Introduction

Many years ago, I spent some time helping to develop a documentary film about the life and legend of Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly (1889–1949). An African American musician born in Louisiana, Ledbetter found fame but not fortune among New York City's folk music and labor movements in the 1930s and 1940s. Among some 200 songs he recorded, he is perhaps best known for "Goodnight, Irene," "In the Pines," "Midnight Special," and "Rock Island Line," music popularized in the years after his death by a wide range of artists including Frank Sinatra, Odetta, Robert Plant, and Kurt Cobain. As sometimes happens, that documentary did not end up being produced. More recently, in 2010, I was hired to write a feature documentary for PBS based on Douglas A. Blackmon's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Slavery by Another Name* (Anchor Books, 2008). Immersing myself in this history of convict leasing and other forms of forced labor in the US South in the decades between the end of the Civil War and World War II, I kept thinking back to Huddie Ledbetter, incarcerated in both Texas and Louisiana in the years between 1915 and 1934. His first conviction, I remembered, was for "carrying a pistol," a charge that I now understood might be one of the vague charges levied against African Americans, and rarely against whites, as a means of asserting white dominance while also securing a tightly controlled and virtually cost-free labor force in the industrializing South.[1]

Bring Judgment Day is structured around Ledbetter's interaction with two white men, folklorist John Lomax and his son, Alan Lomax, who met the performer in 1933 and later spent six months with him, from late September 1934 through late March 1935. The Lomaxes introduced Ledbetter to national audiences, and they were the first to publish an account of his life, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (The Macmillan Company,

1936). The Lomax book, despite considerable inaccuracies, remains the main source of information about Ledbetter's early life, and it sets the tone for the portrait of "Lead Belly" that continues to the present day, emphasizing a career of violence and incarceration. Subtitled "King of the Twelve-String Guitar Players of the World, Long-time Convict in the Penitentiaries of Texas and Louisiana," the Lomaxes' book is divided into two parts: Part I: The "Worldly N[–]" and Part II: The Sinful Songs. Part I, which runs to sixty-three pages, begins with a one-page chronology, followed by:

- "Lead Belly Tells His Story" (pages 3–28), which purports to tell the story of Ledbetter before he met the Lomaxes, primarily in Ledbetter's own words;
- "Finding Lead Belly" (pages 29–33), about their meeting in prison;
- "Traveling with Lead Belly" (pages 34–46), featuring Lead Belly's work with the Lomaxes from late September 1934 to the end of the year, as they toured southern prisons and Black communities in search of music; and
- "New York City and Wilton" (pages 47–64), about the events that followed after John Lomax arranged for Ledbetter to perform at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in Philadelphia, in December 1934, and the trio began to seek out academic and general audiences in the Northeast. The section drives to a split between John Lomax and Ledbetter, who returned to Louisiana in late March 1935.

Part II is a compilation of songs, with explanations from the Lomaxes and Ledbetter, with an emphasis on his prison repertoire.

The credibility accorded the early biography stems from the ways in which the authors, especially in the section titled "Lead Belly Tells His Story," presented Ledbetter's words as if they were a transcript of spoken, recorded speech, and therefore a reliable primary source. They used quotation marks and stereotyped dialect, such as "Yassuh, my papa he was a wuckah. I reckon I got it from him to be such a good wuckah in de penitenshuh," even as they acknowledged that "[s]ometimes Lead Belly spoke in dialect, sometimes he didn't."[2] They repeatedly emphasized the authenticity of this account. "In this book we present his life's story and some of our novel experiences with him," they wrote. "We print the story

of his life before he met us, **told in his own words**, and we offer forty-nine of the songs he sang for us, together with the background of these songs, again, in many instances, in Lead Belly's vernacular."[3] (Emphasis added.)

Reviewers and scholars, when the book was published, and in the decades since, have therefore relied upon the Lomax book as a credible primary source. This includes Kip Lornell and Charles Wolfe (*The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, Da Capo Press, 1992), who noted that the Lomaxes had "a chance to do something hardly anybody else in folk music research in that day had done: record a singer's total repertoire. Along the way, they would also record the singer's autobiography, and comment about his songs."[4] It also includes John Lomax's principal biographer, Nolan Porterfield (*Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax*, University of Illinois Press, 1996), who credited the Lomaxes as the source of information for his own brief discussion of Ledbetter's early years.[5] More recently, Alan Lomax's biographer, John Szwed (*Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*, Penguin Books, 2010), wrote: "[Ledbetter] was also interviewed while he was being recorded to create an oral autobiography to be deposited in the Library of Congress."[6] Even the website for the Association for Cultural Equity, founded by Alan Lomax in 1983, suggests transcription.[7]

In fact, there is no transcript because there was no recording of an autobiography. In the first months of 1935, as they compiled the book, the Lomaxes recorded Ledbetter singing and at times speaking as he introduced or interrupted his songs to explain them, but the twelve-inch aluminum discs on which they recorded were expensive and scarce. In unpublished drafts of *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, part of a collection donated to the Library of Congress in 2004, the Lomaxes made this clear as they explained how they documented Ledbetter's story. (The "XXX" and crossed-out lines are in the original, and, although the excerpt ends mid-sentence, a follow-up page was not found in the archive.)

