

Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection

By Howard Rye



Martha Ledbetter and Huddie. Photo: Abe Greiss, courtesy of the Lead Belly Estate.

When 'Blues Records 1943-1966' first appeared in 1968, established collectors were shocked to find the Lead Belly listing limited to a few arbitrarily selected items with the note, 'As this artist has recorded mainly in the true folk vein, only sessions thought to be of interest to blues collectors are listed'. Subsequent editions backed off from this ludicrous position but it reflects at least one reality. However genuine Huddle Ledbetter's African-American musical roots, and however skilled he was at putting an African-American rhythmic cast onto the most unlikely material, his records were certainly not aimed at the blues audience of his own time. Yet comparison of his performances with Woody Guthrie's on the occasions when they performed together clearly reveals how far from the 'true folk vein' he was and it is difficult to believe now that the 'folk' audience ever accepted his uncompromising approach. On the other hand he was willing to co-operate with the presentation of his music by a succession of patronising gits who seem to have regarded him as a cross between a museum exhibit and a mischievous sprite.

This latest repackaging by Smithsonian Folkways is a five CD set (CD40201) ranging in date from titles recorded for the Library of Congress in 1934 up to its whole final CD drawn from 'Lead Belly's Last Sessions' in 1948. The CDs are accompanied by a 139-page book, with an introductory essay by Robert Santelli, and a biographical and analytical essay by Jeff Place. Place's essay is at pains to point out that those who saw an 'Uncle Tom' in Lead Belly plainly did not know him very well. He presents some impressive oral testimony, including Pete Seeger's observation that "when Lead Belly found out that white people were willing to help him 'he simply ignored our radical politics'." The testimony of Moses Asch, who recorded most of what is on these CDs, very much points in the same direction. Cisco Houston perhaps protests too much in describing him as 'a proud African king when he picked up that guitar'. Walter Winchell's outrage that "anybody could put out a record for children sung by a murderer" was welcome on both sides of this equation. Huddle died before the House Un-American Activities Committee could launch their planned investigation.

Place also provides some detailed information about the history of recording Lead Belly, including an account of the Stinson label, and some observations about Britain's skiffle boom. I admit, though, that I still do not believe Moses Asch's story that representatives of Lonnie Donegan attempted to shake him down for Lead Belly's thefts of Donegan's songs! The book is completed by 'Why He Sang Certain Songs' by Lead Belly's niece, Tiny Robinson, and a listing of the Moses Asch sessions (1942-1948) without personnels. This list is sometimes at

variance with the dates given for the individual titles used on the CDs. Among many fascinating pieces of memorabilia reproduced, pages from Moses Asch's ledgers make clear how little chance anyone has of solving the many discographical problems his methods of work created. Record labels and LP sleeves, flyers and tickets, and of course photos of the man complete the offer.

And so to the music. Disc Four carries the subtitle 'Lead Belly On Radio', and Disc Five is 'Last Sessions'. Documentation of the last does not give the exact recording dates, which appear to be known, and has three previously unissued tracks, which include the charming 'Princess Elizabeth', composed for her 1947 wedding and Lead Belly singing along with Bessie Smith's 'Nobody Knows You', which is a complete waste of space (and money since, this being an American issue, they had to license it from Sony). 'Every Time I Go Out' is a cappella.

I have vainly tried to detect any unifying factor on the first three discs, though there are clearly some intentional groupings. They represent a very listenable cross section of Lead Belly's various modes, including material originally issued on Asch and Disc 78s, as well as performances which first saw the light on Folkways LPs or previous Smithsonian CDs. All the expected classics occur at least once, 'Irene', 'Bourgeois Blues', 'Rock Island Line', 'Boll Weevil', 'Ella Speed', the pardon songs. One apparent grouping includes a song about 'Jean Harlow', 'Laura', accompanied by his remarkable accordion playing, and a version of 'Sweet Jenny Lee', which he got from Cab Calloway. Most of this material is previously issued and most has been on CD before. Three appear previously unissued. A swinging 'I Done Got Over' is apparently from 1943. 'Been So Long', is of unknown provenance from a battered acetate, though evidently late since it is a tribute to staff at Bellevue Hospital. "When I see Miss Thelma coming, I get so glad, I believe she's the best head nurse Bellevue ever had." "She was good-looking and she was nice." This was evidently intended to demonstrate how he made up songs. 'Ham And Eggs', a prison work song, 'Ham' being short for 'hammer', comes from a WNYC 'Folk Songs Of America' broadcast on 20th March 1940.

This serves to introduce the more homogeneous fourth CD, which tells the story of Lead Belly's involvement with WNYC and Henrietta Yurchenko's folk song programs. Two complete broadcasts are included, from 6th February and 13th March 1941. Some further individual songs are also previously unissued, except for three from an October 1948 Jazz Fest taped by Frederick Ramsey, and also what is claimed, wrongly I think by aural comparison, to be an alternative 'Leaving Blues' from 13th March. The two versions in this set of the children's game song, 'Ha-Ha This A Way', neither of which is the Asch 78 despite what is claimed, are very different from that 78, though quite similar to each other.

This well-produced set is quite pricey, which perhaps limits the market to those for whom this is all the Lead Belly they will ever want, who should be well satisfied, and those who want all the Lead Belly they can get.

Howard Rye reviewed 'Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection' (SFW40201) Five CDs, featuring 5 hours of music with 16 unreleased tracks.



Lead Belly (with Woody Guthrie) with female admirers. From the John Reynolds Collection.