperscript{104} By the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century American folklorists were already finding it difficult to unearth a music not affected by popular phonograph tunes and European musical forms. It is hard to imagine by the time the Lomaxes recorded Lead Belly in Angola prison such a thing as an isolated African American ethnic music still existed. Fellow folklorist Dorothy Scarborough discovered this a decade before Lomax met Lead Belly. In her book \textit{On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs} (1925) Scarborough tells how she was “tricked into enthusiasm over the promise of folk-songs only to hear age-worn phonograph records and

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\textsuperscript{101} Mullen, \textit{The Man who Adores}, 83. \\
\textsuperscript{103} John Lomax, \textit{American Folk Songs and Ballads}. (New York: Macmillan, 1934). XXX. \\
\textsuperscript{104} See Amiri Baraka’s \textit{Blues People: Negro Music in White America}. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963) The friction of the statements by Scarborough and Lomax lie in the African American musical adaption of western religious beliefs with the call and response of slave spirituals. There has not been an isolated African music since perhaps 17\textsuperscript{th} century Congo Square in New Orleans. Even then there was a likely cultural music transfusion between Europeans and Africans (71 – 72). 
\end{flushleft}
Broadway echoes” from musicians across the south and southwest. But John Lomax was persistent and believed untainted, pure, or authentic music could still be found. He argued that, “Folk songs...are created, propagated, transformed – in the eddies of human society, particularly prisons where there is isolation and homogeneity of thought and experience.” And so if black folk music could not be found in public he travelled to a place where time seems to stand still: prison. Since a jail cell lacked modern utilities such as the radio and phonograph, Lomax believed it was there he could record the endangered primitive African American folk music that Scarborough had claimed already disappeared.

However, isolated authentic black music was not to be found in prisons. The history of American music involves the integration of black and white musical relationships. For example, before Lead Belly ever met the Lomaxes he sang the show-tune “Frankie and Albert,” mimicked Jimmie Rodger’s yodel, and waltzed along with his button-accordion. Lead Belly was a “songster,” in that he used a variety of musical styles and instruments, pop, country, and blues to suit the particular performance. He was not solely a blues musician any more than he was just a black folk musician. Lead Belly could

105 Dorothy Scarborough. *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs.* (Harvard University Press, 1925). 3. Scarborough does state that “I knew, by the uncanny instinct of folklorists, that there were folk-songs there” (3). But like Lomax, she simply documents black folk songs of the 18th and 19th centuries offering little more than reprints of spirituals, and work-songs. Her more modern folk music is labeled “blues” but are simply modern renditions of *hero songs* of distinctly Americanized black folk, like Casey Jones and Joe Turner. Blues music of the 1920s either resembled the country blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson or the jazz-inspired blues of Bessie Smith. Both were modern musical creations rather than folk music. Ira Berlin also said in *The Making of African American: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking, 2010) that black music and culture changed thematically and stylistically with The Great Migration (128).

be a bluesman one minute and sing field hollers in a do-rag and denim overalls the next. For John Lomax though, certain black rural stereotypes were employed to authenticate his titular folk music. The first photograph of Ledbetter staged by John Lomax in 1936 exemplifies how John Lomax portrayed the poor, rural barefoot southern black man, complete with overalls (Fig. 5). A second photo (Fig. 6) shows the more natural Ledbetter in 1942, who was always known as an immaculate dresser.107

Beliefs of African American cultural isolation put Lomax at odds with many in his profession. The chief of the Music Division at the Library of Congress Carl Engel said that prisons did not present a legitimate form of cultural isolation. “Mr. Lomax entertains the belief that long confinement in prison cells keeps the singer of folk-songs from influences which tend to concentrate and pervert the ‘folky’ strains and thus rob these songs of their authenticity.”108 This counters what Lomax sought in “Negro songs, rendered in their own native element.”109 These contradictions can be seen in John Lomax’s cowboy and western songs he first began collecting for Cowboy Songs and other Frontier Ballads (1910) and American Ballads and Folksongs (1934). This is not to say folk music did not exist, but John Lomax simply chose the aged folk songs to include in his own publications. Lomax believed he could find black folk music in prisons even if it did not exist in the public. Finding a prison musician he could see as authentic black culture, like Lead Belly, gave credence to the existence of an isolated black folk music

107 Filene, Romancing the Folk, 61.
109 Lomax, Sinful Songs, 188.
Figure 5. 1936 photo of Ledbetter staged by John Lomax
Library of Congress, Charles Todd Collection. Note the only similarity between the two pictures is the 12-string guitar; perhaps signifying the only verisimilitude between both pictures.

*Figure 6.* 1942 photo of Ledbetter
and even if it was not black folk music he legitimized the idea in his scholarly works and lecture tours.\textsuperscript{110}

Jail cells held black primitive music, or so Lomax thought, and primitivism was a convoluted representation of early black music. While historians like Filene and Miller have shown many examples of John Lomax’s use of primitivism in Ledbetter’s music and performance as an act of cultural romanticism, Patrick Mullen makes the connection to modernity that Lomax seemed to fear. “Many folklorists held the pastoral ideal,” Mullen writes, “thought to be disappearing because of social change, industrialization, urbanization, and developing technology.”\textsuperscript{111} Lomax hoped to hold onto the past in the form of folk songs, protecting it from being destroyed by modernity, emerging African American culture and technologies that he himself employed and used to disseminate folk music. In this way he maintained he foundation of southern traditionalism and projected this ideologies onto Lead Belly as the quintessential isolated, primitive African American. Lomax felt the antiquated folk music of the past needed protection and dissemination, lest it disappear forever. The past chattel bondage of African Americans, now seen in southern prisons, seemed to Lomax, the natural habitat of the traditional black man. John Jacob Niles, singer, composer, and ballad collector stated in 1932 that “isolation has helped to preserve the music of both the Appalachian mountaineer and

\textsuperscript{110} Historians have written extensively about the Lead Belly tour of 1934 – 35. The Life and Legend of Lead Belly by Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell offers a complete narrative, while Karl Miller’s Segregating Sound and Benjamin Filene’s Romancing the Folk both tackle issues of Lomax’s romanticized usage of Ledbetter. Perhaps the most revealing work regarding Lomax and Ledbetter’s tour may be John Lomax’s Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly.

\textsuperscript{111} Patrick Mullen The Man Who Adores the Negro: Race and American Folklore. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008). 120.
the American Negro.”¹¹² This affirmed to Niles and Lomax that the past was still alive in the form of folk music. Jerrold Hirsch points out how pastoralism was a reaction to modernism and the fear that industrialism destroyed folk traditions.¹¹³ John Lomax saw in the black folk musician a model for his endangered folk music as primitive tropes of African American folk culture.

