Romancing the

FOLK

Public Memory & American Roots Music

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speaking common man—the "voice of the Middle West," said British novelist Rebecca West—who "has learned his country by heart." He traveled the country on his lecture tours, spouting homespun yarns, poems, Lincoln anecdotes, and, of course, songs. The Lincoln biography, published in 1926, propelled him to new levels of popularity for a literary figure. In its first year, the 962-page two-volume work sold forty-eight thousand copies at ten dollars each and made Sandburg a national celebrity. Instead of recoiling from this rush of fame, Sandburg employed new image-building media to capitalize on it. In 1926 he gave a half-hour radio speech in Chicago for Lincoln's birthday. That same year he both took advantage of the Lincoln book's success and promoted the forthcoming *American Songbag*, by making a recording of Lincoln songs for RCA Victor.[126] Sandburg the folk song collector helped Sandburg the folk song popularizer by being folk singer and folk hero as well. When *American Songbag* came out in 1927, it did not have a quaint log cabin on its cover but a picture of Sandburg.

Although he had a sure instinct for modern publicity and promotion, Sandburg remained decidedly old-fashioned in his song-collecting methods. Unlike Gordon, he failed to see that the future of collecting pointed toward new technologies. In his methods Sandburg was still fundamentally part of the old songbook tradition. In gathering songs, he either drew on published sources, solicited donations from friends, or scribbled down notes and lyrics as he heard a folk singer sing them. Then he published his collection in a book aimed at amateur pianists. Sandburg's 1926 recording of Lincoln songs indicates that he understood that phonograph records could enable a popularizer to reach a mainstream audience, but he does not seem to have foreseen the power recordings could have when used in fieldwork. For him, collecting remained a writing-based task. He did not realize that if field collectors pursued recordings, not song transcriptions, new possibilities opened up for popularizing folk traditions. With the unprecedented sense of immediacy that field recordings provided, audiences could embrace not just specific folk songs but the folk themselves.

By the late 1920s, Ralph Peer and the commercial race and hillbilly series, Robert Gordon and the Archive of American Folk-Song, and Carl Sandburg and his best-selling *American Songbag* had all made some inroads into America's popular culture. As the thirties began, though, not one of them had managed at the same time to articulate a canon of American folk music, use modern technology to document systematically and preserve this body of song, and employ the techniques of modern mass communication to popularize his vision of America's musical roots.

2

CREATING THE CULT OF AUTHENTICITY
THE LOMAXES AND LEAD BELLY

The winter of 1932 was bleak for John Lomax. In the past year his wife had died, and, with personal distress compounded by the strain of the depression, he had been forced to leave his bank job, telling his boss that he could no longer fulfill his duties adequately.[1] Needing a fresh start, he resolved to return to the vocation he truly loved, collecting American folk music. He decided to do a lecture tour to reintroduce himself into folk song circles and to promote his *Cowboy Songs* book, which, although more than twenty years old now, had been reprinted in 1929. By the spring, after a desperate letter-writing campaign to hundreds of colleges, high schools, and clubs around the country, he had enough engagements to justify a car tour. He enlisted his son John Jr., then twenty-four, to accompany him and aid in driving, selling books, and setting up camp.[2] In March 1932 they left from Dallas. Following the lecture schedule Lomax had arranged, and accepting whatever new engagements presented themselves along the way, they made their way by June to New England, where they picked up Lomax's youngest son, seventeen-year-old Alan. The three Lomaxes then embarked on a cross-country tour

that would last the rest of the summer and would lay the groundwork for an American folk music revival.

The Lomaxes' experiences on this trip are preserved in a logbook that first John Jr. and then Alan kept throughout the journey. Its frontispiece shows the handwritten title, "30,000 miles by Cowboy song." On the adjacent page, John Jr., who seems to have brought his thesaurus along for the ride, wrote, "Herein are set down the experiences of the Lomaxes who peregrinated in 1932."

Peregrination can be hard. Book sales were sluggish on the trip—three sold here; four there; only occasionally as many as six. Inevitably, there were also strains between father and sons as the three spent months together in close quarters. After a day of driving and many flat tires, Alan wrote, "The tension between us grew almost too great to endure." These stresses were compounded by a current of political tension that pitted the elder Lomax, an Old South conservative, against his youngest son. The journal is dotted with references to heated debates in the car about "Alan's Communist friends" and his supposed "communistic activities."[3]

For all these difficulties, the Lomaxes seem never to have doubted their devotion to the music they were promoting. Indeed, for young Alan the trip was an eye-opening experience that introduced him to folk music's emotional power. A performance at the Taos Pueblo particularly moved him. In the logbook he wrote: "First we heard the tom-tom, distantly thumping, beaten by hands out of darkness. Then a strong man's voice in a wolf-shout began a tune; others took it up in harmony. They sang in perfect unison. Down the creek another group began a different tune that blended with and accentuated the first. [Through] both ran the rhythm thread of the tom-toms. The music was old and stirred one to fight, to make love violently." The Lomaxes did not have a recording machine with them on this trip, but even in his state of excitement, young Alan's thoughts turned to preserving this music for posterity. He wrote, "The rough, powerful voice of the men chanting in harmony from the gloom of the thickets on the creek howls excited men all over the pueblo. They shouted and joined in the chant.—Someday Alan will come with his recording outfit and can that music."

By August the three reached Los Angeles, where they took a few days off to watch the 1932 Olympics. Pasted into the logbook are black-and-white photos, taken from the stands, of a tiny figure crossing the finish line. The handwritten caption notes Babe Didrikson winning the fifty-yard low hurdles in world record time. The underlying strains within the family surfaced briefly in the two-hundred-meter dash. Alan wrote,

"Tolan and Metcalfe, black, loaf . . . and still break World's and Olympic records that have stood for 28 years. Father was half-chagrined, half pleased. Alan triumphant. The two negros settled the race problem for that afternoon." As the Lomaxes turned back toward Texas, though, these tensions for the most part did not intrude. They arrived home at least as committed to folk song as when they had left. But they were not significantly more well known or better established professionally. In the logbook's last entry Alan wrote, "Father and Alan know nothing of the future, even ten days ahead. They are homeless, jobless, and have no expectations. Let the curtain fall upon this woeful last scene. So ends this log."[4]

This doleful ending, though, turned out to be only the beginning for what would become the most spectacularly successful and innovative folk song–collecting team of the twentieth century. Unbeknownst to the Lomaxes themselves, the summer expedition of 1932 amounted to a test run. Over the next decade, John Sr. and Alan would travel tens of thousands of miles and make thousands of recordings.[5] They did so not with the detachment of academics but with the zeal of proselytizers. Eager to promote their vision of America's musical past, they recognized early on the power of enlisting living vernacular musicians—"actual folk"—to aid their cause. In a pioneering move, the Lomaxes began to promote not just the songs they gathered but the singers who sang them. In doing so they produced a web of criteria for determining what a "true" folk singer looked and sounded like and a set of assumptions about the importance of *being* a "true" folk singer. In short, they created a "cult of authenticity," a thicket of expectations and valuations that American roots musicians and their audiences have been negotiating ever since.

