

1500

(1)

### LEAD BELLY

A YELLER WOMAN KEEPS YOU WORRIED ALL THE TIME,  
A YALLER WOMAN MAKES A MOONEYED MAN GO BLIN'  
BUT A BROWN SKINNED WOMAN MAKES A JACKRABBIT HUG A HOUN'  
AND BLACK SKINNED WOMAN MAKES A PREACHER LAY HIS BIBLE DOWN.

HUDDIE LEDBETTER CLAIMS TO HAVE BEEN BORN ABOUT 1885 ON A FARM NEAR MOGRINGSPOUT, LA. HIS FATHER, WESS LEDBETTER, WAS A HARD-WORKING SHARE GROPPER WHO HAD WORKED HIMSELF UP TO BE A SMALL LANDOWNER. HIS MOTHER WAS A HALF BREED CHEROKEE.

AS A BOY HUDDIE WAS VERY WILD AND KEPT HIS FATHER BUSY BUYING HIM OUT OF TROUBLE. HE GOT INTO MANY SCRAPES WITH THE NEGROES OF THE SURROUNDING COUNTRY AND SPENT MOST OF HIS NIGHTS AT NEARBY COUNTRY DANCES LISTENING TO THE MUSIC AND THE SONGS. ONCE HE WAS FINED TWENTY FIVE DOLLARS FOR CARRYING CONCEALED WEAPONS AT A DANCE. BUT HIS SPECIAL TROUBLE WAS WOMEN, EVEN AS A BOY HE COULDN'T STAY OUT OF THEIR BEDS.

A NEIGHBOR'S DAUGHTER HAD A CHILD BY HIM WHEN HE WAS ONLY FIFTEEN YEARS OLD. A YEAR LATER THE GIRL HAD ANOTHER BABY BUT THIS TIME HUDDIE DENIED ANY RESPONSIBILITY IN THE AFFAIR AND EVENTUALLY HAD TO LEAVE TOWN.

AS SOON AS HE RECEIVED HIS FIRST PAIR OF LONG TROUSERS HE WAS OFF TO SHREVEPORT'S FANNIN STREET WHERE HE FOUND QUITE A FEW NEGRO WOMEN WILLING TO KEEP HIM. HOWEVER, IN A SHORT TIME HE BECAME VERY ILL AND HAD TO RETURN HOME.

ABOUT THIS TIME HE SAW A MAN PLAYING A TWELVE STRING GUITAR AND VERY SOON HE HAD ONE OF HIS OWN TO PLAY DURING THE HOURS WHEN HE WAS AWAY FROM THE COTTON FIELDS, PLOWING AND TAKING CARE OF THE LOCAL GIRLS. HE WANDERED AROUND THROUGH LOUISIANA AND TEXAS FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS AND EVENTUALLY SETTLED IN DALLAS FOR A WHILE WHERE HE MADE A FAIR LIVING IN THE SALOONS

INDEXED

(2)

AND BROTHELS OF EAST DALLAS. DURING THIS PERIOD HE WAS IN AND OUT OF JAIL MANY TIMES FOR KNIFE BATTLES. HE FINALLY GOT A YEAR ON THE CHAIN GANG BUT MANAGED TO ESCAPE AND GO TO NEW ORLEANS. BUT THE FAST DALLAS WOMEN HAD MADE HIM RESTLESS AND HE COULDN'T STAY PUT LONG.

ALONG ABOUT 1916 HE MARRIED A WOMAN NAMED ~~LETHE~~ <sup>LETHE</sup> BUT HE CONTINUED TO WANDER AND SHOW MORE THAN A PASSING INTEREST IN ANY LIKELY-LOOKING WENCH. IN 1917 WHILE USING THE NAME OF WALTER BOYD HE GOT UP A NEGRO NAMED WILL STAFFORD IN A QUARREL OVER STAFFORD'S GIRL. IN SPITE OF HIS FATHER'S MONEY AND A PLEA OF SELF DEFENCE HE WAS SENTENCED TO THIRTY YEARS AT HARD LABOR IN THE TEXAS STATE PENITENTIARY ON TWO COUNTS, MURDER AND ASSAULT TO MURDER.

HE ESCAPED THREE TIMES BECAUSE AS HE LATER SAID "BOSS, I WAS USTA LOTS A WOMEN, AND COULDN' STAN' DE PENITENSHUH." BUT EACH TIME HE WAS RECAPTURED AND RETURNED TO PRISON. AFTER THE LAST TIME HE SETTLED DOWN AND IN HIS OWN WORDS BECAME "THE BEST WHITE MAN'S NIGGER AROUND." ABOUT THIS TIME HE WAS NICKNAMED "LEAD BELLY" BY HIS FELLOW CONVICTS. SHORTLY AFTERWARDS THE NEW GOVERNOR OF TEXAS, PAT NEFF, STOPPED AT THE PRISON AND WAS ENTERTAINED BY LEAD BELLY'S SINGING. NEFF PARDONED ONLY FIVE CONVICTS IN HIS FOUR YEARS AS GOVERNOR BUT LEAD BELLY'S SINGING MADE HIM ONE OF THE FIVE.