The existence of a traditional black folk musician served to validate John Lomax’s traditional southern way of life. African American primitivism and southern pastoralism reinforced John Lomax’s traditional southern social norms by maintaining segregation, not just socially but musically as well. Miller points out that music developed a color line in the early 20th century that “corresponded to the corporeal distinctions emerging under Jim Crow,” such as publishing rights and the jurisprudence of mixed race musical performances. But there had always been a color line in music. Slave work-songs, spirituals, minstrel, and ragtime music all kept black and white music separate. Even if popular music like jazz, swing, and classic blues was played and enjoyed by both blacks and whites they were still separated by racial restrictions. By creating a genre of black folk music, folklorists like Lomax could not only supply their folk goals but maintain segregation and southern tradition. It was also a way to distinguish black folk music from black popular music that became a problem later. African American primitivism signified “black folk” music separately from white music. Composer and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson stated that artificial black dialect music was full of,

“Exaggerated geniality, childish optimism, forced comicality, and mawkish sentiment.”\textsuperscript{114} This was how Lomax represented Lead Belly on their tour, believing the singer was shaped by minstrel stereotypes of black male violence and primitivism.\textsuperscript{115}

This image was exacerbated by newspapers during Lead Belly’s and John Lomax’s northeastern tour. Headlines from the \textit{New York Herald Tribune} like “Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes between Homicides” and the \textit{Brooklyn Eagle}’s “Ebon, Shufflin’ Anthology of Swampland Folksong Inhales Gin, Exhales Rhyme,” furthered the violent, primitive nature of Lomax’s \textit{singing jailbird}.\textsuperscript{116} Poet William Rose Butler wrote a 1936 ode to Lead Belly in the \textit{New Yorker} with the lines “He was big and he was black. And wondrous were his wrongs.”\textsuperscript{117} Lomax’s romanticism was in the name of cultural preservation and Lead Belly was his connection to the past. Lomax saw Lead Belly as more of a living artifact than a modern performer.

While John Lomax has been labeled a romantic, or even a primitivist, it was paternalism that most connected him to his traditional southern ideals. He felt he had to control Ledbetter, believing the musician could not take care of himself or his future wife Martha. So while he hoped to set Lead Belly and Martha “on a farm stocked with cattle, pigs, chickens,” he “knew it was only a dream.”\textsuperscript{118} He took a custodial role over Ledbetter’s early music career and finances leading to monetary disputes between

\textsuperscript{115} Miller, \textit{Segregating Sound}. 242.
\textsuperscript{116} See Filene \textit{Romancing the Folk} (62) for more newspaper headlines propagating Lead Belly’s primitive nature. Carl Engel coins the term “Lomax’s singing jailbird” as \textit{Captus cantor lomaxius} acknowledging the construction John Lomax created of Lead Belly’s identity in “Views and Review,” (388).
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, 62 – 63.
\textsuperscript{118} Lomax, \textit{Negro Folk Songs}, 63.
them. Lomax kept two thirds of Lead Belly’s earnings, booked every show and determined the songs he performed during their northeastern tour in the later 1930s.119 Central to his paternalism was his need to maintain social hierarchy between the two that Lomax saw Lead Belly as an uneducated, savage ex-slave necessitated his need to expose black folk music to America. Lomax did not allow Lead Belly to play urban music with the popular modern sound heard in Harlem clubs and Chicago nightspots. This blurred the line of folk music. During their Northeastern tour in 1934 and ’35 Lomax told reporters that Lead Belly was “a natural, who had no idea of money, law, or ethics.”120 He was, to Lomax, unadulterated by modern America and needed to stay that way, resulting in Lead Belly’s absence from the booming popular music scene of the 1930s.

John Lomax’s desire to collect authentic black folk culture sent him crisscrossing the endless southern cotton fields with his son. He was an eighteen year old young man evolving into a talented musician with an ear for music who was only more driven watching Lead Belly perform. Alan and his father began to see African American culture in different ways. The elder Lomax’s wanted to maintain cultural stability, and in this way he the functionalist model of the traditional folklorist who made “sweeping functional statements that imply an idealized African American culture.”121 These power

119 For more info see Delta Blues by Ted Gioia, 193 – 194 and The Life and Legend of Lead Belly by Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, 146 – 147.
121 A deeper analysis can be found in Patrick Mullen’s The Man Who Adores (88) between John’s cultural evolution background and Alan rejection of this. Mullen also states that functionalism may have only been the first layer of Alan’s psyche. He claims that “Alan Lomax wanted to be black” as in Franz Fanon’s
dynamics made it possible, moreover acceptable, for Lomax to use Lead Belly the way he did – more as a child prodigy and less like a fifty-year old adult with an individual consciousness.

Columbia University music professor John Szwed argues “Alan was attempting to steer Lead Belly toward introducing blacks as people with a culture and a tradition to white Americans, who more often than saw them as ciphers,” rather than using them as an example of primitive music and culture.\textsuperscript{122} Alan Lomax saw black folk music as an instrument of cultural dissemination and utilization. Historian John Alexander Williams maintains that Alan was the much more progressive of the father/son folk collecting team and that Alan shared Benjamin Botkin’s modern concept of folk that “embraces urban as well as rural groups.” John disagreed and challenged the company Alan kept, referring to his “communist friends” in personal letters.\textsuperscript{123} Alan’s close relationships with African American musicians allowed him to use folk music for a different cultural function. This certainly countered John’s conceptions of folk as rural, isolated music. By the time Alan had begun independent collecting trips in the 1940s and 1950s he shared his view of “applied folklore.”\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{123} John Lomax Family Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. “John A. Lomax, Jr.: Personal: Log of Automobile Tour, 1932.
\textsuperscript{124} John Alexander Williams, “Radicalism and Professionalism in Folklore Studies: A Comparative Perspective.” \textit{Journal of Folklore Institute}. Vol. 11 (Mar., 1975). 214. Applied folklore is a branch of social science concerned with the study of folklore and traditional cultural materials to solve real social problems. This term was coined in 1939 by Benjamin Botkin and Alan Lomax.
Despite Alan’s more progressive nature during the Lead Belly concerts of the mid 30s, he still agreed with his father that prisons held “the richest stores of Negro material.” Alan deemed the necessity of an “expert in primitive music” to accompany his future black folk research trips, sharing his father’s assumption that black folk music was uncivilized and un-modern. ¹²⁵ Not only did Alan share his father’s desire to collect so-called isolated, primitive black music, by the end of the Lead Belly tour labeled himself an expert in primitive music. In a 1937 letter to Harold Spivacke, one of the founders of the American Musicological Society, Alan criticized a recent collection because some of the tunes did not seem to be “Negro” enough, arguing that this music must purge “all white folk’s music.”¹²⁶ Here, the Lomaxes’ were in agreement about black music, both believing that jazz, swing, and blues was not pure black music, which legitimized their need to record black folk music, this music they defined as endangered ethnic music that must be saved by folklorists. Both Lomaxes shared the desire to create a traditional African American folk tradition, or rather validate the existence of such music.