When Alan Lomax gave his woeful assessment of his and his father's prospects in 1932, he left out one potential bright spot. In June, John Lomax had persuaded the Macmillan publishing company to contract for a book of folk songs.[6] In 1933 Lomax used this contract to draw support for a collecting expedition. The American Council of Learned Societies and the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk-Song contributed funds that enabled Lomax to order one of the first portable electronic recording machines for the trip. The archive, now leaderless, having dismissed Robert Gordon, agreed to be the official repository for the materials Lomax gathered.[7] Having again enlisted Alan as his assistant, in June 1933 Lomax loaded his Ford with "two army cots and bedding, a cooking outfit, provisions, [and] an infinite number of 'etceteras.'" After a delay, the Lomaxes added to this miscellany the 350-

Recording equipment in the back of John Lomax's car, probably late 1930s. (Library of Congress)

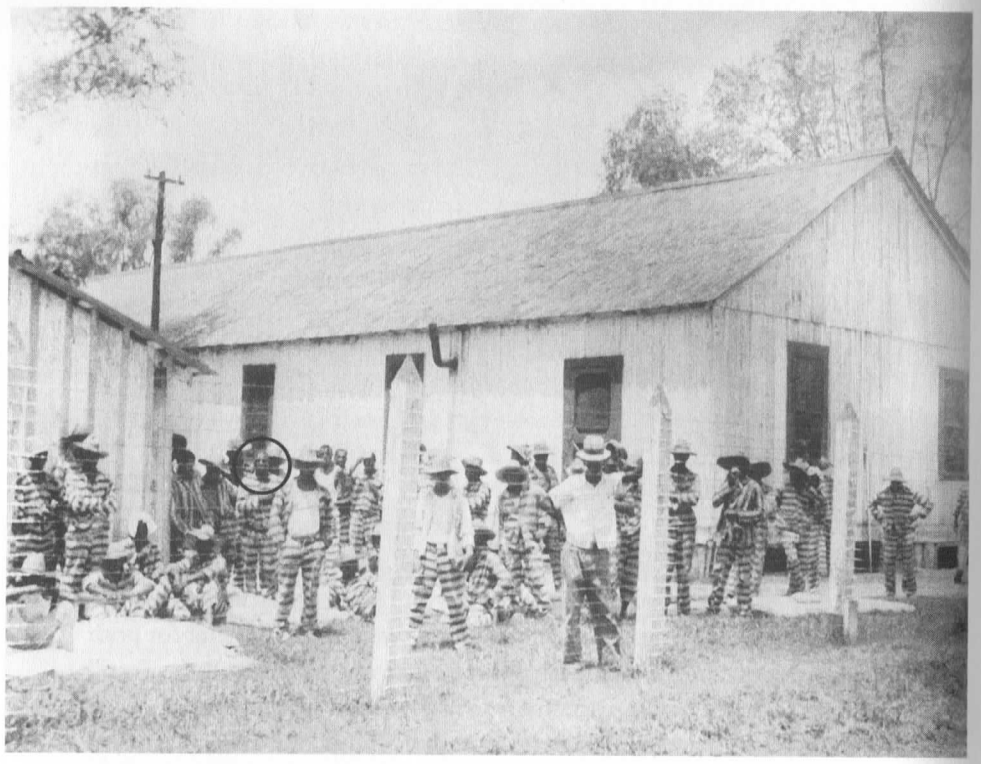
pound "portable" Dictaphone recorder, which they built into the back seat. It came with two seventy-five-pound batteries, a microphone, cables, and piles of blank aluminum and celluloid disks.[8] Carrying this load, the Ford lumbered off, and the Lomaxes began their hunt for America's folk songs.

The Lomaxes had a complicated agenda for this expedition. Their collecting methods and attitude make the trip, from today's perspective, seem part talent search, part sociological survey, and part safari. Primarily they sought traditional folk music in the "eddies of human society," self-contained homogeneous communities cut off from the corrupting influences of popular culture.[9] Mainstream communities, the Lomaxes feared, had lost touch with their folk roots. As historian Joe Klein writes, "Instead of listening to Grandma sing 'Barbara Allen' on the back porch, the kids—and often Grandma too—were listening to Bing Crosby on the radio." The Lomaxes hoped to find the old styles "dammed up" in America's more isolated areas. They collected from remote cotton plantations, cowboy ranches, lumber camps, and, with particular success, southern segregated prisons. John Lomax believed that prisons had inadvertently done folklorists a service by isolating groups of informants from modern society. On their 1933 trip, the Lomaxes recorded in the penitentiaries of five states, as they sought to document "the Negro who had the least contact with jazz, the radio, and with the white man. . . . The convicts heard only the idiom of their own race."[10]

Recording in a prison was not a simple proposition. Usually Lomax would write the warden in advance, soliciting likely prospects.[11] Upon arrival, though, the Lomaxes would audition as many singers as they could. Lomax painted a vivid picture of this process in a letter to his future second wife, Ruby Terrill. He wrote that he was listening to the prisoner nicknamed "Lifetime" sing while "over in a corner . . . Alan is trying out a heavy-jawed negro, appropriately named Bull-dog (we test out voices and songs before recording the songs). The interested and curious men in stripes crowd around, while the guards look on condescendingly, sometimes with amused tolerance."[12]

After selecting the best singers, the Lomaxes would set up their recording equipment and, usually with Alan manning the controls, have the prisoners sing for the machine. The recording session might take place under a shady tree or in a barn with bales of hay improving the acoustics.[13] Sometimes, though, conditions were more difficult for both the Lomaxes and the prisoners. John Lomax recounted to Ruby Terrill their experience at the Parchman Convict Farm in Mississippi: "The men convicts work from 4 a.m. until dark. Thus our chance at them comes only during the noon hour or at night before the lights are turned out at 9 o'clock. These periods are strenuous for us, for each group is timid, suspicious, sometimes stubborn and of no help whatsoever." At the end of their day the Lomaxes often would return to their car, either to drive by night to a new recording site or to camp by the roadside.[14]

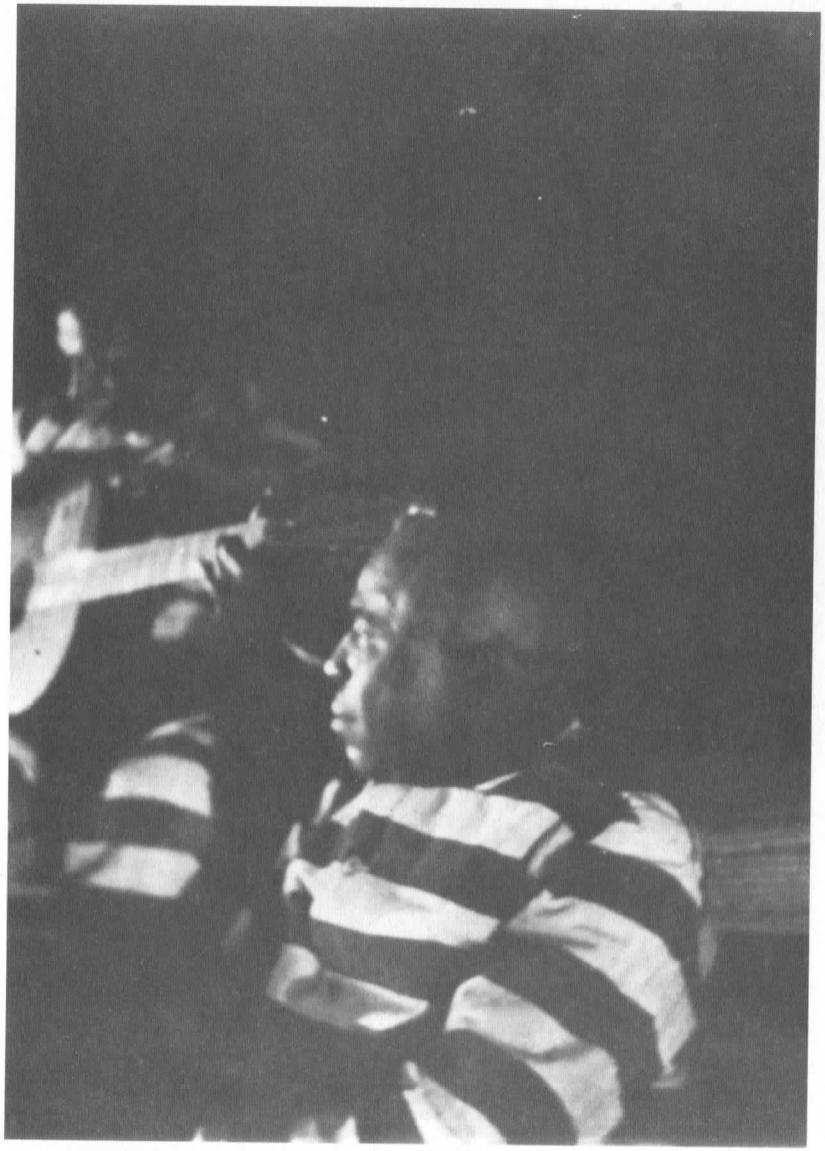
Early on in the 1933 trip the Lomaxes were convinced of the value of their efforts. One of the first people they recorded was an African American singer and guitarist named Huddie Ledbetter, or "Lead Belly."[15] The Lomaxes "discovered" Lead Belly, roughly forty-four years old at the time, in Louisiana's Angola prison, where he was serving out a sentence for murder. Lead Belly astonished the Lomaxes with the variety of songs he knew and the verve and virtuosity with which he played them. He seemed to be a living link to traditions that were slipping away, a storehouse of old-time songs greater than they had thought possible to find in the twentieth century. John Lomax would later write, "From Lead Belly we secured about one hundred songs that seemed 'folky,' a far greater number than from any other person." Although Lead Belly did know some popular songs, the Lomaxes felt that "his eleven years of confinement had cut him off both from the phonograph and from the radio."[16] The Lomaxes had stumbled upon the folk song find of their dreams.