HE CONTINUED TO RAMBLE BECAUSE AS HE SAID MANY YEARS LATER "A NATCHUL RAMBLER, BOSS, DATS WHAT I AM." BUT GIN, WOMEN AND A WILLINGNESS TO PULL A KNIFE AT THE LEAST PROVOCATION CONTINUED TO BE HIS TROUBLES. WHILE DRIVING A TRUCK FOR THE GULF REFINING COMPANY IN OILCITY HE HAD A BLOODY FIGHT AND WAS ASKED TO LEAVE TOWN. LATER IN LOUISIANA HE SLICED UP SIX MEN FOR TEASING HIM. IN 1930 HE WAS SENTENCED TO LOUISIANA STATE PENITENTIARY AT ANGOLA FOR ASSAULT WITH INTENT TO MURDER. IT WAS HERE THAT JOHN LOMAX, WHO WAS SEARCHING FOR NEGRO FOLK SONGS AMONG THE PRISONS AND NEGRO SETTLEMENTS OF THE SOUTH, DISCOVERED HIM WHILE HE WAS ACTING AS A TRUSTY AND SINGING FOR GUESTS.

INDEXED

(3)

LEAD BELLY MADE A GREAT IMPRESSION ON MR. LOMAX. IN FACT, HE THOUGHT SO MUCH OF HIS SINGING THAT HE MADE A RECORD OF LEAD BELLY SINGING A SONG ASKING GOVERNOR O.K. ALLEN OF LOUISIANA FOR A PARDON AND ONE MONTH LATER THE PARDON WAS RECEIVED.

A SHORT TIME LATER LEAD BELLY WAS DRIVING LOMAX'S CAR AND ACTING AS HIS "BODY SERVANT." THEY DROVE THROUGH THE SOUTH RECORDING FOLK SONGS. IN PRISON CAMPS AND NEGRO DISTRICTS LEAD BELLY PLAYED AND SANG "GREEN CORN," "MISS JULIE ANN JOHNSON" AND "MISTER TOM HUGHES TOWN." THE NEGROES HEARD, QUICKLY UNDERSTOOD WHAT WAS WANTED AND CAME FORWARD WITH THE SONGS THAT LOMAX WAS SEARCHING FOR.

BUT LEAD BELLY CONTINUED TO CARRY A KNIFE, LIKED HIS GIN AND WAS STILL FOND OF STAYING OUT ALL NIGHT WITH ANY NEGRO GIRL WHO CAUGHT HIS FANCY. LOMAX TRAVELLED WITH LEAD BELLY BUT THERE WERE CONSTANT SQUABBLES AND HE DOES NOT SEEM TO HAVE TRUSTED HIM. ONCE IN MARSHALL, TEXAS HE TOLD A LAWYER IN LEAD BELLY'S PRESENCE, "IF I FAIL TO TURN UP SOME DAY, YOU CAN TESTIFY THAT YOU LAST SAW ME LEAVE YOUR OFFICE WITH THIS MAN." UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES IT IS QUITE OBVIOUS THAT THIS PAIR WERE NOT IDEAL BUSINESS PARTNERS.

JOHN LOMAX RETURNED TO NEW YORK CITY LATE IN 1934 TO ARRANGE FOR PUBLICATION OF SOME OF LEAD BELLY'S SONGS IN BOOK FORM AND IN DECEMBER OF THAT YEAR SENT FOR HUDDIE LEDBETTER WHO HAD REMAINED IN SHREVEPORT. LOMAX OBTAINED A ROOM FOR LEAD BELLY IN HARLEM'S Y.M.C.A., BUT IN A SHORT TIME HE WAS AGAIN STAYING OUT ALL NIGHT WITH HIS GUITAR, SINGING HIS SONGS. THE NEWSPAPERS PRINTED STORIES ABOUT HIM AND HE WAS BESIEGED WITH OFFERS TO SING BUT STILL NO ONE SOUTH OF HARLEM WOULD GIVE HIM A ROOM. LOMAX TALKED IT OVER WITH HIM AND IT WAS FINALLY DECIDED THAT MARTHA PROMISE, A SHREVEPORT GIRL WHO HAD HELPED HIM SEVERAL TIMES BEFORE SHOULD BE SENT FOR. MARTHA ARRIVED AT THE PENNSYLVANIA STATION EARLY IN JANUARY 1935 TO BE GREETED BY LEAD BELLY, SEVERAL NEWSPAPER REPORTERS AND A CROWD OF CURIOUS SPECTATORS. THEY WERE

INDEXED

(4)

MARRIED AT MR. LOMAX'S PLACE IN WILTON, CONN. AND ALL WAS PEACE AND QUIET FOR A SHORT TIME.