Alan Lomax is thought to have been free of the racial constraints John imposed upon black folk music. Historian Robbie Lieberman points out that Alan’s leftist political leanings encouraged him to promote black music a major contribution to the modern American nation. However, Alan still maintained a division between white and black music, limiting the origins of Depression era black folk music to “field hollers, work

¹²⁶ Ibid, 56.
songs and spirituals.”\textsuperscript{127} Alan’s early convictions changed over time, but just prior to World War II it is clear that he felt there was \textit{still} a division between a white and black folk tradition just like when he began collecting music with his father and later while working for the Library of Congress and other folklore institutions:

The tremendous enthusiasm of all Americans, no matter what their prejudices, for Negro folk music, and the profound influences of this music on American culture – all this denies the effect of Jim Crow at this level of communication.\textsuperscript{128}

Alan believed that their collection of black ethnic music existed separately from other forms of popular black music. Thus, both John and Alan continued to posit black folk music was distinct in both origin and style during the American interwar period despite their affinity with the emerging record industry, which also defined their own version of authentic black folk music.

Manipulation in the name of profit was one thing Lomax and the recording industry shared. If folklore study was to become scholarly and merge with the disciplines of ethnography and history, then the integrity of folklorists’ goals could not be tangled up in the financial goals of recording companies. Both altered original field recordings or mimicked popular songs to fit their agendas. Lomax insisted that Lead Belly was a folk musician not a modern blues performer. Folk music collectors accomplished this by subtly changing their definitions of folk songs to include certain styles of mass-produced popular music. An example of music alteration can be seen in

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Lead Belly’s “Fannin St.” first recorded by John Lomax in 1934. In the early part of the
20th century, the city of Shreveport, Louisiana had designated a red-light district in a
run-down section of town. The Fannin Street that Lead Belly got to know was filled with
saloons, dance halls, gambling houses, and an opium den run by Ol’ Bob’ that Lead Belly
sings about.129 At the age of sixteen Ledbetter snuck off to hear the fresh new rhythm
and blues styles, “I went on down on Fannin Street and that’s where I’d go every time
I’d leave home.”130 He went to find blues in the juke joints. Lead Belly’s original forceful,
sharp guitar attack and meaningful voice takes the listener to the fast-paced and seedy
Fannin Street crossroads as he sings,

Follow me down,
By Mr. Tom Hughes town.
I got a woman,
Lives back of the jail.
Makes an honest livin’
By the workin’ up her tail.
Somethin’ lawd,
I sure would like.131

But, the version recorded in 1948 for RCA records has slowed the tempo of Lead
Belly’s strumming and smoothed his moan into a sweet hum. The lugubrious tone
representing the vices of red-light district turned blithe. But the biggest discrepancy
between the two versions is the changed lyrics. The notion of the red-light district of
Fannin Street had been replaced to manufacture a less derelict part of town. RCA’s
version has Lead Belly singing

130 Ibid, 34.
131 Ibid.
I got a woman,
Who makes a livin’
By the wigglin’ of her tail.
Follow me down,
I’m on my last merry go-round.  

The change in lyrics and melodic contour sanitized the song to attract a wider audience. It also shows how folklorist altered recordings of musicians to better suit perspective audiences. While this is not unique to music production, what is significant is who arranged and supervised the session: Alan Lomax.

The Lomaxes regularly manipulated Lead Belly’s work to fit their personal objectives who primarily restricted Lead Belly’s performances to rural, folk covers. For example, during the Lead Belly northern tour in 1935 they restricted Lead Belly’s set-list by removing his blues songs and replacing them with ballads, work songs, lullabies, and square-dance songs.  

Lead Belly’s eastern tour focused endlessly on his violent past with New York headlines like “Ebon, Shufflin’ Swampland Convict.” Early Lead Belly’s sets featured bad man folk songs like “Bad Man’s Ballad,” that Johnny Cash became famous for “When I was arrested I was dressed in black, Dey bound me down in the de county jail. Couldn’ get a hangman for the gallows.” Or the infamous bad man song of the desperado Stagolee, which Ledbetter never liked to perform Lomax wrote.  

Filene and Miller spend much of their analyses on Lomax and Ledbetter’s internecine

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133 Szwed, *Alan Lomax*, 67, 68.
134 *The Herald Tribune*. March 2, 1936.
relationship, showcasing the misrepresentation of Ledbetter by Lomax and newspapers rather than accomplishments achieved by the first black man to play white universities and lecture halls across the United States. Or the racial diversity of his sets, often casts of sixty blacks and whites supported him on his later tours.  

In a nation where Lead Belly was touted as a “murderous singer from the swamplands” his image conjured a violent, African barbarian trained on the guitar as this illustration for the *Texas Monthly* satirically capturing only the most primitive and violent aspect of his past (See Fig. 7).

The racial divides in America only espoused this verisimilitude. In the multitude of newspaper articles in the 1930s and 1940s concerning Huddie Ledbetter few of them contain any statement from the performer himself. For those who did not get a chance to meet Lead Belly as Hector Lee did, it was only his music that could challenge his perceived image. Lead Belly’s music and performances became his mode of communication. Lyrics become a communicative medium, expressing a social consciousness that was taboo in the American public forum.

136 Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend*, 188.
Figure 7. Keith Graves, illustration for Texas Monthly
During the time Lomax served as Ledbetter’s manager he entered a recording studio for the first time where they shaped Lead Belly’s music. It was not until Ledbetter relieved John Lomax as his manager and producer in 1939 that most of his blues songs were recorded. Most of the country blues songs Ledbetter recorded were not modern enough for popular tastes and only six songs were fully recorded. Those six songs resemble the country blues music that was becoming popular on the emerging race records. Cultural historian Grace Elizabeth Hale points out that “The blues was not a ‘folk’ form, around for decades and developing in isolation. It was a new musical form.” But the Lomaxes rejected portraying Lead Belly as a blues musician, as it completely severed the link between his music and the Lomaxes’ southern romantic ideals. The country blues that Lead Belly recorded for the American Recording Company in 1936 was not black folk music and could not be labeled as such. This furthered John Lomax’s need to concoct a distinct, isolated black vernacular music in turn fulfilling his longing for the traditional American ideals. Lomax could simply not envision African American musicians as modern artists with an evolving music culture. This was not uncommon, Hermann Keyserling writing in the Atlantic Monthly in 1929 stated:

As a primitive, the colored man is naturally superior to his white brother, his expressions are more authentic, more genuine, and this superiority is enhanced by the great emotional endowment and the equally great gift of artistic expression of the Negro.  

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This type of argument confirmed that African American musicians held a link to the tradition of black spirituals and inhumane treatment of the slave era. Keyserling did not believe that black music had evolved into a modern music comparable with white musicians. It was their African heritage that held all the power. Primitivism signified the authenticity of black folk music.