Prison Compound No. 1, Angola, La., 1934. Lead Belly appears in the middle foreground to the left. (Library of Congress)

Lead Belly inspired such excitement in the Lomaxes because he confirmed their most basic assumptions about American folk song, assumptions that may now seem commonplace but that in the early thirties represented decisive blows against the still powerful Child canon. The variety of songs that Lead Belly knew, for instance, nicely illustrated for the Lomaxes that America did have a folk song heritage independent of Britain. Even more so than Carl Sandburg and Robert Gordon, the Lomaxes were determined to praise America's indigenous music, refusing to apologize for its supposed inadequacy.[17] In *Our Singing Country* (1941), they wrote that America's artists "have created and preserved for America a heritage of folksongs and folk music equal to any in the world."[18]

As an exemplar of the African American song tradition, Lead Belly vividly illustrated that one need not be an English peasant to sing folk songs. On the 1933 trip, John Lomax was quite aware that in recording African American music he and Alan were displacing the Anglo-dominated folk music canon. He wrote Ruby Terrill about a "handsome



Lead Belly in prison (Angola, La.), July 1934. (Library of Congress)

mulatto woman" who sang a spiritual for them in Texas: "Soon Alan had recorded the music and, possibly, a new musical theme had been added to our small American stock; for, to me and to Alan, there was depth and grace and beauty; quick power and dignity; and a note of weird almost uncanny suggestion of turgid, slow-moving rivers in African jungles."[19] Setting aside for the moment Lomax's sensationalized style, for him to

John A. Lomax, portrait by J. Anthony Wills, ca. 1964. (John Avery Lomax Family Papers, CN 10042, The Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin)

locate black songs in the center of America's folk song canon marked a significant step in the early thirties. In the book that resulted from their 1933 trip, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934), the Lomaxes stated matter-of-factly that blacks created "the most distinctive of folk songs—the most interesting, the most appealing, and the greatest in quantity."[20]

Beyond illustrating the richness of America's musical traditions, Lead Belly's immense repertoire lent credence to the Lomaxes' assertions that these traditions remained very much alive in contemporary America. Challenging Child and Sharp, they dismissed notions that an authentic folk song must be hundreds of years old and that only fragments of true folk culture survived in contemporary society. The Lomaxes depicted a much more robust folk tradition. They argued that traditional American music remained vibrant, creative, and essential to American life. Alan Lomax urged Americans to fight "the tendency . . . to begin to regard [folk] culture as static—to leave out of consideration its living quality (present and past)." In a lecture to the Progressive Education Association in 1940, he told the audience of his desire "to convince you and to convince you so that you could never be unconvinced that there is, was, and will be something here that is in American folk music to be looked into; and . . . that there is enough to go around for a long, long, time."[21] Lead Belly allowed the Lomaxes to make such statements with confidence and to illustrate them dynamically. Because he sang indigenous American songs, was rooted in the precommercial past, and yet was vibrantly connected to the present, he personified the Lomaxes' challenge to the Child canon.

The Lomaxes succeeded as canon makers, though, not just because they embraced performers with the repertoire and style of Lead Belly. At least as important as how they defined the new American folk canon were the ways in which they preserved and popularized its exemplars. First of all, the Lomaxes rejected Child's manuscript-based collecting and instead relied almost completely on fieldwork. A living oral tradition, they believed, could not be captured in a Harvard library. One must go out among the folk to find folk songs.

In an extension of this desire to collect directly from folk sources, the Lomaxes turned to the recording machine. Folklorists such as Robert Gordon and John Lomax himself had used recorders before, but in the 1930s the Lomaxes employed superior technology, recorded far more widely, and embraced the recording medium with more passion than previous collectors. No written document, the Lomaxes felt, could capture the full flavor and intricacy of a folk performance, and the process of transcription relied too much on human skill and judgment to be accurate. Even dedicated transcribers like Sharp, they concluded, could not do justice to the subtlety and emotion that a Lead Belly brought to his songs. On their trips, the Lomaxes relied exclusively on the recording machine to take down songs, always experimenting with new techniques and technologies in the hope of achieving a less distorted sound. The recorder, they believed, removed the collector as a source of bias and

captured all of a song's nuances. Instead of a scholar's representation of a song, the machine preserved a folk singer's entire performance, unadulterated. As Alan Lomax recalled, using the recorder on the 1933 trip "meant that for the first time there was a way to stick a pipeline right down into the heart of the folks where they were and let them come on like they felt."[22]

Aside from producing more lifelike renditions of songs, then, the recording machine enabled the Lomaxes to downplay their role in the collecting process. John Lomax accentuated this point, stressing that he was "innocent of musical knowledge, entirely without musical training." He saw his ignorance as a distinct advantage, recalling that the head of the Library of Congress's music division had urged him, "Don't take any musicians along with you: what the Library wants is the machine's record of Negro singing, and not some musician's interpretation of it." At the end of his first summer of recording, Lomax concluded that he had successfully maintained his studied detachment from the recording process. He saw the 150 tunes he had come home with as "sound photographs of Negro songs, rendered in their own element, unrestrained, uninfluenced and undirected by anyone who had his own notions of how the songs should be rendered."[23]

In idealizing the recording machine, the Lomaxes tapped into what historian William Stott has called the "documentary motive" of the thirties. As George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer explain, "There was a hunger for reliable information, a widespread suspicion that newspapers were manipulating the news, . . . and a simple unavailability of public facts."[24] In this context, the recorder appealed as an incontrovertible source of truth. How could a recording machine lie?

In addition to making more effective use of the recording machine, the Lomaxes began to realize the potential of the Archive of American Folk-Song. Like Gordon, the Lomaxes had secured the archive as a repository for the recordings they collected. But the Lomaxes had a much stronger sense than their predecessor of the power and possibilities that the archive offered collectors. Gordon had used his position at the archive primarily as a base from which to pursue his own private collecting work. The Lomaxes, though, realized that government backing for their enterprise could give it added credibility. They used the archive not simply as a storage place for their recordings but as a credentializing institution, a way to link their personal musical tastes to a sense of national mission. Having the Library of Congress behind them made it easier for the Lomaxes to attract folk musicians to record and to secure a hearing for the music after they recorded it. When requesting permission to collect in prisons, for example, John Lomax always emphasized his position as honorary curator at the archive. His association with the nation's library gave him access that might otherwise have been denied.

The Lomaxes' Washington links impressed not only prison officials but folk informants as well. In a time in which the federal government under President Roosevelt played such a visible role in Americans' lives, any connection to the capital had considerable power. Alan Lomax later recounted the story of an African American singer in 1933 who refused to sing in advance the song he wanted the Lomaxes to record. Normally the Lomaxes tried to conserve blank cylinders by auditioning singers first, but this man said, "No sir, you are going to have to have this right from the beginning." The Lomaxes eventually agreed, and the man sang,

> Work all week
> Don't make enough
> To pay my board
> And buy my snuff.

After a few more stanzas, the man said, "Now, Mr. President, you just don't know how bad they're treating us folks down here. I'm singing to you and I'm talking to you so I hope you will come down here and do something for us poor folks here in Texas."[25] Harnessing the power and appeal of the recording machine and of the federal government, the Lomaxes succeeded in collecting thousands of folk songs in the thirties.

