

## Bring Judgment Day

Known worldwide as Lead Belly, Huddie Ledbetter (1889–1949) is an American icon whose influence on modern music was tremendous – as was, according to legend, the temper that landed him in two of the South’s most brutal prisons, while his immense talent twice won him pardons. But, as this deeply researched book shows, these stories were shaped by the white folklorists who “discovered” Lead Belly and, along with reporters, recording executives, and radio and film producers, introduced him to audiences beyond the South. Through a revelatory examination of arrest, trial, and prison records; sharecropping reports; oral histories; newspaper articles; and more, author Sheila Curran Bernard replaces myth with fact, offering a stunning indictment of systemic racism in the Jim Crow era of the United States and the power of narrative to erase and distort the past.

SHEILA CURRAN BERNARD is an Emmy and Peabody Award-winning filmmaker, author, and educator. The recipient of an NEH Public Scholars award, Bernard is an associate professor in the Department of History at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

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Sheila Curran Bernard  
Frontmatter  
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**BRING JUDGMENT DAY**  
RECLAIMING LEAD BELLY'S TRUTHS FROM JIM CROW'S LIES

Sheila Curran Bernard



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*Go down, ol' Hannah,  
Don't you rise no more,  
And if you rise in the morning,  
Bring Judgment Day.*

Huddie Ledbetter

For librarians, archivists, and others who preserve and make accessible the records of the past,

and in memory of Judge Joni Tidwell Haldeman of DeKalb, Texas.

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## Note on the Text

Throughout his life, Huddie Ledbetter (with Huddie pronounced somewhere between “muddy” and “hoody”) signed his personal letters and referred to himself with his given name, Huddie Ledbetter, rather than what was almost certainly a prison moniker, “Lead Belly.” His wife, family members, and friends called him “Huddie”; in interviews, some of his New York City musician friends referred to him as “Led.” To Ledbetter, “Lead Belly” was a stage name, and he spelled it with two words. That is the convention used in this book, except when quoting print sources that merged the two as “Leadbelly.”

I have chosen not to spell out the N-word even when it is included in historical documents. The harmful intent is clear; there is no need to replicate it. I left intact, for historical purposes, the offensive dialect and stereotypes used at times by the Lomaxes and others, and I regret any distress this may cause. In addition, there may be misspellings, typos, or inconsistent capitalization in these sources, which I have generally chosen not to point out. In quoting from unpublished oral histories conducted in the 1950s and after, I’ve modified the transcriber’s attempts to convey accented speech. Except as quoted in published material, Black is capitalized, but not white, in line with current guidelines of the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

I acknowledge that much of this history, and the ways in which sources describe it, is shocking and difficult to read. It is not my intent to cause further harm, but to illuminate a past that remains deeply relevant to the present.

## Chronology

- 1863 President Lincoln issues Emancipation Proclamation, declaring as free the enslaved people in states still in rebellion.
- 1865 January: Congress passes the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution.  
April: Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrenders to Union general Ulysses S. Grant, beginning the process of ending the US Civil War.
- 1867 John A. Lomax is born in Goodman, Mississippi. Two years later, the family relocates to Texas, purchasing 183 acres of land in Bosque County.
- 1877 The era of post-war Reconstruction ends as federal troops are withdrawn from the South.
- 1889 Huddie Ledbetter is born near Mooringsport, Louisiana. Within five years, his family relocates to Texas, purchasing 68.5 acres of land in Harrison County.
- 1915 Alan Lomax is born.  
Ledbetter is arrested in Harrison County and sentenced to a county chain gang.
- 1917 Using the alias “Walter Boyd,” Ledbetter is arrested in Bowie County, Texas and convicted of murder and attempted murder. He serves time at Shaw State Prison Farm outside DeKalb, Texas, and at the Imperial State Prison Farm in Sugar Land, Texas.
- 1925 January: Ledbetter is pardoned by outgoing Texas governor Pat M. Neff.



CHRONOLOGY

- 1930      Ledbetter is arrested in Mooringsport and convicted of assault with attempt to murder. He is sent to the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.
- 1933      July: John and Alan Lomax meet Ledbetter while recording at Angola.
- 1934      July: The Lomaxes return to Angola and record again with Ledbetter.  
            August 1: Ledbetter is released.  
            September 26: Lomax “hires” Ledbetter as an assistant.  
            December 28: Lomax introduces Ledbetter at the Modern Language Association gathering in Philadelphia.
- 1935      The Lomaxes and Ledbetter arrive in New York to a storm of publicity. They settle in Wilton, Connecticut to work on *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* and launch a northern performing tour. Martha Promise marries Huddie Ledbetter.  
            March 26: Martha and Huddie Ledbetter return to Shreveport, Louisiana.
- 1936      February: The Ledbetters return to New York City and remain there.  
            November: *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* is published by Macmillan.
- 1948      John A. Lomax dies, age eighty.
- 1949      Huddie Ledbetter dies, age sixty.
- 1968      Martha Ledbetter dies, age sixty-eight. The Ledbetter estate passes to Martha’s niece, Queen (“Tiny”) Robinson.
- 2002      Alan Lomax dies, age eighty-seven.