The Lomaxes would skirt the line separating folk and popular music throughout their ballad collecting careers. In order for black folklore to gain academic authority it had to exist separate from jazz, blues, or other popular music associated with both black and white music traditions. This resulted in the creation of black folk music where it did not exist before – outside of jazz, blues and swing. The resulting formation of black folk music was a ready supply for the nascent record industry’s ethnic records. Despite an affront to the folklore cannon, Alan wrote in a 1936 letter to the Work Progress Administration (WPA) that his Library of Congress folk recordings were great fodder for singers, radio producers, and writers “all searching for fresh material.”

Karl Hagstrom Miller explains folklorists had long policed the lines of folk and commercial music, “by systematically excluding mass-produced fare from their collection.” Alan believed that by “making available in the form of actual recordings [of] the rich folk culture of America we can supply their needs in a way that will be fruitful for American civilization.”

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139 Lomax, Letters, 14.
140 Miller, Segregating Sound, 246.
141 Ibid.
There may have been no one in the country who had a greater collection of American music than the Lomaxes. Alan accredited his father as the most accomplished folklorist:

“All nobody… touches you on the score of bringing folklore to the American public. When you consider that our folk literature is our most significant contribution so far to world culture, then the significance of your role becomes apparent.”

John Lomax’s contribution to academic folklore discussions and government collections of folk music gained him the title of dean of American folk music, while his role merged with that of the recording industry contradicted his ideal of black folk music. Distinctions between white and black music fulfilled a niche in the music market. Before black and white artists performed together their music was kept separate and fueled a booming demand for ethnic music, thus creating a distinct market from that of white music, particularly that of early swing. John Lomax was not ignorant of this need for black folk music, nor was his son Alan. Alan would copyright over eight hundred “folk” titles following in the footsteps of his father who would copyright nearly all of Ledbetter’s songs, despite the Lomaxes’ insistence that black folk music must be passed down through black tradition.

While Ledbetter was not a commercially successful musician during his tenure with John Lomax it did not stop the record industry from employing similar methods to exploit his heritage. Blues performers of the 1930s added more selections to their music

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142 Ibid, 306.
144 See Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 242.
catalogue with the creation of a “race record” genre. Race records began as black music for a black audience, but the success in the 1920s of female classic blues musicians like Mamie Smith, who saw her album sell thousands of copies in one week, caused other recording companies to take advantage of this new, untapped musical trend creating a market known as “race music.” Music scouts raced to record the next Mamie Smith. Race records were an industry success in both black and white markets before the integration of music and had already been a market draw for years before Ledbetter began to record. Sarah Filzen wrote that Smith’s “Crazy Blues” opened a niche not yet controlled by the music industry. Record companies like Paramount embraced the new musical trend that Smith represented, allowing them to compete with larger recording giants like Columbia and Victor. The success of a black performer fueled recording companies’ desires to find their own race musician. The Lomaxes were clearly aware of the commercial market value Lead Belly held and use him in the same manner minstrels employed black romanticism in its own music creation.

The recording industry found itself in an opportune position during the 1930s. Radios, jukeboxes, and modern recording technology of the machine-age boosted sales of Kenney’s “hot music,” while the availability of ethnic records supplied the past on wax phonograph records. African American race records found a prominent place in the

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145 This is a designation from “ethnic music” which is most often referred to music from Eastern Europe and Scottish immigrants.

in the industry despite a musical color line. White record companies like Okeh Records, and later Columbia Records and Paramount Records sought to expand their music collection by categorizing popular music distinctly from ethnic records.\textsuperscript{147} Benjamin Filene explains the race genre had “separate numbering systems, separate advertisements, and separate markets.”\textsuperscript{148} Filene forgets to add separate treatment, as African American musicians were discouraged from recording with white musicians and were economically marginalized. Copyright assignment was one way record companies’ segregated music, opening a door for the race record market. African American blues music was also absent from the popular music genres as black, country blues style was deemed old-time music.\textsuperscript{149} Perhaps this is the reason many folklorists saw country blues music as early black folk music.

Their theories of cultural isolation and primitivism kept them from playing songs that made Ledbetter famous after the integration of music, such as “C.C. Rider,” “Midnight Special,” and “House of the Rising Sun.” Popular musicians like Chuck Berry, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and the Animals all scored hits with these Lead Belly covers in the 1950s and 1960s. Lead Belly eventually became both a music success and cultural icon. Tunes like these were crowd favorites when Lomax and Lead Belly toured their black folk music, but did not translate to white record buyers. This can likely be

\textsuperscript{147} Okeh Records released Bessie Smith’s Crazy Blues in 1920 forever changing black music in popular culture, as well as the first use of “race records” as advertisements. See John Solomon Otto and Augustus M. Burn’s “The Use of Race and Hillbilly Recordings as Sources for Historical Research,” \textit{Journal of American Folklore}, Vol. 85 (Oct. - Dec., 1972). By 1932 race records were on the decline. Race record releases by Okeh, Columbia and Paramount greatly decreased (123).

\textsuperscript{148} Filene, \textit{Romancing the Folk}, 36.

\textsuperscript{149} Miller, \textit{Segregating Sound}, 188 – 189.
explained by Lead Belly’s use of traditional folk songs and Broadway show tunes that had already passed its phase of popularity. White record buyers wanted popular black swing or jazz inspired classic blues, while early record companies attempted to use Lead Belly for their ethnic or old-time music market. Lead Belly did not really fit into any musical categories because he played such a variety of styles. Some record companies like American Recording Company (ARC) attempted to capitalize on Lead Belly’s black country-style music that resembled the blues, but never followed through on later recordings. VICTOR Records scout Frank Walker points out, “You had to be very careful...because there were many laws in the Southern states, which for instance, if I recorded a colored group and yet it was of a hillbilly nature, I couldn’t put that on my little folders that I got out on hillbilly music or vice versa.” Therefore rural, country music that Lead Belly often sang was labeled differently than similar “hillbilly” music by a white artist such as Jimmie Rodgers and Fiddlin’ John Carson. Race records did not identify a musical sound; it signified the race of the musician. Okeh Records use of racial stereotypes and minstrel signifiers can clearly be seen in many of their advertisements for race records (see Figs. 8 and 9).

The Okeh Records’ Mamie Smith concert review reveals the segregated effect race records’ held. “Mamie Smith is to her race,” the ad states, “as Sophie Tucker is to...

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150 It should also be noted that African American owned record companies like Black Swan did not approach Lead Belly or Lomax for use of their music. Black Swan stressed their efforts to record “high class” race records which may have eliminated Lead Belly’s chances of recording for them because of his association with folk music.