Beyond the Lomaxes' considerable skill at collecting vernacular music, what truly separated them from their predecessors was their ingenuity at popularizing it. In the twenties, Ralph Peer and Carl Sandburg had been attentive to the possibilities of using publicity to generate interest in old-time music. But Peer, for all his influence, had not articulated a unified vision of American music—he had not tried to shape the way America remembered its musical past. And Sandburg, for all the hype he generated, had not recognized the fascination that folk figures could generate in a modern industrialized culture—he had chosen himself to be the star figure who would personify folk traditions. The Lomaxes were the first to use "actual folk" to promote a coherent vision of America's folk music heritage. To promote their canon they relied not on a popular interpreter of folk songs but on exemplars from the folk culture itself. They enlisted the full array of mass media—newspapers, radio, movie newsreels, concerts, and records—to transform rural folk musicians into celebrities. In effect they spread their vision of American music by integrating folk into mass culture.

The Lomaxes' efforts to popularize representatives from folk culture

added an element that became central to the folk music revival of the thirties and to every burst of interest in roots music since then—an impression of authenticity. In some ways, of course, this appeal was nothing new. The supposed purity and simplicity of the music had been what attracted the earliest collectors of roots music and what interpreters like Sandburg had capitalized on. But by dispensing with the second-hand interpreters and foregrounding the rural musicians who created the folk music, the Lomaxes added a new source of authenticity—the performers themselves. Purity now was attributed not just to specific folk songs (e.g., Child ballads) but to the folk figures who sang them. Audiences and critics began to assess roots musicians with new standards.

The Lomaxes' handling of Lead Belly helped spur this fascination with a folk performer's authenticity. Lead Belly was released from prison in 1934. A popular story, spread widely by the Lomaxes in the thirties and forties, says that Lead Belly was freed because the Lomaxes delivered his stirring musical appeal to Louisiana's governor, who was moved to commute his sentence. The Lomaxes did make a second visit to Lead Belly in prison in June 1934, and they did record his "Governor O.K. Allen" song, but prison documents show that Lead Belly actually won his release for good behavior.[26] Upon his release, Lead Belly was eager to pursue a postprison musical career, and the Lomaxes, having found a living example of the noncommercial tradition they prized, could not stand to allow their discovery to remain in the Louisiana backcountry. Early in 1935, therefore, the Lomaxes took Lead Belly to New York City.[27] There they recorded scores of his songs for the Archive of American Folk-Song, booked appearances for him at concerts, took him on a lecture-recital tour of eastern colleges (in which John Lomax explicated the songs Lead Belly sang), and arranged commercial recording sessions for him.

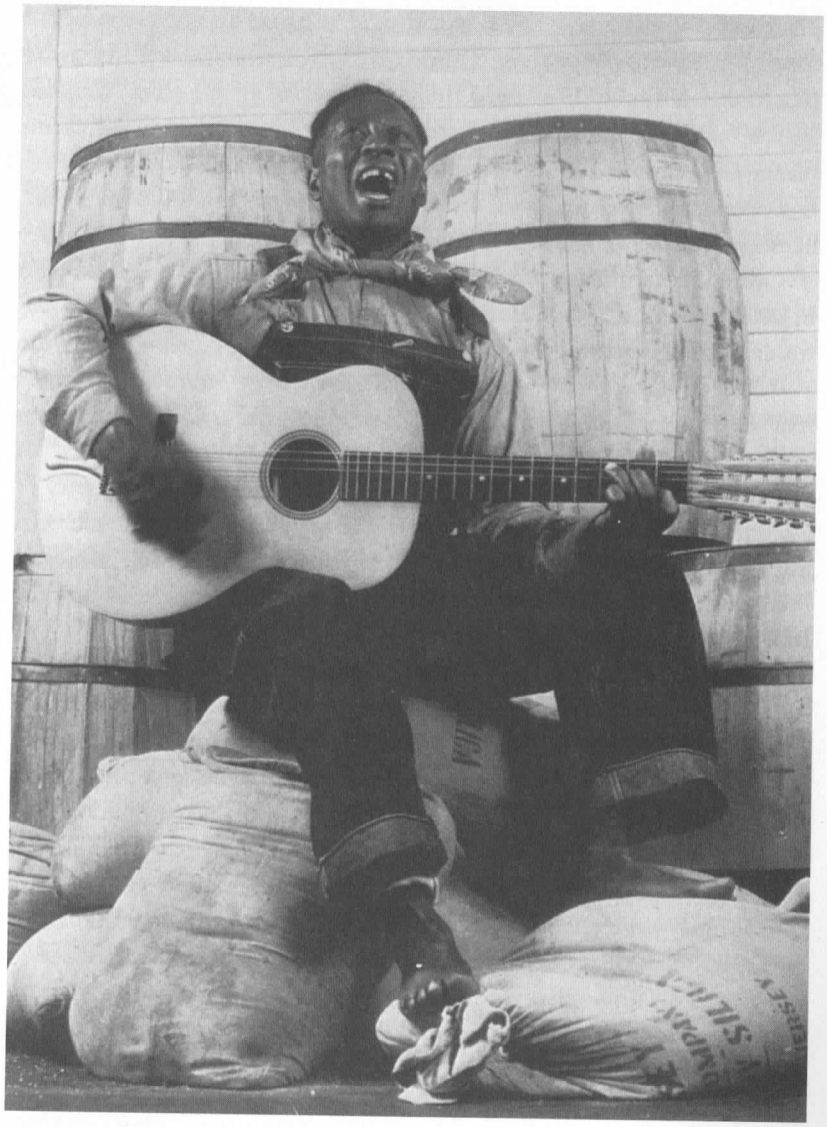
Most striking, upon arriving in New York the Lomaxes launched a publicity blitz, promoting Lead Belly as the folk song find of the century. This media campaign essentially relied on two strategies to establish Lead Belly's authenticity—strategies seemingly at odds. On the one hand, the Lomaxes depicted Lead Belly as the living embodiment of America's folk song tradition, a time capsule that had preserved the pure voice of the people. Often this strategy involved counterposing Lead Belly's "pure" music to its inferior modern descendants. At Lead Belly's New York debut (at a hotel luncheon for University of Texas alumni) John Lomax explained: "Northern people hear Negroes playing and singing beautiful spirituals which are too refined and unlike the true southern spirituals. Or else they hear men and women on the stage and radio, burlesquing their own songs. Lead Belly doesn't burlesque. He

plays and sings with absolute sincerity. . . . I've heard his songs a hundred times, but I always get a thrill. To me his music is real music." The press picked up on this strain of Lead Belly's appeal. An article chronicling his March 1935 appearance at Harvard observed: "There is but slight resemblance between his singing and that of the stage and radio singers. There is a deep primitive quality to Lead Belly's songs." The *New York Post*, likewise, praised his music's "perfect simplicity."[28]

Often this emphasis on Lead Belly's musical purity extended into broader statements about his cultural authenticity. The *World Telegram*, for example, proclaimed that Lead Belly was "living history," while the *Post* dubbed him "a new American original." A 1935 *March of Time* newsreel used symbolism to make the same point. At the end of the dramatization, in which Lomax and Lead Belly reenact Lomax's "discovery" of the singer, a heavy voice-over announces that "Hailed by the Library of Congress . . . Lead Belly's songs go into the archives of the great national institution." The camera shows the Archive of American Folk-Song and then, as the music fades out, moves to a close-up of the Declaration of Independence.[29]

At the same time, though, that the Lomaxes ennobled Lead Belly as an authentic folk forefather, they thoroughly exoticized him. Their publicity campaign depicted him as a savage, untamed animal and focused endlessly on his convict past. Long after Lead Belly had been freed, Lomax had him perform in his old convict clothes, "for exhibition purposes, . . . though he always hated to wear them."[30] At the Modern Language Association Lomax arranged for Lead Belly to sing his "raw folk songs" while "seated on the top center of the banquet table," a performance, Lomax noted, that "shocked his hearers into attention."[31] The posed photograph on the frontispiece of the Lomaxes' 1936 biography, *Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly*, shows Lead Belly in overalls rolled up to reveal bare feet, with a handkerchief tied around his neck. Sitting on canvas sacks, he is playing guitar, with his head tilted back, eyes wide, and mouth open to show a tooth missing.

