

# This Day in History... January 23, 1888

## Birth of Lead Belly

Huddie William “Lead Belly” Ledbetter is believed to have born on January 23, 1888, in Mooringsport, Louisiana. Called the “king of the 12-string guitar players,” he was a popular folk and blues performer known for such songs as “Goodnight, Irene,” “Midnight Special,” and “In the Pines.”

Some sources cite Ledbetter’s birthdate as January 20, 1889, but January 23 is what he put on his 1943 draft card, and is generally accepted as his birthdate. His family moved to Texas in 1893, and it was here that he received his first instrument, an accordion from his uncle. In his teens, a guitar given to him by his father was a constant companion. In his early 20s, Ledbetter left this home to find work as a guitarist and sometimes laborer.



*From the Folk Musicians issue*



*Ledbetter was friends with Richard Wright, who portrayed him as a hero in his columns of the Daily Worker.*

By 1903, Ledbetter had earned some recognition as a musician. He traveled the country picking out songs on the instrument, playing street corners to make money. He also made a living in cotton fields and construction. Ledbetter went to prison and jail a few times between 1915 and 1939 for various criminal charges. It’s believed he got his nickname, “Lead Belly,” (also sometimes Leadbelly) while in prison, as a play on his last name and his toughness. Another story claims the name came after he was shot in the stomach, and yet another says it was because of his ability to drink moonshine.

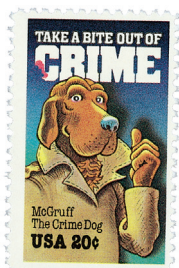
In 1932, he was “discovered” while serving a jail term in Louisiana, when folk song expert Dr. John Lomax asked him to record prison songs. Good behavior got him released in 1934, and he showed up in New York City with a beat-up green guitar, held together by a piece of string. Ledbetter’s story was picked up by the press, who said he had sung his way out of prison, and called him the “singing convict.”

Ledbetter made his first professional recordings in 1935. The album featured only blues songs and none of the folk songs that would later bring him fame, and sold poorly. Ledbetter eventually split from Lomax and briefly returned to Louisiana. Back in New York in 1936, he played at the Apollo Theater and was featured in a 1937 article in *Life* magazine. He gained some popularity playing folk music and developed his own singing style.

Ledbetter was back in prison in 1939, but Lomax’s son raised money for his legal defense. After he was released, Ledbetter performed on the influential radio show *Back Where I Come From*, which was broadcast around the country. Ledbetter also became a star in New York City’s expanding folk scene. Soon, he was the first American country blues musician to find success in Europe. In 1940, Ledbetter recorded the album *The Midnight Special and Other Southern Prison Songs*, which has been called “a landmark in African American folk music.”



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*Ledbetter was discovered while serving out a prison term in 1932.*

Ledbetter got his own radio show in 1949, *Folk Songs of America*. He also went on his first European tour later that year. However, he was unable to complete the tour when he fell ill and was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig’s disease. Ledbetter’s final concert was at the University of Texas at Austin and he dedicated it to John Lomax, who had died the year before. Ledbetter died on December 6, 1949. A biopic about his life was released in 1976 and he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame. Several musicians have cited him as an influence and his 125th birthday in 2015 was celebrated with several events at The Kennedy Center and the Library of Congress.

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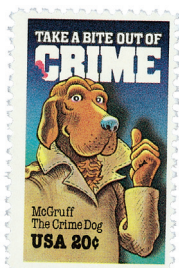
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