151 Ibid, 220.
Cleveland Gazette: Nov. 17, 1923.

Figure 8. Advertisement in Cleveland Gazette
The Okeh Records’ second advertisement shows the blatant use of exaggerated racial characteristics and links to minstrel’s use of blackface to showcase race music. The large hoop earrings may even be an inconspicuous connection to perceived African heritage or African American slavery, while the childish and uncouth behavior of the African American on the cover gave a sense of verisimilitude to the primitive nature of the black man. Similar notions translated to Lomax’s desire to preserve traditional southern black ethnic music by separating it from white music and culture.

While Lead Belly’s early commercial recordings for ARC in 1935 did not sell well, he nearly recorded his entire catalog for the Library of Congress as part of the New Deal music projects. By this time race records had also met the Depression’s scythe. In 1932 Okeh and Columbia had reduced the number of its race records to levels not seen since before Mamie Smith’s first hit. Ledbetter recorded eighty-nine selections for the Library of Congress of various American musical styles. After these recording sessions a number of record companies came calling, Alan Lomax sent and received hundreds of letters looking for potential buyers of ethnic songs by the Lomaxes’ infamous singing jailbird. One of these inquires was from Victor’s Frank Walker. Alan wrote to Walker that people were interested in Lead Belly’s music and he was willing to do him a favor considering the “Columbia Company doesn’t want a Lead Belly album” because Lead Belly could not fulfill Alan’s goal of showcasing America’s rich folk culture in popular music. Regardless, the Lead Belly Library of Congress’ recordings failed to meet the record industry objectives for sales selling fewer than 5,000 records in a quarter. Lead Belly continued to be touted by Lomax and others as a primitive musician of the rural American south absent of civilization and self-consciousness and disassociated with popular music. Despite his earlier failures as a popular musician Lead Belly still held value to folklorists. Both folklorists and the record industry defined their own version of

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154 Filzen, “The Rise and Fall,” 123.
157 Hirsh, “Modernity, Nostalgia” 195.
black folk music. Popular music destroyed the distinct commodification found in black music. While Lomax called this African American folk music, the record industry titled it race records. In the end, Ledbetter had become simply a signifier of the past.

As the exploitation of ethnic music helped the record industry meet its financial goals, the creation of black folk music also served President Roosevelt’s New Deal goals of promoting authentic American culture through the Federal Arts Project. Despite the government’s disproportionate treatment of African Americans to whites in New Deal programs, historian Lauren Sklaroff recognizes it as a foundation in the Long Civil Rights Movement as well as a promoter of “real” perspectives of the Black Arts Movement.\textsuperscript{158}

While the Federal Arts Project championed racial integration and diversity it also became a racial power struggle. In 1935, the same year Lead Belly was “discovered” by John Lomax, the Federal Music Project (FMP) began to broadcast and perform so-called cultivated music as part of the New Deal’s civic uplift. The FMP’s director, former Cleveland Symphony Conductor Nikolai Sokoloff emphasized “high” cultural music of the European tradition and saw little cultural substance in popular music or “low-brow” ethnic music.\textsuperscript{159} The FMP gradually offered African American music, but largely as segregated groups performing traditional spirituals and work songs. “New Deal cultural development represented a continuous process of negotiation,” Sklaroff said, “as both black and white officials championed some symbols, ideas, and media, while discarding


\textsuperscript{159} Ibid, 31.
The FMP put limits on the styles of music black musicians performed for the public limiting their musical output to traditional black music like spirituals and work songs.

By 1936, incoming FMP folk music director Charles Seeger understood the need to stress a distinct American music culture - a national music that was both for and by its citizens. This distinct American music Seeger said could be found in jazz, swing, hill-billy and old-time music. The music that Seeger mentions all have their roots in early African American musical styles. Seeger, unlike Sokoloff, made little distinction between “high” and “low” cultural music. Seeger believed all held cultural value. He made no distinction between “civilized” music and rural black music. Historian Kenneth Bindas points out the FMP hoped to become “an important contributor to the exposure of the African-American musical heritage.” There was likely no other deposit as gratuitously stacked with this type of music than the Library of Congress’ folk division headed by John and later Alan Lomax. Here, Seeger found a plethora of black hill-billy and old-time music. In this way the FMP propagated the primitive image the Lomaxes had used as a signifier of folk music.

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160 Ibid, 2.
161 Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarch in America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). Here Levine argues the convoluted nature of highbrow and lowbrow culture divides that can be linked to American music. Levine states “The urge to deprecate popular musical genres was an import element in process of sacralization” of classical music (136). This can be applied to Sokoloff’s belief that classical music of European tradition was on a higher plane of cultural evolution than that of American popular or folk music. Charles Seeger rejected this idea.
Luckily for the Lomaxes the FMP still did not make use of popular music. Charles Seeger was looking for a music that Janelle Warren-Findley explains as a “rural, artistic concept of ‘the folk,’” that being music of the common people. From 1935 to 1953 Charles Seeger worked for the Federal Music Project, Resettlement Administration, Works Progress Administrations and finally the Pan American Union. But it was his son Pete Seeger and his influence with leftist movements, who came to appreciate Ledbetter’s protest music and topical songs. Like the Lomaxes, Charles Seeger needed to document this type of American past as the music of black Americans in cultural isolation. Seeger believed ethnic music held a “Divorce between source and product and between outsider original and insider re-creation could easily have persisted in American cultural history as in the Appalachian hills and hollers...and the Negro Quarters became economically and politically more isolated during the Depression.”

This assumption was exactly what the Lomaxes were hoping for. While John Lomax was working with the Federal Writers Project folklore division, Alan was busy petitioning WPA Director of Music Projects Francis McFarland, stressing the variable uses of folk music to define a “genuine American music.” Alan went on to say this material had “great importance in the study of Afro-American music.” The music of Lead Belly surfaced in Alan’s folk radio broadcasts while his father’s book Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly found its way into the New Deal’s Resettlement Administrations Folk Song

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164 Ibid, 199.
165 Lomax, Letters, 11 – 12.
Sheet Program. These songs created solidarity among the rural resettlement community. It is interesting to note that many of these folk songs were both black and white renditions, but jazz, blues and swing music did not exist in the homestead camps.

John Lomax employed racial clichés of African American primitivism and cultural isolation to add some sense of verisimilitude to his constructed image of the black folksinger Lead Belly. His trepidation over the loss of American folk music drove his need to preserve a traditional black music that existed outside of popular music. Displaying Lead Belly as a savage, only capable of playing primitive black music did not acknowledge his political and social consciousness. Both John and Alan used the same techniques to authenticate folk music, while upholding a music color line that created a distinct market for black folk music.

The recording industry carried this similar drive with their race records, effectively segregating black and white music. But this analysis only completes half the story. Ledbetter successfully swam these currents of Jim Crow while expressing his own voice. By comparing both sides of the story a more rounded Lead Belly perspective may emerge. Ledbetter worked both sides of the color line to achieve success and voice his discontent, not openly, but through his lyrics and association with leftist groups.