In describing Lead Belly, John Lomax consistently stressed his rapacity. Shortly before taking Lead Belly to the North, Lomax wrote a letter previewing his coming attraction for the papers: "Leadbelly is a nigger to the core of his being. In addition he is a killer. He tells the truth only accidentally. . . . He is as sensual as a goat, and when he sings to me my spine tingles and sometimes tears come. Penitentiary wardens all tell me that I set no value on my life in using him as a traveling companion. I am thinking of bringing him to New York in January."[32] Similarly, in *Negro Folk Songs* the Lomaxes stress that Lead Belly "had served time in a Texas



Lead Belly, shown in the frontispiece to Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly, *1936. Exoticizing the singer only added to his authenticity. (Photograph by Otto Hesse)*

penitentiary for murder; . . . he had thrice been a fugitive from justice; . . . he was the type known as 'killer' and had a career of violence the record of which is a black epic of horrifics." When Lomax first arrived in New York, he introduced Lead Belly to reporters by explaining that he "was a 'natural,' who had no idea of money, law, or ethics and who was possessed of virtually no restraint."[33]

Lead Belly, 1942. Contemporaries recall Lead Belly as an immaculate dresser. (Library of Congress, Charles Todd Collection)

Others who worked with Lead Belly in the thirties and forties dispute this portrait of him. Most people who met him commented on his gentleness. Pete Seeger remembers him as soft voiced, meticulously dressed, and "wonderful with children." Seeger found it "hard to believe the stories we read of his violent youth."[34] Producer Moses Asch recalls that

his first impression was Lead Belly's "overall aristocratic appearance and demeanor."[35] Lead Belly had enough of an "idea of money," moreover, to demand that John Lomax give him control over the revenues from his concerts. For the first eight months or so that he was with the Lomaxes, they used him as their chauffeur and house servant. He drove the car on their collecting expeditions and to and from concert engagements, and he did chores around the Lomax home in Wilton, Connecticut. The Lomaxes kept two-thirds of Lead Belly's concert earnings and deducted room and board from the remainder. Lead Belly angrily challenged this arrangement (brandishing a knife) in March 1935, and a shaken John Lomax put him on a bus back to Shreveport, Louisiana. Lead Belly promptly hired a lawyer to press for compensation. Lomax eventually paid a lump sum to settle the matter.[36]

Regardless of the inaccuracies in their portrayal, the Lomaxes' emphasis on Lead Belly's "Otherness" seems to have been strikingly effective. The *New York Herald-Tribune* responded to the Lomaxes' publicity campaign with the headline "Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes between Homicides," prompting John Lomax to reflect that "his criminal record was securing a hearing for a Negro musician" and that "the terms 'bad nigger' only added to his attraction." The next year the *Tribune* followed up with "Ebon, Shufflin' Anthology of Swampland Folksong Inhales Gin, Exhales Rhyme." Routinely the press in the thirties described Lead Belly with epithets like "two-time Dixie murderer," "[Lomax's] murderous protégé," or "two-time killer, who twice sang his way out of jail." In a typical story, the *Brooklyn Eagle* announced Lead Belly's wedding (a major media event organized by the Lomaxes) by reporting, "Lead Belly, the Louisiana swamplands Negro equally proficient with knife or guitar, is happy today in the knowledge that Martha Promise . . . , who sheltered him between prison sentences, is with him again." Such excesses were by no means confined to tabloid presses. In his 1936 ode to Lead Belly, published in the *New Yorker*, the poet William Rose Benét (Stephen Vincent's older brother) marveled,

> He was big and he was black
> And wondrous were his wrongs
> But he had a memory travelled back
> Through at least five hundred songs.

In reviewing *Negro Folk Songs*, the Texan folklorist J. Frank Dobie offered a particularly striking description of a Lead Belly performance:

> His way before an audience [was] to sit quiet and relaxed, this man of terrible energy, turning over in his mind God alone knows what thoughts; then at the signal, to let loose his hands and his voice. He crouched over his guitar as he played, . . . and he sang with an intensity and passion that swayed audiences who could not understand a single word of his songs. His eyes were tight-shut so that between his eyebrows there appeared deep furrows of concentration curving back like devil's horns.[37]

In his public persona, then, Lead Belly seems to have been cast as both archetypal ancestor and demon—and to have been convincing as the real thing in each role. These conflicting personas illustrate a dynamic that has characterized the cult of authenticity ever since. Revival audiences yearn to identify with folk figures, but that identification is premised on difference. Roots musicians are expected to be premodern, unrestrainedly emotive, and noncommercial. Singers who too closely resemble the revival's middle-class audiences are rejected by those audiences as "inauthentic." Generally, then, the most popular folk figures—those with whom revival audiences most identify—are those who have passed a series of tests of their "Otherness."

The Lomaxes' handling of Lead Belly resonated with a current of primitivism that ran through early-twentieth-century modernism. Avant-garde writers, artists, and intellectuals used "the primitive" as a source of imagery, metaphors, and behavior patterns that fulfilled personal longings and enabled cultural critiques. Picasso and the cubists incorporated the stark geometries of African sculptures in their work. Art collectors and intellectuals (including Freud) sought out these sculptures for their galleries and studies. In *Heart of Darkness* (1913), Joseph Conrad used a ride down the Congo to signify his exploration of the darkest depths of the human soul. Both the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis put "primitive" tribes on display. Beginning in 1912, Edgar Rice Burroughs masterfully moved the fascination with the primitive into popular culture with his wildly successful series of Tarzan novels.[38] Often these appropriations of the primitive were based on extremely limited knowledge of non-Western societies. The modernists' representations of the primitive said as much about their own artistic visions and personal fantasies as about the people whose culture they purported to depict. "The primitive" became a symbol that could encompass violence, sex, irrationality, and, at the same time, noble innocence and childlike naïveté.

While modernist artists tended to discover the primitive without leaving their studios, turn-of-the-century anthropologists took the search more literally. In the late 1800s, extended fieldwork became more expected within the profession, and extended sojourns with isolated peo-

ples became rites of passage for young anthropologists.[39] After the turn of the century, such missions increasingly set out to undermine the racist assumptions that had so often underlain depictions of non-Western societies. Columbia University professor Franz Boas, in particular, pioneered a relativistic approach to culture. Dominating the anthropological discipline for much of the first half of the century, Boas and his students attacked dichotomies between "savage" and "civilized" as simplistic divisions based on artificial Western values. They favored looking at each society on its own terms, charting cultural roles and rituals without passing judgment on whether they were "primitive" or "advanced." The relativists' goal, historian George Stocking summarizes, was to "account for human variability in all its aspects."[40]

The Boasians, though, were hardly dispassionate data gatherers. Their interest in documenting variability was very much counterposed to what threatened that variability—the spread of Western, industrialized culture across the globe. Margaret Mead recalled that as an undergraduate in 1922 she chose anthropology (rather than psychology or sociology) because fellow Boas student Ruth Benedict convinced her that "anthropology had to be done *now*. Other things could wait."[41] Boas and his followers saw their work as a cultural salvage mission.

The Lomaxes, then, in pursuing culture in the "eddies of human society" (and in expressing both fascination and fear at what they found there), were engaging in an exploration of "Otherness" that had deep roots. Emerging from these antecedents, the search for the "primitive" took on an especially rich and idiosyncratic inflection during the Great Depression. Many Americans in the period mistrusted business and political leaders and blamed them for the hard times. Henrietta Yurchenco, a public radio producer in the thirties, remembers feeling that "in the cataclysmic climate of the Depression, who was foolish enough to trust government spokesmen, the rich and powerful who had a stake in the status quo?"[42] In this environment, the Lomaxes' depictions of Lead Belly as both everyman and outlaw tapped into what one might call the "outsider populism" of the period—a tendency in the thirties to locate America's strength and vibrancy in the margins of society. The depression had caused many Americans to reevaluate what forces in society were good, powerful, and sustaining. The economic collapse had led to speculations about weaknesses in the national character, questions about whether the country had lost touch with the spirit that had once, many Americans felt, made it great. Many romanticized a mythical time in the past when Americans were more vigorous, more honorable, and more self-sufficient.