> And here follows the story of the XXX "worldly n[–]" so far as we have been able to reconstruct it from his own reluctant, contradictory and intentionally confusing statements, from prison records, from a few scattering, brief and uninterested letters written by white men who have known him, and from the ~~statement~~ recollections of two of his women – Margaret, his childhood sweetheart, ~~by whom he had his only child, who lives now in Dallas~~ – and

> Martha, his present wife. ~~whom we brought East and saw him legally marry~~. Some of the most interesting and significant stories we have had to omit because of ~~the bad impression they would make all around~~ their complete unprintableness. Some of the tales are told in his own idiom with as close an approximation to his narrative style as we could reconstruct.* There is certainly an over-emphasis of the violent and criminal side of Lead Belly's life, and that because we had some basis (in his criminal record) for our questions. [*inserted* Therefore] we present this loosely woven texture of reconstructed stories and letters, not as accurate biographical material, but as a set of dramatic ~~and exciting stories~~ tales through which the

The asterisk leads to:

> *Since neither of us could write shorthand, we soon despaired of taking notes on his stories as he told them. In writing long-hand we lost some ~~portions~~ of ~~his~~ each tale in ~~being accurate in the~~ attempting accuracy of idiom. ~~of others~~. Besides, Lead Belly soon become embarrassed and unnatural *when he saw us taking notes* [italics is a handwritten insert from Alan]. We, therefore, wrote down the stories complete directly after he told them.

In the draft, the Lomaxes wrote that they had reconstructed these stories, "not as accurate biographical material but as a set of dramatic tales." They acknowledged an "overemphasis" on Ledbetter's "violent and criminal side," because that is what they asked him about.[8] However, in the book as published, this explanation is absent, and instead the biography's authenticity is emphasized. As a result, the book became a source for other "biographical" accounts. This included Edmond Addeo and Richard Garvin's self-described "historical novel," *The Midnight Special: The Legend of Leadbelly*, published by Bernard Geis Associates in 1971. In their preface, the authors stated that the book was "the truth, so far as we can ever know it,"[9] although in a 1990 interview with Kip Lornell, Addeo noted that they had taken "some literary liberties, dramatic liberties" and included "scenes we made up … out of whole cloth, just for dramatic continuity."[10] A few years later, screenwriter Ernest Kinoy seems to have been influenced both by the Lomax book and by *The Midnight Special* as he wrote the screenplay for *Leadbelly* (Paramount Pictures, 1976), directed by Gordon Parks. Although the film is a fictionalized account of Ledbetter's life, reviewers often saw it as biography.[11]

What is especially troubling about the Lomaxes' framing of Huddie Ledbetter is that by casting one man as the violent center of the narrative, they erased the context of racial terror that marked the economic and political dominance of white southerners in the decades following the Civil War. It was Ledbetter's personal traits and actions, the Lomaxes argued – and most audiences accepted this as fact – that led to his repeated incarceration. Conversely, it was the Lomaxes' personal traits and actions, and not any sort of privilege or the exclusion of others, that made them deserving of the opportunities and advancement that they and millions of other white southerners enjoyed in education, housing, and employment. This erasure can be found in liner notes, articles, books, and websites, up to the present day, even those intended to celebrate the performer. "Unfortunately, Ledbetter had a violent temper and was in and out of prison several times in the course of his life," reports the Bullock Museum in Austin.[12] The website of the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame, into which Ledbetter was inducted in 2008, reads: "Possessing a legendary quick temper, he was arrested and convicted of murder in Texas in 1917 and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment."[13] Until it was changed in 2019, Ledbetter's biography on the website of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, into which he was inducted in 1988, read, "A man possessed with a hot temper and enormous strength, Lead Belly spent his share of time in Southern prisons."[14]