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166 Warren-Findley, “Passport to Change,” 232. Seeger used the RA song sheets to introduce professional musicians to what he recognized as a living vernacular music or folk music (197 – 198).
CHAPTER IV

BOURGEOISIE BLUES

With all the literature surrounding Ledbetter’s duality, much of it on the sole focus of his insincere relationship with John Lomax, his participation in social activism 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 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.” 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 having one of the first racially integrated ensembles during his northeastern tour in the mid-1930s. The accumulation of Ledbetter’s influence with 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.

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167 Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, xii.
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 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 this could 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 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 story teller 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.”

Like Lead Belly, the audience was responsive and congenial, but many left the show without confronting many of the 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 souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” This duality becomes transparent by pitting the 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

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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.\textsuperscript{170}

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, a career and a marriage. Ledbetter was a major voice in the civil rights and leftist movements. When 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 superstructure” Lead Belly certainly felt he was part the American superstructure.\textsuperscript{171} 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 unknown sung 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 exploitations and racial prejudices against Ledbetter. Karl Hagstrom Miller illuminated the 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

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid, 2 – 3,
\textsuperscript{171} Baraka, \textit{Blues People}, 87.
song – spirituals, shouts, jubilees, gospel songs, field cries, blues, and pop songs by Blacks.”¹⁷² All of these perspectives highlight the “difference” between races linking racial oppositions to, “[B]lack to white, African to European, abnormal to normal.”¹⁷³ 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 black and white together – similarities of music culture and human expression. Baraka wrote “black music reveals black thought,” while this is true, American music also reveals the similarities of white and black thought together and Ledbetter was just one transmission of this.¹⁷⁴ 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” Historian Mia Bay writes.¹⁷⁵ 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.”¹⁷⁶ To find any truth in the duality of Lead Belly’s authenticity becomes what he had to say – an alternative story to the narrative of the

¹⁷² Baker, Blues, Ideology, 80.
¹⁷⁴ Baraka, Blues People, ix.
¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 220.
fabricated African American authenticity propelled by folklorists and the record industry the discussion must begin with racial difference.

One result of analyzing the difference in African and 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.” 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 history as the relationship between 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 workingman. “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,” Sterling Brown wrote. 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

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white water boy for black section gangs on the M&O Railroad, also learning many of his lyrics from black work gangs.\footnote{Otto and Burns, “Race and Hillbilly Music,” 410.} 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 head to a rural juke joint on the edge of town.\footnote{Ibid, 411.}

Southern whites and blacks are often viewed as culturally dissimilar perpetuating this black/white dichotomy. The image of the primitive African often generalized the entire southern black population. This depiction was exacerbated by emphasizing the difference between white and black music rather than a process of creativity resulting in a new song. African American musicians were often classified by race subjecting their music to a label of blackness. While Patrick Mullen gives many examples of the primitive image of bluesmen he also states that this was reciprocally exchanged by black performers manipulating white music producers.\footnote{Mullen, \textit{The Man Who Adores}, 128.} Ledbetter often used the racialized image of blackness to delude Lomax. At a hotel in Montgomery, Alabama John Lomax recalls Ledbetter asking him for money while he continued to resist. “Boss, I’se 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’se 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.\textsuperscript{182} Ledbetter addressed his letters “Dear Boss Man” and signed them “i’m your Servant, Huddie Ledbetter,” throughout the years Ledbetter and Lomax corresponded.\textsuperscript{183} He knew relatively early on, probably in prison, what particular racial traits to play-up or romanticize for personal gain; both with Lomax and on the stage. This was already evident in blackface by African American performers who Ellis Cashmore said “may have been consciously playing the roles whites had created for them; they may also have been manipulating images for expedient purposes.”\textsuperscript{184} 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 while another is attributed to laziness.\textsuperscript{185} Music professor Adam Krims believes that place became the geographic equivalent of identity.\textsuperscript{186} 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. One false heritage of the servile black man enjoying field work is satirized in Lead Belly’s “Pick a Bale of Cotton.” “Great God Almighty, I can pick a bale of cotton. I can pick a bale a day.”

\textsuperscript{182}John Lomax, \textit{Negro Folk Songs}, 41.

\textsuperscript{183}Wolfe and Lornell, \textit{The Life and Legend}, 123.

\textsuperscript{184}Ellis Cashmore quoted from David Krasner “The Real Thing.” \textit{Beyond Blackface}, 105.

\textsuperscript{185}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.

\textsuperscript{186}Adam Krims, “Music, Space, and Place: The Geography of Music.” \textit{The Cultural Study}, 141.
This double consciousness, in the form of whiteness/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.\(^{187}\) 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. Catherine Stewart argues that this detrimental cultural dichotomy of blackness can be attributed to “the pathology of whiteness and the problems that stemmed from racial discrimination.” 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” illustrates how the disease of racism affected both black and white. It emphasizes morals and sympathy for the audience, while invoking a sense of shame.

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

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“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?

This song questions white insecurities about racial inequality and leads to the final confrontation of blackness and whiteness can be seen in African American desire for full citizenship as Lead Belly’s “Equality for Negros” expresses, “Negroes fought in World War One and Two, why can’t we get some equal rights.”

Both songs questioned divisions that were essential to American segregation, “images of inferiority” that white American emphasized as one of the black race’s deficits. This song dwells on white regret at the treatment of African Americans and implores the listener to ask questions “The 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.

Lead Belly’s relationship with John Lomax and the white-dominated music industry presented him as a simple fool who was continually taken advantage of, both in finance and the popular music business. The few personal statements Ledbetter made throughout his life has limited his voice and led to a one-sided analysis of his career. Despite this, Ledbetter maintained his own voice that illuminates him as a conscious African American musician crossing racial and social boundaries when it was necessary or playing the Negro servant when it was not. An example of this awareness can be seen

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188 Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend*, 245.
early on in the John Lomax and Ledbetter relationship. While Lomax carried the notion 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.”

Ledbetter knew the only thing keeping Lomax and he together was his music. And his wife Martha was the only person he truly trusted. In between recordings and concerts Huddie married her the day she arrived from Louisiana in 1935 at the Bethel A. M. E. Church in Norwalk, Connecticut.

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.” It was the MLA who urged John Lomax, not Huddie Ledbetter, “to set down the story of my experiences.”

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 notes this “was the first time that recordings of black vernacular music had been heard at an

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MLA meeting.”¹⁹² This bold move legitimized a black voice in 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.”¹⁹³ More significantly though, Ledbetter was the first black man to play for the 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, instead focusing on racial division.