In this atmosphere, middle-class Americans were drawn to people who seemed to exist outside the modern industrial world, able to survive independent of its inhumane economy and not lulled by its superficial luxuries. Figures of the outcast, the folk, the impoverished, and the dispossessed fascinated Americans. The common person was glorified in a wide variety of media in the thirties—in novels such as Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, in the Chicago School's urban sociology, in plays such as Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, and in the post office murals commissioned by the Works Progress Administration. Most poignantly, perhaps, the documentary photography of the Resettlement Administration, the photojournalism of *Life* and *Look* magazines, and the "I've-Seen-America" books of Margaret Bourke-White and James Agee and Walker Evans portrayed the strength and forthrightness of downtrodden men and women who leveled their steady gaze at the camera.[43]

There is, of course, an oxymoronic quality inherent to "outsider populism": how can one build populism around those outside "the people"? The outsiders appealed, though, because they reminded Americans of themselves—or of how they wanted to see themselves: independent, proud in the face of hardship, straightforward, beholden to no special interests. Images of the folk attracted Americans because they suggested sources of purity and character outside the seemingly weakened and corrupt mainstream of society. Ironically, then, to highlight a person's marginality in relation to the mainstream helped authenticate him or her as an exemplar of American grit and character. For the Lomaxes to depict Lead Belly as an exotic animal added to his appeal. They realized that if they wanted Lead Belly to achieve mainstream popularity his very incompatibility with mainstream society was his greatest asset.

This realization led the Lomaxes to manipulate not only Lead Belly's image but also his music. As the Lomaxes knew, Lead Belly's commercial strength depended on the perception that his songs were "pure folk." But they also recognized that popular audiences would not necessarily appreciate the folk style unadulterated. So, even as the Lomaxes worked to preserve Lead Belly's "authenticity," they encouraged him to make his singing more accessible to urban audiences. Alan Lomax recalled that white audiences found Lead Belly's southern dialect impenetrable until he "learned to compromise with Northern ways and 'bring his words out plain.' "[44] The Lomaxes may also have urged Lead Belly to insert spoken comments in the middle of his songs, a technique for which he is famous. Spoken sections made a song easier for a neophyte to understand by outlining its plot, explaining obscure words and symbols, and providing transitions between verses. Folklorist John Minton cites a Library of

Congress recording of "Scottsboro Boys," in which Alan Lomax "asks Lead Belly in mid-performance to expand on the song's theme." Minton speculates that "the interpolated narrative was already a part of Lead Belly's style, but it was obviously encouraged by the Lomaxes."[45]

A close look at one Lead Belly song, "Mister Tom Hughes' Town," illustrates how Lead Belly's musical style evolved in the years after he left prison. "Tom Hughes" was a signature piece in Lead Belly's repertoire, one that he recorded six times between 1934 and 1940 and twice more at his final recording sessions in 1948.[46] He first recorded the song for the Lomaxes on July 1, 1934, while still an inmate in the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola.[47] This version is a hard-edged, sometimes bawdy tale that recounts Lead Belly's desire as a youth to flee home and enjoy the illicit pleasures of Fannin Street, the red-light district of Shreveport, Louisiana, where Tom Hughes was sheriff.[48] To an outsider, the song is stirring but can sound opaque, full of arcane slang and local references. Over the next six years, as Lead Belly moved from prison to freedom, from Louisiana to New York, and from field recordings to the commercial studio, he made a series of alterations to the song. Some changes were subtle and some dramatic. Some innovations surfaced just a few months after he left prison; others evolved gradually over years. Some reappeared in each subsequent version of the song, while others dropped away forever as soon as they were introduced. The changes to "Tom Hughes" do not, then, reflect a complete transformation in Lead Belly, but they do suggest a trend—a shift toward a less rough-edged style that, presumably, he hoped would attract wider audiences.

Even by the fall of 1934, only months after Lead Belly had left prison, "Tom Hughes" differed from the original field recording he had made for the Lomaxes. The second version of the song, which was recorded by John Lomax as he and Lead Belly traveled in Arkansas, makes changes that help clarify the seemingly fractured story line of the original recording. It adds a spoken narrative that guides the reader through the tale. While the original prison version of the song featured high-pitched moans without explanation, here Lead Belly sets them up by saying, "I broke Martha's heart, and she turned around, and she started to cry. . . . I walked away from her, and here's what she said. [Moaning begins]."[49] On subsequent versions of "Tom Hughes," Lead Belly tended to start with long spoken introductions that set out the song's premise and previewed its plot ("Here's a song I composed about Mr. Tom Hughes' town, better known as Shreveport, Louisiana.").[50] At times, he used the spoken asides to translate key terms. In his 1948 version, he sings about rambling with "Buffalo Bill" and adds parenthetically "a bad man," so as to account for his mother's distress at their friendship.[51]

In addition to making more effort to explicate the song's story, Lead Belly's postprison versions of "Tom Hughes" considerably changed the story's outcome. In the first field recording, the narrator leaves for Shreveport, ignoring the pleas of his mother to stay at home, and adopts a licentious lifestyle about which he is remorseless, even boastful. Subsequent versions, though, add lyrics in which the narrator falls on his knees and begs his mother to forgive him for his past behavior.[52] Most striking, most of Lead Belly's postprison renditions omit two suggestive verses that appear on the first field recording. In these verses Lead Belly refers to a woman who earns her living by "[workin']"[53] up her tail," and he exclaims that she has "somethin' lawd / I sure would like."

The taming of Lead Belly's narrator is also reflected in changes in his performance style. First of all, most of Lead Belly's subsequent versions of "Tom Hughes" are slower in speed than the original field recording, a change that makes the narrator sound less frenzied.[54] Lead Belly has more time to sing the words, and they come out more clearly than in his first session, in which he runs many words together. Similarly, Lead Belly's voice is more emotive on his first recording of the song. While all the versions of "Tom Hughes" feature Lead Belly humming a melody in a moaning voice, in the first version he uses a sharper attack on the moans, giving them a piercing quality that most subsequent versions lack.

These transformations appear even more dramatically in a 1940 rendition of "I'm on My Last Go-Round," a song that uses the same tune and a variation of the Tom Hughes refrain.[55] This recording session was Lead Belly's first with a major record company, and Alan Lomax arranged and supervised the session.[56] In this version Lead Belly's singing has lost all the bite that it had on the initial field recording. The song is considerably slower than on earlier versions, and Lead Belly's usually rough voice sounds almost mellifluous. Light, delicate strummings have replaced his once fierce guitar work.

One can suppose that the Lomaxes and the commercial producers of Lead Belly's records played a direct role in reshaping "Tom Hughes," but it would be a mistake to presume that Lead Belly himself resented the advice. He had a notable interest in popularizing his music and a willingness to alter his songs. The evolution of "Tom Hughes" does not necessarily chart the crass exploitation of a "pure" folk artist. More accurately, the ebb and flow of his style illustrates how contact with the Lomaxes and the world of commercial recordings affected Lead Belly's sense of

what would appeal to white audiences. In addition, the changes give us a glimpse of the musical dilemmas Lead Belly faced as he tried to find his niche in the folk revival. How much should he adapt his style, and in what direction? What appealed to audiences as an honest-to-goodness rough-edged sound and what struck them as abrasive? What was the boundary between "mysterious" and scary? Throughout his career, Lead Belly struggled to translate his persona as a musical throwback into popular success.

The strategy of smoothing out Lead Belly's music while promoting him as an outsider did win Lead Belly some audiences in the mid-thirties. His story generated significant publicity in popular newspapers and magazines, and his music was disseminated via radio, record, and even newsreel. This publicity blitz likely reached millions of Americans, but it generated by far the most intense response from the political Left, the core constituency for the folk revival of the thirties and forties.