It is true that Huddie Ledbetter spent several years in captivity. He served on a county chain gang in 1915 and was incarcerated in state penitentiaries in Texas (1918–1925) and Louisiana (1930–1934) and in jail at Rikers Island in New York (1939). Yet, without historical context, even those who celebrate Ledbetter's ability to survive his time in these institutions are robbed of an opportunity to understand not only the performer but also the nation in which he came of age. At the same time, to write a biography of Ledbetter's early life without acknowledging the Lomaxes and their engagement with him, including their writing of *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, would be a mistake. First and foremost, it is the Lomax narrative that has defined Ledbetter for the better part of a century. Exploring the choices that they made as they created a persona for Ledbetter, and the ease with which their version of him was accepted and augmented by others, often in highly negative ways, is an important part of *Bring Judgment Day*. Reporters, radio producers,

motion picture executives, academics, and the general public willingly went along with what historian Hazel Carby described as "[t]he political project of the Lomaxes," which was "to cast the black male body into the shape of an outlaw. John Lomax intended to recover an unadulterated form of black music, and in the process actually invented a particular version of black authenticity."[15]

Additionally, there are elements of the Lomaxes' writings that can be verified and prove useful, including both the description of their travels with Huddie Ledbetter and even some discussion of his early life. Notably, where their book seems most aligned with Ledbetter's past, it is when he talked about music, storytelling, and good times with family and friends. Where it is often demonstrably false is when he is quoted as describing terrible acts of violence, always "against his own people," as the Lomaxes put it, as if to reassure themselves and their white readers. Certainly, some of this was Ledbetter himself being selective about what he shared, understanding, as did the Lomaxes, that any reported charge that he had been violent toward white people would end the possibility of a national career. Some of Ledbetter's songs contain elements of autobiography; some also contain lyrics of violence, notably against women, but the extent to which they should be trusted as character-based is unclear. Much of his repertoire was drawn and adapted from material that had been performed by others he'd encountered, and the choices of which songs he would perform, which he would record, and which he would release to the public were generally made by white gatekeepers, whether prison officials, the Lomaxes, or northern record producers. Further confusing the narrative, Ledbetter himself liked to share what he called "tall tales," as they were known "down home."[16] The Lomaxes, too, could be selective and at times deceptive when describing their own actions. John Lomax, in particular, is an unreliable narrator, often presenting himself as being drawn into events rather than orchestrating them, even when evidence shows otherwise. In addition, throughout the time he spent "interpreting" Ledbetter for the benefit of audiences and the press and in *Negro Folks Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, Lomax emphasized his knowledge and expertise while continually minimizing the achievements, talent, and expertise of Ledbetter. At times, though, he paints such a negative portrait of himself in the book that the results gain credibility.

Bring Judgment Day is structured around the relationship of Huddie Ledbetter and John Lomax, primarily between 1933 and 1935, while also

drawing on the historical record of Ledbetter's life from 1889, when he was born, to the mid-1930s, when he and his wife, Martha Promise Ledbetter, by then independent of John Lomax, permanently relocated to New York City. Ultimately, though, this book is Ledbetter's. The Lomaxes, for better and worse, played an important role in bringing his music to new audiences, but it was Ledbetter himself who rose to this opportunity and challenge, as he had so often in the past, and then moved beyond it. As a performer, he was a link between the past and the future, a collector and promoter of America's tremendously diverse musical heritage and an innovator whose creative drive played a vital role in shaping the foundation not only of modern American culture but also of world culture. To truly understand that culture, a fresh look at the early history of this important American musician is essential – today more than ever. As political pressure is building to limit and even criminalize efforts to teach evidence-based history of the nation's past, a book that re-examines the life and legacy of Huddie Ledbetter in the broader context of the United States' social, political, and legal systems is especially timely.

CHAPTER 1

Encounter at Angola

In June 1933, Huddie Ledbetter, prisoner #19469 at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, received welcome news. Pending the governor's signature, the Louisiana Board of Pardons had agreed to commute his minimum sentence from six years to three, making him eligible to apply for parole. Ledbetter, forty-four years old, had been fighting for his freedom since he arrived at Angola on February 26, 1930. His intake papers described him as 5′ 7.5″ tall, 171 pounds, with black hair streaked with gray. He had "[g]ood teeth, medium ears, medium nose, black burn scar back of right hand, long cut scar right side of neck, cut scar left shoulder, sore scar right thigh."[1] His full sentence, if served, would run until February 6, 1940. For the first time since his incarceration, freedom seemed to be in sight.