Historians continually distinguish the difference between African and Western musical tradition and culture when defining African American music. Southern whites and blacks were often viewed as culturally dissimilar to emphasize their opposites. Amiri Baraka states “the only so-called popular music in this country of any real value is of

¹⁹² Wolfe and Lornell, The Life and Legend, 130.
¹⁹³ John Lomax. Negro Folk Songs, 45.
African derivation." He claims that polyphonic rhythms, call and response lyrical techniques, melody and the aberration of the diatonic scale prove that American music in general, lies in Africa. While this is partly true, elements of spirituals, jazz, and even the blue note could not have been possible without the assimilation of European musical traditions, as well as emerging American musical techniques. The bricolage of all these musical traditions created the music of Lead Belly.

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.” Similarities to Blues, Ragtime, and Jazz rhythms are the first likeness 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. Amiri Baraka explains the link of slaves’ call and response singing to early 20th century African American spirituals and seculars:

“Rhythmic syncopation, polyphony, and shifted accents, as well as the altered timbrel 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.’”

194 Baraka, _Blues People_, 28.  
196 Lomax, _The Land Where_, xii – xiii.  
197 Baraka, _Blues People_, 47.
The western pentatonic scale did not theoretically fit into African musical styles. Aberrations of melody and harmonies became known as blues 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. 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 freemen had mastered European instruments but performed stylistically different than their white counterparts. 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

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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 blues.” 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. 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 is a Negro experience, it is also a duality. Blues music was an American experience as much as it was an African American experience.

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. Christianity influenced Lead Belly’s songs like “Amazing Grace” and “Laz’us” seen in John Lomax’s collections. Here, Lomax acknowledges the “difference” by categorizing the spirituals into separate White and

200 Ira Berlin states 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 (36).

201 Reference Ira Berlin for the parallels of Moses and African Americans as “modern counterparts to the Children of Israel (128 – 129).
Negro categories, just as the recording industry had done. Considering both songs, “Amazing Grace” and “Laz’us,” deal with Western religious themes revamped for the slaves’ current bondage clearly show African forms with Western themes became draped in 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.” In this version Lead Belly exemplifies the divides between rich and poor, black and white, 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’!”202 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. 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.”203 Ledbetter attempted a number of prison breaks. None of them found the success of Ol’ Riley.204

Finally the story of the devil and the crossroads repeated throughout blues lore is another adaptation of black and white culture. The devil and the crossroads is a black

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204 Refer to the chapter “Lead Belly tells his story” in Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs.*
American mix of the Christian devil and the African crossroads’ god Esu.\textsuperscript{205} The trickster Esu was the guardian of the crossroads - that symbolic juncture that represents choice. Henry Louis Gates described Esu as individual and loyal:

\begin{quote}
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.\textsuperscript{206}
\end{quote}

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.\textsuperscript{207} 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.”\textsuperscript{208} The colorblind nature of music allowed for the assimilation, reconfiguration and authentication of African and European music and 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.

\textsuperscript{205} 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.
It is these connections between Africa and America that resulted in an American heritage that was both black and white. 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 “Bourgeois Blues” recorded in 1937.

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.

Here, Ledbetter equates class and race together, as he did in many of his songs to suggest that black citizenship should exist for African Americans as well. As he does with “Equality for Negros” 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 in which 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.” Wright and even Alan Lomax encouraged this song because it was reality, and was equally endorsed by Pete Seeger and People’s Songs, a leftist, grassroots organization that equated the black struggle with the worker-class struggle.

Not all of Lead Belly’s lyrics were so transparent. The role of language and performance reflected a subculture of social protest. The folksongs Lead Belly sang live recognized him as a spokesperson. The music, lyrics and performances of Lead Belly were often critiques of society or signifiers to 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. A song like "Bourgeois Blues" was a subversion of social norms. A musician’s ability to “communicate publicly through veiled and coded language” was perhaps their most

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210 See James Lawson’s Jim Crow’s Counterculture and Sean Cubitt’s “‘Maybellene’: Meaning and the Listening Subject.” Reading Pop, ed. Middleton.
unique advantage. 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 enactments. 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.” Not only can the words and music be a social dialogue, but conventionally allows 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 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 the music.

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.” Lee continued, “He seemed proud that he had the means at his command of expressing the sadness of his

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213 Wilson, “The Significance.” 16.
people.” 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.”

While being a musician allowed for the interaction with vast groups of people it also allowed the performer to release their own fears, joys and desires and finally 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. 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 it.

\[^{215}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{216}\text{John Lomax, }\textit{Negro Folk Songs, 47.}\]
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 city.” 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 the 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 “Wooo” 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. 217 “New York, New York” showcases an exciting modern black city, but really represents the long train ride from share-croppers shacks in the Mississippi Delta to the upscale row houses of Sugar Hill.

Lead Belly’s music also allowed for communal call and response. In “Alabama Bound” Lead Belly invokes his African heritage with his call of I’m Alabama bound, the

217 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.”
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 Alabama. But it was also held meaningful content in the context in the Jim Crow south. “I’m Alabama bound if the train don’t stop and turn around. Oh, don’t you leave me here.” Alabama was notorious for its slavery like prison system that Ledbetter must have feared even while spending time in Parchman Farm.\(^{218}\) As a slave, convict, or black man, Alabama was the antithesis of New York City that Lead Belly sings about. This version of the late 19\(^{th}\) century folk song based in early American call and response connects folk with modernity, 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.\(^{219}\) “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 former jail Ledbetter could see the train’s lights cast across his cell. Like the north, the west held allure of freedom and safety.

\(^{218}\) See Mary Ellen Curtin *Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865 – 1900* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000) 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” (41). Ledbetter understood this system well and often sang prison folk songs.

\(^{219}\) The Scottsboro Case can be examined in monograph *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) by Dan T. Carter.
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.”\footnote{Lee, “Some Notes,” 137.} The 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.’”\footnote{Lawson, Jim Crow’s, 198.} The polyphonic nature of African rhythm translated into the lyrics creating a community dialogue.\footnote{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 Bindas. (London: Praeger, 1992). 17.} 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.”\footnote{Hale, “Hear Me Talking,” 253. Hale also states “the blues stylized presentation of individualism almost always occurs through the use of first person” (246).} 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.” Toynbee 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.”\footnote{Toynbee, The Cultural Study, 169.} The sharing of music in the form of the folk or blues songs create an evolving heritage that ensures Lead Belly’s version will not be the last or only...
voice. This means that the folk songs Lead Belly sang became an outlet for continuing communal response. Many of Lead Belly’s songs reflected social critiques seen in “Bourgeoisie Blues,” “New York, New York,” and “Scottsboro Boys.”

Alternative forms of communication were often more effective than 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.” 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. 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 explanations of the differences in their language, style and manners. The black and white demand for race records show white listeners sought African American music. 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.

226 Ibid, 240.
227 Refer to Kenney’s *Recorded Music in American Life*, chapter six.
While Ledbetter crossed race lines by singing a selection of politically conscious songs to white audiences at the Modern Language Association performance, along with forty two shows at black and white universities, featuring black and white performers, across the United States from 1934 to his death in 1949. At New York University in 1947 the concert flyer said “An alert and open mind” was the only admission requirement.”