Folk-styled music had been a part of leftist culture since well before the thirties. In the first decades of the 1900s, both the Socialist and the Communist parties encouraged efforts to create a body of proletarian music, songs that would encourage solidarity among the workers and inspire them to challenge their oppressors. In its early attempts to create a people's music, the Left relied on a decidedly different style of music than would the folk song enthusiasts of the late thirties. For the most part, leftist music organizations before the thirties either ignored or disparaged traditional American songs. Instead, early agitprop music, such as the Industrial Workers of the World songbooks from the early part of the century, relied either on European or original composed melodies.[57]

In large part the Left was uninterested in American music because, before the thirties, most of its supporters were foreign-born and the vast majority did not speak English fluently. The primary musical outlets for these members were the workers choruses that the Communist Party (CP) sponsored in the 1920s and early 1930s. Drawing on a decades-old tradition of workers' choral groups in Europe and America, the CP intended for these choruses to inspire the masses to devote themselves to the movement. Certainly they had a sizable constituency, as groups such as the American People's Chorus, the Daily Worker Chorus, and the Jewish *Freiheit* ("Freedom") Chorus proliferated on the left. But their lack of connection to American musical traditions precluded a broader influence. Since most of the singers were Eastern European immigrants, the choruses sang few of their pieces in English. The groups also assumed a degree of familiarity with high-art musical traditions that likely would have intimidated most American workers. Their songs tended

to be technically difficult and to require rehearsals under a conductor's baton to achieve an acceptable degree of precision.[58]

With the advent of the CP's doctrinaire Third Period in the late twenties and early thirties, the party began making a more conscious effort to politicize the arts. In 1931 the Workers Music League was founded to oversee the workers choruses. It organized their efforts and provided them with appropriate revolutionary compositions, still mostly European-styled.[59] The league delegated its most important compositional work to the Composers' Collective, a subset of New York's Pierre Degeyter music club, which had been named after the composer of the "Internationale." The collective was made up of classically trained composers such as Charles Seeger, Elie Siegmeister, and, occasionally, Aaron Copland. They took to heart the party's request for politically charged music and seem to have believed that they could write songs that would spark the revolution. In the *Daily Worker*, Seeger wrote, "Music is propaganda—always propaganda—and of the most powerful sort."[60]

Despite this hard-hitting attitude, the members of the collective proved to be singularly unsuccessful at reaching out to Americans. Making no effort to assess popular taste, they decided that music for a revolution should be musically revolutionary, and they composed songs designed to challenge listeners' rhythmic and harmonic expectations. Many of their compositions were inspired by the German composer Hanns Eisler, a student of Arnold Schoenberg, who hoped to use dissonance and rhythmic variation to create a politically charged alternative to symphonic music. As Seeger recalled, "Everything we composed was forward-looking, progressive as hell, but completely unconnected with life, just as we were in the Collective."[61]

In effect, then, the collective took a top-down approach to creating proletarian music, offering the masses the music that they, as composers, deemed most suitable. Although Seeger would go on to be an important folk music advocate, at this stage he and the collective scorned traditional songs as politically unaware and musically simple minded.[62] "Many folksongs," he wrote in the *Daily Worker*, "are complacent, melancholy, defeatist, intended to make slaves endure their lot—pretty but not the stuff for a militant proletariat to feed on."[63] The collective's high-art biases were clearly revealed when a few of their meetings were attended by Aunt Molly Jackson, a renowned ballad singer and strike organizer from Kentucky. She sang some of her strike songs, which were based on traditional melodies, and the collective's members in turn presented some of their own compositions. Each found the other's music impenetrable. As Jackson's bewilderment illustrates, even workers allied

with the Left rejected the music the collective wrote for them. *Daily Worker* columnist Mike Gold quoted a worker who dismissed the collective's tunes as "full of geometric bitterness and the angles and glass splinters of pure technic . . . written for an assortment of mechanical canaries."[64] The Composers' Collective's music may have been intended for the populace, but it showed scant awareness of popular tastes.

The Left began to change its approach to vernacular music in 1935, when the Communist Party announced its Popular Front policy. The party's advocacy of a united stand against fascism brought with it a new attitude toward American culture. Rather than preaching mass revolution, the Popular Front urged Americans to embrace cultural diversity and to bond together in common cause. Culture came to be seen less as a didactic tool for arousing class conflict than as a force for fostering community and revealing people's shared humanity. The party's composers and musicians, therefore, could stop trying to transform popular taste and could focus instead on understanding it. They became fascinated with music that seemed to speak in the voice of the people, and folk songs enjoyed party approval. In 1936 the American Music League, a Popular Front organization, included among its published goals "to collect, study, and popularize American folk music and its traditions." Historian Robbie Lieberman writes that "folk song, more than any other cultural form, expressed and reaffirmed the Popular Front spirit. It was simple and direct; it invited mass participation; it expressed the concerns of the common person."[65]

With the party's new attitude, folk music became an established part of left-wing functions, and folk performers enjoyed quite a vogue among the white radicals and intellectuals who sustained the CP.[66] Lead Belly, from Louisiana; Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan, and Jim Garland, from Kentucky; and (after 1940) Woody Guthrie, from Oklahoma, all became folk celebrities among the Left in a vibrant New York City–based scene. The singers were in demand for the political meetings, parties, and benefits that the Left sponsored. Henrietta Yurchenco recalls that these musicians were "the answer to left-wing prayers. Through their songs, life among poor whites of Appalachia, oppressed southern blacks, and dust storm victims came alive far better than in all the articles in the *Daily Worker* or the *New Masses*."[67] With these homespun folk associated with their movement, party regulars could feel that perhaps they could be accepted by "the people" after all and that their hopes for a mass following might one day be fulfilled.

Despite their popularity among leftists, though, the urban folk revivalists had little success at attracting broader mass-culture audiences.

Again Lead Belly serves as an example. Even with the adaptations he made to his style, he never enjoyed significant popularity in his lifetime. His records, even those on commercial labels, sold little, and he forever struggled with financial hardship. For much of the thirties, in fact, he and his wife depended on assistance from the New York Department of Welfare. In 1949 when he died of amyotropic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease, Lead Belly was well known enough to generate an obituary in the *New York Times* but not popular enough to have achieved a broad-based following or any kind of financial security.[68] Americans found Lead Belly fascinating, it seems, but they kept him at arm's length.

Lead Belly's commercial career sputtered because of the contradictory demands placed on him by the folk revival. The outsider populism impulse that made Lead Belly and the other folk singers so intriguing to thirties Americans trapped them between the conflicting demands of purity and commercialism. Fundamentally, these singers' appeal depended on their folkloristic purity. They faced significant pressure, therefore, to sing only timeless songs that had been passed down (but not altered) through generations of oral transmission. This notion, though, of a pristine and unchanging traditional music fundamentally misrepresented the reality of folk culture. As the Lomaxes well knew, the folk tradition had always depended on its adaptability.[69] Lead Belly himself, for example, continually altered his songs. In concert he often varied his lyrics to mention the city in which he was performing, and he adjusted his repertoire to the tastes of his audience.[70]

No roots musician, moreover, was as isolated as the entrepreneurs of the folk revival wished. Although he had spent his whole life in the rural South, much of it confined in prison, Lead Belly was quite well versed in popular culture and saw no reason to shut himself off from it. He was renowned for his openness to all kinds of music, including Tin Pan Alley. In an interview he recalled, "I learned by listening to other singers once in a while off phonograph records. . . . I used to look at the sheet music and learn the words of a few popular songs." Similarly, Lead Belly did not share John Lomax's fears about the radio's corrupting influence on his repertoire. He so much enjoyed listening that while in New York he wrote a tribute song called "Turn Your Radio On," singing, "You listen in to tell what's goin' on in the world."[71]

Lead Belly's receptiveness to different kinds of music led to some striking juxtapositions. He was fascinated, for instance, with singing cowboy Gene Autry. He liked to sing Autry's songs, went to his movies, and was thrilled early in his stay in New York when Autry, dressed in white, stopped by to see for himself what a twelve-string guitar was all

about. Lead Belly was also known to do a dead-on imitation of hillbilly star Jimmie Rodgers's yodeling.[72] He was, in short, an old-fashioned "songster," the term the African American community used to describe eclectic musicians able to sing practically any type of song. He performed everything from work songs to dance tunes to blues to cowboy ballads to popular hits. Literary critic Daniel Hoffman observes, "As he was a folksinger, not a folklorist, all of these [were] equally admissible to his canon." As one might guess, the Lomaxes found Lead Belly's attraction to ersatz cowboys and crooning balladeers disquieting, and they did their best to restrict him to his traditional repertoire. John Lomax wrote, "For his programs Lead Belly always wished to include [Autry's] 'That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine' or jazz tunes such as 'I'm in Love with You, Baby.' . . . He could never understand why we did not care for them. We held him to the singing of the music that first attracted us to him."[73]