A month later, John Lomax and his eighteen-year-old son, Alan, gathering material for an anthology of American folk music for Macmillan and the Library of Congress (eventually titled *American Ballads and Folk Songs*), arrived at Angola. The pair had recorded at three prisons in Texas before traveling east to Louisiana. They arrived on Sunday, July 16, 1933 and stayed for four days in hot, muggy weather; it rained both Sunday and Monday. Lomax, a portly, white sixty-five-year-old with a graduate degree from Harvard and a cigar frequently between his teeth, complained that they "found the fountains drier than they are in Texas" because at Angola, "Negro prisoners [were] not allowed to sing as they work," thus limiting the Lomaxes' ability to gather material. Yet "[o]ne man . . . almost made up for the deficiency."[2] At Camp A, they were introduced to "Huddie Ledbetter – called by his companions Lead Belly" who "was unique in knowing a very large number of tunes, all of which he sang effectively while he twanged his twelve-string guitar." As an added bonus for the

Lomaxes, Ledbetter, a seasoned performer, was well-versed in the type of songs they wanted to hear. "Alan and I were looking particularly for the song of the Negro laborer, the words of which sometimes reflect the tragedies of imprisonment, cold, hunger, heat, the injustice of the white man," John Lomax wrote. "Fortunately for us and, as it turned out, fortunately for him, Lead Belly had been fond of this type of songs."[3] Ledbetter performed seven songs, some of them multiple times, as the Lomaxes recorded. These included "The Western Cowboy," with a refrain of "cow cow yippie yippie yay"; "Frankie and Albert," a ballad of love gone wrong; and "Goodnight, Irene," an edgy waltz with a captivating tune:

> Irene, goodnight;
> Irene, goodnight;
> Goodnight, Irene; goodnight, Irene –
> I'll kiss you in my dreams.[4]

Other songs included the up-tempo "Take a Whiff on Me," a risqué song about cocaine that he said he learned from his father's brother, Terrell; "You Can't Lose-a-Me, Cholly," which the Lomaxes described as a "ragtime strut" for dancing; and "Ella Speed," another ballad of doomed love. Equipment problems meant that they caught only bits of some songs, including "Angola Blues," which Ledbetter said he wrote while at the prison. It's a lament about incarceration and being forced out of bed at 3:30 a.m. to work; about the woman he loved in Shreveport; and about the possibility of release.

> If I leave here walkin', hang crape on de do',
> If I leave here walkin', hang crape on de do',
> I may not be dead, but I ain't comin' back here no mo'.

The Lomaxes would later claim that the song was "a mélange of stanzas from many different 'blues.'" But it spoke powerfully to Ledbetter's situation and frustration, especially the final stanza:

> I wouldn' min' rollin' no two, three years,
> I wouldn' min' rollin' no two, three years,
> But I'll tell de gov'nor, can't go ten or twelve.[5]

As evidenced by audio archives in the Library of Congress, the recording quality in 1933 was poor.[6] Lomax had been working with sound

engineers to design and build a machine that would improve the quality of field recording, but it was not yet ready when he and Alan set out that summer. "The whole idea of using a phonograph to preserve authentic folk music was, in 1933 . . . radically different from the popular notion of recording," wrote scholars Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell. "Field recordings are not intended as commercial products, but as attempts at cultural preservation."[7] Setting out in June, the Lomaxes settled for a "cylinder model" dictating machine, "equipped with a spring motor," from the Dictaphone Corporation.[8] A year later, in 1934, they returned to Angola with the new machine, and the fidelity of these recordings makes it easy to imagine the astonishment the Lomaxes must have felt when they first heard Ledbetter's powerful twelve-string guitar as it drove through the fast-paced tunes, accompanied by a voice that could caress with sweetness, howl in lament, and force the listener to pay attention. When Ledbetter played, he was in total charge, sometimes slapping his guitar in rhythm, sometimes contrasting the rhythmic movement of his feet and hands. In an age before amplifiers, his sound could – and eventually would – fill a concert hall.

In *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, the Lomaxes claimed that after each song Ledbetter performed, "when Captain Reaux was not about," he told them that he was eligible for parole and begged them to see if he could be paroled to work for them. Their book, published after the Lomaxes had begun to face criticism for their working arrangement with Ledbetter, alleged that it was Ledbetter who proposed the terms of employment: He would drive their car, cook their meals, wash their clothes, and be their man "as long as I live," they quoted him as saying. Once he started his "old twelve-string to twanging" in any town in the United States, people would come running. "I'll make you a lot of money," they said he told them. "You needn't give me none, 'cept a few nickels to send my woman."[9] Whether the passage is factual or not, the Lomaxes do seem to have investigated the possibility of getting Ledbetter released to them. In his 1947 autobiography, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, John Lomax wrote, "He knew so many songs which he sang with restraint and sympathy that, accepting his story in full, I quite resolved to get him out of prison and take him along as a third member of our party."[10] After finishing their work at Angola, father and son drove to Baton Rouge to check the penitentiary records. "Often he had been in trouble with the