LEAD BELLY AGAIN OCCASIONALLY TRAVELLED WITH LOMAX AND SANG FOR THE STUDENTS AND FACULTIES OF VARIOUS COLLEGES. SOMETIMES HE PLAYED FOR A FLAT SUM, SOMETIMES HE PASSED THE HAT, BUT ALWAYS MR. LOMAX HELD THE MONEY. HE GAVE MANY CONCERTS IN NEW YORK STATE AND MADE SEVERAL APPEARANCES AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY. IN A SHORT TIME HE BECAME GLUM AND STARTED STAYING OUT NIGHTS, SINGING FOR HIS FRIENDS, SINGING JUST FOR THE LOVE OF SINGING. IT IS OBVIOUS THAT LOMAX THOUGHT HIM UNGRATEFUL AND THAT LEAD BELLY THOUGHT LOMAX WAS TAKING ADVANTAGE OF HIM. SOON, THEY WERE SQUABBLING OVER MONEY AND OVER LEAD BELLY'S LATE-NIGHT EXCURSIONS. MARTHA WAS CALLED IN FOR A CONFERENCE AND IT WAS DECIDED THAT THEY WOULD BE BETTER OFF IN THE SOUTH BY THEMSELVES, SO THEY WERE SHIPPED BACK TO SHREVEPORT ON A GREYHOUND BUS.

THEY DID NOT STAY IN THE SOUTH LONG. MARTHA EARNED ONLY FOUR DOLLARS A WEEK AS A LAUNDRY WORKER AND LEAD BELLY'S SONGS WERE NOT THE NOVELTY IN HIS OWN SOCIAL CIRCLE THAT THEY WERE IN THE GREAT UNIVERSITIES OF THE NORTH. IN LESS THAN A YEAR THEY WERE BACK IN NEW YORK CITY. MARTHA WORKED WHEN SHE COULD GET A JOB, LEAD BELLY SANG AT SMALL GATHERINGS AND PARTIES ALL UP AND DOWN MANHATTAN BUT HARD TIMES WERE KNOCKING AT EVERYONE'S DOOR AND THE PICKINGS WERE PRETTY SKIMPY. SOON THEY WERE ON HOME RELIEF. ON HIS FIRST TRIP NORTH HE HAD LAUGHED AND OCCASIONALLY SUNG HAPPY SONGS BUT NOW HE GREW SADDER DAY BY DAY AND HIS SONGS GREW GLOOMIER AND GLOOMIER.

NIGHT AFTER NIGHT THIS STOCKY, EBONY-COLORED MAN WITH THE GREAT SCAR ACROSS HIS FACE SAT IN SMOKE FILLED ROOMS WITH A GUITAR ACROSS HIS KNEES AND CROONED IN A PLEASANT BARITONE THOSE SONGS THAT HE AND OTHERS LIKE HIM HAD WOVEN OUT OF EVERY DAY EVENTS, EVERY DAY DREAMS, EVERY DAY PLANS AND HOPES. MOST OF HIS SONGS ARE HANDDOWNS FROM OTHERS BUT IN MOST CASES HE HAS ADDED OR SHORTENED THE ORIGINAL AND IN ALL CASES HE HAS IMPROVED ON IT. HE CLAIMED TO KNOW 500 SONGS, MANY OF THEM HIS OWN COMPOSITIONS.

INDEXED

(5)

PEOPLE HEARD HIM AND MARVELLED. THEY WONDERED OUT LOUD WHY THIS MAN COULDN'T GET RADIO OR PICTURE CONTRACTS. HE WAS VERY NEAR TO GETTING CONTRACTS, REMUNERATIVE ONES, SEVERAL TIMES, BUT ALWAYS SOMETHING HAPPENED SO THAT THE DEAL FELL THROUGH. LEAD BELLY JUST DIDN'T SEEM TO BE OUT FOR PROSPERITY.

I SHOULD LIKE TO END THIS ON A PLEASANT NOTE BUT I CANNOT. IN MARCH OF THIS YEAR LEAD BELLY, STILL ON HOME RELIEF, WAS INVOLVED IN A FIGHT WITH A FRIEND IN HIS ROOM AT 356 W. 52ND STREET. THE FRIEND WAS BADLY CARVED UP. ON MAY 18TH IN GENERAL SESSIONS JUDGE DONNELLAN SENTENCED LEAD BELLY TO ONE YEAR IN THE PENITENTIARY FOR THIRD DEGREE ASSAULT. WITH TIME OFF FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR HE WILL BE OUT IN A SHORT TIME. PERHAPS WITH A NEW SONG OR TWO.

THIRTY DAYS IN THE WORKHOUSE, SIX LONG MONTHS IN JAIL,  
THIRTY DAYS IN THE WORKHOUSE, SIX LONG MONTHS IN JAIL,  
NOW THEY GOT ME IN TROUBLE, NO ONE GO MY BAIL.

INDEXED

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