The revivalists, though, were not consistent in their emphasis on purity. Even as they warned folk singers not to add popular tunes to their song lists, they encouraged other changes in the singers' repertoire. In the spirit of the Popular Front, for instance, the Left was eager for Lead Belly to compose political songs. Some historians speculate that Alan Lomax helped compose "The Bourgeois Blues," Lead Belly's protest against segregated housing in Washington, D.C.[74] Lead Belly also wrote political material like "Jim Crow Blues," "Hitler Song," and "Scottsboro Boys" after being discovered by the Lomaxes.[75] Radicals found these songs more palatable than many of those Lead Belly chose to play if left to his own devices. In the mid-1930s, for instance, left-wing composer Earl Robinson invited Lead Belly to play at Camp Unity, the CP's summer retreat. The first night, Lead Belly performed songs like "Ella Speed" and "Frankie and Albert" that featured gun-toting gamblers, cheating husbands, and murderous wives. "The camp was in an uproar," Robinson recalled. "Arguments raged over whether to censure him, me, or both of us." Before the next performance, Robinson explained to Lead Belly that the party expected exemplars of the Negro race to express more high-minded sentiments. That night Lead Belly charmed the crowd with "Bourgeois Blues" and "Scottsboro Boys."[76]

If selecting songs to play was so complicated, choosing the style in which to play them must have seemed especially bewildering to the folk revival singers of the thirties. The singers' appeal to the cult of authenticity depended on the notion that they had a "natural" sound—a style unsullied by the encroachments of popular culture. But, as the case of "Tom Hughes" suggests, a singer's style often was altered in an effort to reach popular audiences. Folk performers were encouraged to moderate

the pitch of their voices, enunciate clearly, and slow down their songs. Singers like Lead Belly and Josh White took these lessons to heart in an effort to broaden their music's appeal.

Performers who did make stylistic adjustments, though, soon found that adapting their sound jeopardized their standing in the eyes of the folk revival's core following. Purists denounced them for selling out their pure heritage. Folklorist Charles Haywood thought Lead Belly a "sad spectacle" by the end of his career, charging that he had changed to fit "night clubs and popular taste": "In the place of strong rhythms the guitar was toying with delicate arpeggi and delightful arabesques, filling in between verses with swaying body movements, marching up and down the stage, swinging the guitar over his head, instrument upside down, or behind his back. This was a sad and tragic sight, cheap vaudeville claptrap." Lead Belly attempted to adapt to the commercial market, and as a result, says Sven Eric Molin, "folklorists shake their heads over his recordings and distinguish between an 'earlier' and a 'later' Leadbelly, for . . . the singing techniques and the choice of materials changed, and Tin Pan Alley had its perceptible influence."[77]

The Lomaxes had encouraged Lead Belly to adjust his style, but they, too, spoke wistfully of his "purer" past. As early as January 1935, John wrote to his wife that he and Alan were "disturbed and distressed at [Lead Belly's] beginning tendency to show off in his songs and talk, when his money value is to be natural and sincere as he was while in prison. Of course, as this tendency grows he will lose his charm and become only an ordinary, low ordinary, Harlem nigger."[78] Alan Lomax found that "Lead Belly recorded his songs for a number of companies though never so beautifully as he had first sung them for us in Louisiana." He described Lead Belly's 1940 recordings as "not complete authenticity, but . . . the nearest thing to it that could be achieved away from the prison farms themselves."[79]

Lead Belly did not have the same yearning for the purity of the prison farms, but he does seem to have internalized the confusing standards that the Lomaxes and folk song revivalists set for him. In a 1940 letter to Alan Lomax, Lead Belly wrote: "If your Papa come I would like for Him to Here me sing if He say i Have Change any whitch i Don't think i have and never will But to Be [sure] to get his ideas about it i would feel good over what ever he say about it." Lead Belly's predicament arose from the conflicting demands the folk revival placed on him. As Joe Klein writes, folk singers who tried to make it in urban society while remaining "true to their roots" ended up like "museum pieces, priceless and rare, but not quite marketable in the mass culture."[80] The folk revival tried to use

idealized conceptions of authenticity to achieve its dreams of reaching mass audiences. But the tensions in this agenda left performers like Lead Belly caught in limbo between folk and popular culture.

Like many roots musicians, Lead Belly found his way out of this limbo only after his death. Within months of his death at the end of 1949, the Weavers, a singing quartet featuring Pete Seeger, issued their version of Lead Belly's "Goodnight Irene." It eliminated from the song a verse about taking morphine, changed the ominous-sounding lyric "I'll *get* you in my dreams" to "I'll *see* you in my dreams," and added lush vocal harmonies. It became a number one hit.[81]

The Weavers' "Irene" was only one in a series of efforts by Lead Belly's allies in the folk revival to advance his legacy after his death. At the end of January 1950, Alan Lomax organized a tribute concert for him in New York's Town Hall. After Lomax moved to England that year, he produced a radio series that introduced British audiences to Lead Belly's music. (In 1956, Lonnie Donegan, a British banjo player, returned the favor by making Lead Belly's "Rock Island Line" a top-ten hit in America.) Moses Asch, who had recorded scores of Lead Belly songs for his Folkways label between 1941 and 1948, kept all of Lead Belly's albums in print and, in 1954, issued *Lead Belly's Last Sessions*, a set of three double albums featuring more than ninety songs and stories that Lead Belly had recorded in 1948 at the home of jazz historian Frederic Ramsey, Jr. A series of books, too, helped bring Lead Belly to new audiences. In 1959 Alan Lomax published a collection of Lead Belly songs, followed in 1962 by a songbook that he issued in collaboration with Asch. In 1965 Pete Seeger issued a manual on how to play twelve-string guitar in the style of Lead Belly. Meanwhile, in concert after concert, Seeger performed Lead Belly's music and recounted his story.[82] As folk-styled music surged in popularity in the late 1950s and 1960s, a new generation found Lead Belly. His music became a staple at coffeehouses and folk festivals across the country. The 1960s folk revival did more to cement Lead Belly's reputation than had all his own efforts while he was alive.

Recent decades have witnessed a series of affirmations of Lead Belly's place in the canon of roots musicians. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (1988), the Blues Hall of Fame (1986), and the Nashville Songwriters Association International's Hall of Fame (1980). In 1988 Columbia Records issued a tribute album, for which Beach Boy Brian Wilson, rock and roll pioneer Little Richard, and country legend Willie Nelson covered Lead Belly songs. In 1993, a few months before the suicide of lead singer Kurt Cobain, grunge-rock superstars Nirvana performed a Lead Belly tune for an MTV "Unplugged" album.[83]

On the face of it, such tributes are the stuff of tragedy. If only Lead Belly had lived long enough to see his dreams fulfilled![84] At the same time, the posthumous nature of Lead Belly's success has an air of inevitability to it. It is questionable to what extent he could have reaped the fruits of fame even if he had lived. Lead Belly's renown in the decades after his death certainly derived in part from his considerable artistry, but it was equally driven by the same dynamics that had frustrated and constrained him while he lived—the romanticized (and racialized) life story that had been constructed for him, the primitive emotiveness attributed to his music, the notion that he somehow existed out of time, or at least before the time in which artifice and superficiality had permeated popular culture. In his day, these myths brought Lead Belly momentary popular attention, but they hamstrung his efforts to advance within popular culture, leaving him a folk-revival darling who struggled desperately to make ends meet. The real tragedy, perhaps, is that Lead Belly could flourish in public memory—as a posthumous folk forefather—in a way that he never could have as an active performer. With the "real" Lead Belly buried in Louisiana, each generation could "discover" him for itself, much as the Lomaxes had decades before. Successive cohorts of middle-class, almost exclusively white audiences could become entranced by the Lead Belly myth, revel in the bracing foreignness of his songs, and, eventually, reinterpret the songs as their own. After his death, then, Lead Belly himself became an authenticating agent, one who could bestow legitimacy on performers and fans searching for a sense of roots in the midst of ephemeral pop culture.

In his lifetime, Lead Belly was stymied by the tensions within the cult of authenticity—between rural African American traditions and an emerging set of white cultural brokers, between field recordings and the commercial record industry, between folklore and the modern mass media, between raw naturalism and calculated promotion. In the realm of memory, though, these oppositions that had trapped him became the source of his appeal and his achievement as a roots musician. Haltingly, often painfully, Lead Belly brought together forces that his successors would deploy to powerful advantage.