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.

In the early 1940s Lead Belly’s folk music became part of the American Popular Front in the form of People’s Songs founded by Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger. 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. 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.”

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

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228 Steidl, Lead Belly, 47 – 49.
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 that “American music often bridged the cultural gap between the races.”

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.” 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 “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.”

While the “hot music” of the blues was being marketed to the working-class and white

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233 Wolfe and Lornell, The Life and Legend. 130, 135.
women, 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. The extent at which musical participation confronted the division between white and black, 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.” 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. But it seems naive to suggest that Ledbetter’s himself was apolitical. Ledbetter sang “We Shall Be Free” with Guthrie on the Down Home Radio Show for WKNY in 1940 encouraging racial equality and workers’ rights. While Ledbetter may not have openly voiced his politics because of these racial divides in the 1930s, either way the songs that Lead Belly often performed were politically conscious resulting in a critique of American issues like segregation and disenfranchisement; a form of Lawson’s “blues counterculture...that were necessarily

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234 See Wolfe and Lornell’s The Life and Legend, 209 – 210. Miller’s Segregating Sound, as well as his association with People’s Songs.
accepting of prevailing Jim Crow social norms while at the same time hoping to evade or subvert them.”

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. Ledbetter was singing about society in a country where his voice was not supposed to count for anything. Simply preforming 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 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.” 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).” Many of Lead Belly’s songs fit this criteria as seen in the group lyrics went on to organize and working men defend their rights as well as another tenets associated with protest music: racial equality and full citizenship.

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237 Lawson, Jim Crow’s Counterculture, 17.
238 Ibid.
Lead Belly sang about other principles associated with protest music, like racial equality and African American citizenship. Houston Baker Jr. uses DuBois 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.” 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.” 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 voice social equality with racial equality.

Alain Locke described the New Negro as “self-respecting, self-dependent and demanding full citizenship.” Ledbetter can be seen as a modern New Negro who represented modernity despite being entrenched in various Jim Crow restrictions. He used DuBois’ veils of 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.” Music was another African American political expression. In the song “Equality for Negroes” Lead Belly associated racial equality with religious morals and patriotic sacrifice. Lead Belly asks if

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241 Wolfe and Lornell, The Life and Legend, 244.
243 Lawson, Jim Crow’s. 198.
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.244 “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 indiscriminancy 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.” Lead Belly’s “Equality for Negroes” and a song about Jackie Robison, 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.245 Songs like these for the New York University Division of General Education’s presentation of “American Ballads and

244 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. For more detail refer to Kip Lornell and Charles Wolfe’s The Life and Legend of Lead Belly, chapter 19.
245 Wolfe and Lornell. The Life and Legend. 244 – 245. 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” (244).
Folk Songs,” with New York City major LaGuardia 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.” 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. Ledbetter utilized music to express his part in the New Negro movement as Locke’s 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 New Negro.

The musical career of Lead Belly presents an early representation of a populist, leftist, artistic voice for African American citizenship and national identity. While the issue of citizenship affected African Americans, the blues and folk music culture of the 1930s and 40s expose 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 the social movements, like the Popular Front’s use of folk music that questioned politics and promoted civic solidarity and commitment, which in turn

246 Ibid, 246.
“helped build bridges between class and status groups, between blacks and white
supporters, and between rural and urban, northern and southern blacks.”
Lead Belly did this by breaking through the concept of whiteness/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 sing-able for all races and classes. After 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 – 1949 that put Folkways Records on the map for folk music.
Through his relationships with Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie and Folkways Records Lead
Belly’s music spread across race and class - over ocean and river. Ledbetter, like many
African American musicians found their 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

248 Mullen, The Man Who Adores, 98.
Weavers began singing Lead Belly’s “Goodnight Irene” in 1949 Lead Belly’s music could be heard in Europe, Canada, and the Caribbean.
CHAPTER V

EPILOGUE

On December 6, 1949 Huddie Ledbetter died after a long battle with Lou Gehrig’s disease at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. His friends and family returned Ledbetter’s body to be interned at Shiloh Baptist Church in his hometown of Caddo Parrish, Louisiana. Despite his inability to perform in the last years of his life due to lateral sclerosis’ debilitating effects, Lead Belly’s music continued to live on. Historian Michael Paris noted that a few months after Ledbetter’s death the Weavers recorded Lead Belly’s “Goodnight Irene” to become instant folk music success as “the most widely played song of the year.”250 The following years produced a number of popular musicians who covered Lead Belly’s songs, invigorating the folk revivals of the 1950s and 1960s. An early topical singer, Bob Dylan recorded a number of Ledbetter’s songs in a hotel room in Minneapolis in the winter of 1959. In the mid-sixties Little Richard called Ledbetter the “foundation of modern music.”251 In the 1990s Nirvana and the Ying Yang Twins reworked some of his blues songs. More recently an eclectic assortment of artists played old Lead Belly numbers, from Tom Waits and the Red Hot Chili Peppers to the White Stripes and children’s singer Raffi. Ledbetter’s musical abilities and knack for

251 Ibid.
counter-cultural lyrics has inspired musicians long after he passed and hundreds of his songs remain forever interned in the Library of Congress.

Ledbetter’s music became a way for listeners, black and white, to mediate culture and politics. During American segregation and economic hardship, Ledbetter became a voice of black consciousness and protest through music. Ledbetter was not just a successful blues musician, but an activist for social and political reform. Amidst American segregation and economic hardship Ledbetter became a voice of black consciousness. Lead Belly’s duality reveals how black musicians presented a broad range of American social thought through blues music culture. By navigating a racially divided society with the use of Du Bois double-consciousness, Ledbetter made a career out of music, as well as expressing social critiques. Lyrics like “I been hearing you speak ‘bout that old democracy. The diplomats that old hypocrite speech, think it’s about time you should cut it out, the way Negroes is treated down South” inspired both black and white listeners.252 Rural, and urban, educated and politically conscious African Americans mobilized throughout the 1930s and 1940s motivated by Ledbetter’s music, his lyrics were the medium through which he expressed African American identity and protest. Ethnomusicologist Ian Cross writes “there is no other mechanism or vehicle that can perform for humans what music can perform as a communicative medium.”253

Ledbetter used music and lyrics to traverse modern American society. Long after his death, his tunes continued to serve as a lens into the segregated world of American music and society. Like Lead Belly, Du Bois wrote the Negro folk song, “the rhythmic cry of the slave....has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood.”

Perhaps, by using music and lyrics as analytical tools, these misunderstandings can be reexamined and establish alternative dialogues to the life and influence of American blues musicians.

Goodnight, goodnight Irene.
I’ll see you in my dreams.

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