CHAPTER 9

“The Jail House Is Full of Blues”

Lead Belly’s Prison Pleas

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During the 1930s, prisoners—especially if they ever worked on a chain gang—became favored subject matter in American popular culture. Examples of this interest appear in literature, film, and photography. In his 1932 social-realist novel *Georgia Nigger*, veteran reporter John Spivak details with words and photographs the suffering he discovered in one southern state’s prison and its chain gangs. That same year saw the release of Robert E. Burns’s autobiography *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!*. The author had actually served time on a chain gang, escaped, and founded a successful advertising firm. Later, through an unjust twist, Georgia authorities deceived him by promising a pardon if he returned to the state and then forced him to continue to serve the rest of his sentence—again working on a chain gang—although he managed to escape again. Also in 1932, Warner Brothers Pictures acquired the rights to this book and then rushed out the surprise hit movie of the same name starring Paul Muni. In 1937, Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell came out with their very popular word-and-picture collaboration, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, which contained several images of southern chain-gang members resting at roadside. Various photographers of the Depression-Era Farm Security Administration also documented the lives of inmates in southern prisons, and these images then received widespread attention. In fact, the public’s fascination with chain gangs in the 1930s became so widespread in popular culture that director Preston Sturges parodied it in his 1941 comedy *Sullivan’s Travels*.

As a result of this interest, it is not surprising that a real-life fugitive from a southern chain gang would find a welcome audience. Not only had folksinger/bluesman Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter actually experienced chain gangs...
and prison farms, but he also had expressed this part of his life in many of his songs, played to the accompaniment of his rollicking 12-string guitar. Under the sponsorship of folklorist John A. Lomax and his son Alan, Lead Belly had his first big-time audience in New York City during the early months of 1935. During this visit, a reporter from The Herald Tribune wrote a piece about him that two of his biographers describe as “probably the most important article in Lead Belly’s career . . . [I]t also would be the source of much of the Lead Belly legend in later years.”

In particular, this newspaper piece notes, “Twice has Lead Belly sung for the Governors of southern states, and twice he has been pardoned by them from serving long terms in state penitentiaries.” Later in the article, John Lomax mentions these facts and in this order. Even though neither the Herald’s reporter nor Lomax made an explicit connection, the implication is obvious: The two governors rewarded Lead Belly’s musical abilities with a pardon. As a result of this type of publicity, John Lomax writes, “Always the audiences requested one of [Lead Belly’s] ‘Pardon Songs,’ successful appeals for freedom addressed to Governor Pat Neff of Texas and Governor O.K. Allen of Louisiana.”

In most of the magazine articles and other writing that discussed Lead Belly in the years after his first appearance in New York, the story of how his musical ability gained him freedom from two southern prisons usually appeared, but the truth behind the efficacy and history of these pardon songs did not receive much investigation until decades later. In 1992, Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell published The Life and Legend of Leadbelly. In it, they firmly established that Texas Governor Pat Neff did indeed pardon Lead Belly in 1925 due, in part, to his singing and guitar playing. But these biographers found no evidence that Louisiana Governor O. K. Allen also released the singer for the same reasons. Even the elder Lomax admits this much in 1936 in his comments in Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly, in which he relates how R. L. Himes, the General Manager of Louisiana’s penitentiaries, wrote and informed him that the release was due solely to Lead Belly’s “good time” served (although the Lomaxes only noted this reality in a footnote and later in the book contradicted it by stating, “although the Commissioner of the Louisiana Prison System, Mr. Hymes [sic], says no, Lead Belly and we like to believe this song won him his freedom”). However, even Wolfe and Lornell’s detailed book only briefly discussed the pardon songs that Lead Belly wrote specifically for Neff and Allen. A few verses appear, but the focus is on Lead Belly’s life and not his work. Such an exploration of the lyrics to the songs “Governor Pat Neff” and “Governor O.K. Allen” can balance the words of these two important works with the relevant events occurring in Lead Belly’s personal prison life and the reality of his interaction with these two southern governors. The results provide a deeper understanding of these songs, their historical moment, and Lead Belly himself.