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Recording Review of Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection

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Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection

Disc One:
The Bourgeois Blues / Fannin Street (Mister Tom Hughes Town) / The Midnight Special / John Henry / Black Girl (Where Did You Sleep Last Night) / Pick a Bale of Cotton / Take This Hammer / Cotton Fields / Old Riley – Here, Rattler, Here / Rock Island Line / The Gallis Pole (The Maed Freed From the Gallows) / Ha-Ha This a Way / Sukey Jump / Boll Weevil / Scottsboro Boys / Governor O. K. Allen / Governor Pat Neff / There’s a Man Going Around Taking Names / On a Monday (Almost Done) / You Can’t Lose Me, Cholly / Keep Your Hands Off Her / We Shall Be Free

Disc Two:
Alabama Bound / Almost Day (Christmas Is a-Comin’) / Fiddler’s Dram / Green Corn / Sally Walker / Bring Me a Little Water, Silvy / Julie Ann Johnson / Linin’ Track / Whoa, Back, Buck / Shorty George / Ham and Eggs (Make it On the Side of the Road) / Moanin’ / Out on the Western Plains / Noted Rider / Meeting at the Building (All Over This World) / Good, Good, Good (Talking, Preaching – We Shall Walk Through the Valley) / Ain’t You Glad (The Blood Done Signed My Name) / I’m So Glad, I Done Got Over / The Hindenburg Disaster / Ella Speed / Haul Away Joe / Old Man / Sweet Jenny Lee / Jean Harlow / Laura / Queen Mary

Disc Three:
Good Morning Blues / Sail On, Little Girl (You Can’t Mistreat Me) / Easy Rider / Poor Howard / Duncan and Brady / How Long, How Long / T. B. Blues / Jim Crow Blues / Pigmeat / John Hardy / Outsikts of Town / 4, 5, and 9 / In the Evening (When the Sun Goes Down) / Red Cross Store Blues / Diggin’ My Potatoes / Blind Lemon / When a Man’s a Long Way From Home / Alberta / Excerpt from “The Lonesome Train” / National Defense Blues / Hitler Song (Mr. Hitler) / Big Fat Woman / Been So Long (Bellevue Hospital Blues)

Disc Four:

Disc Five:
Yes, I Was Standing in the Bottom – When It’s Springtime in the Rockies / Ain’t Going Down to the Well No More (Version 2) / Every Time I Go Out / Go Down, Old Hannah / Black Betty / Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out / Stewball / Ain’t It a Shame to Go Fishin’ On a Sunday / Relax Your Mind / Princess Elizabeth / Silver City Bound / The Titanic / House of the Rising Sun / It’s Tight Like That / Diggin’ My Potatoes / Springtime in the Rockies / Backwater Blues / Didn’t Old John Cross the Water / De Kalb Blues (Ain’t Gonna Drink No More) / They Hung Him on the Cross (Version 1) / They Hung Him on the Cross (Version 2) / In the World

Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection, a 2015 set celebrating the music of Huddie Ledbetter (c. 1888-1949), is cast in the basic mold as—and has been advertised as a companion to—that same label’s acclaimed 2012 Woody Guthrie set entitled Woody At 100. Both releases were not only issued by the same company, but they also claim the same producers (Jeff Place and Robert Santelli), mastering engineer (Pete Reining), and art director (both sets were designed by the Visual Dialogue company’s Fritz Klaseteke, who won a GRAMMY for his work on the Guthrie package). This is a veteran team, with many historical recording releases and music-related museum exhibits to their collective credit. Woody At 100 explored the entirety of Guthrie’s work, incorporating selections from his recording career over three CDs as well as (in that set’s 154-page 12” x 12” hardcover book) samples of his idiosyncratic prose writing and visual art. Since Lead Belly is principally remembered for his music, the newer Smithsonian Folkways set commendably features a generous selection of recordings—108 in all—made by Lead Belly for three labels (Folkways, Stinson, and Disc) as well as for the Library of Congress; the set’s five CDs effectively illustrate the musician’s stylistic range and diverse repertoire. The set features 16 previously unreleased recordings, four of which were of Lead Belly compositions never before released in any form. (By contrast, Woody At 100 included 57 tracks in all, 21 of which were previously unreleased recordings, with six of those 21 constituting never-before-heard original songs by Guthrie.) Among the recordings in the Lead Belly set are inspired performances of songs associated with the musician—some of which he composed (“The Bourgeois Blues,” “Bring Me a Little Water, Sylvy,” “Cotton Fields,” “Alberta”), and some of which he adapted from other composers (“Rock Island Line”) or from traditional sources (“The Midnight Special,” “Irene [Goodnight Irene],” “Black Girl [Where Did You Sleep Last Night],” “The Gallis Pole,” “Pick a Bale of Cotton,” and “Black Betty”). Whether written or arranged by Lead Belly, these songs have been embraced over the decades by innumerable music-makers, from international pop music legends to heroes of various roots music subgenres to local singers and strummers. Yet other musicians’ interpretations of such songs generally lack the irrepressible combination of toughness and tenderness present in Lead Belly’s versions; indeed, one of his principal gifts was infusing his music with contrasting elements.

Also included on the Smithsonian Folkways set are recordings that document Lead Belly’s passionate renditions of various work songs (including “Linin’ Track”), prison songs (such as “On a Monday”), and blues compositions (“In the Evening [When the Sun Goes Down]”) as well as gospel material (“There’s a Man Going Around Taking Names”) and songs for children (most famously, “Ha-Ha This Way”). Represented on the set as well are various topical songs, whether prompted by civil rights incidents (“Scottsboro Boys”), celebrities (“Jean Harlow”), notorious figures (“Hitler Song [Mr. Hitler]”), or ephem-
eral events of national or international interest ("Queen Mary"). Lead Belly composed two of the set’s other topical songs—"Governor Pat Neff" and "Governor O. K. Allen"—to thank the governors who, appreciating his music, pardoned him for his crimes and freed him from prison. As evidenced by many of his songs (whether topical or not) showcased on the set, Lead Belly had the rare ability to turn rough-and-tumble personal experiences and observations into songs of universal interest and relevance.

**Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection** bears witness to the striking range and marked contrasts in the musician’s repertoire, voice, performance style, and songcraft. A significant part of the excitement on most of the recordings is Lead Belly’s own 12-string guitar accompaniment, played with dexterous yet firm technique that was paradoxically both influential and inimitable. The set, though, includes a few a cappella recordings, proving that he could command attention and generate excitement without his rhythmically intense, hypnotic guitar. Additionally, on CDs 4 and 5 the listener can hear some of Lead Belly’s spoken reflections uttered during two radio shows recorded live in concert venues, and some sound like they were recorded live in the artist’s T-shirts under less than ideal, and even difficult, conditions—have never sounded so magnificent.

Happily, the mastering throughout **Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection** does justice to this historically significant yet ultimately timeless music. These recordings—some of which were made under less than ideal, and even difficult, conditions—have never sounded so magnificent.

The set’s 140-page book compiles essays that set the recordings into various contexts (by Santelli, Place, and Lead Belly’s niece Tiny Robinson), helpful track-by-track notes (by Place), a discography, a bibliography, and various illustrations (a gallery of album covers, for instance) and photographs (such as a rare color photograph of the musician, suffering from ALS, in 1949 during his final days). Taken together, the 5 CDs and the book survey Lead Belly’s life and his vast repertoire in a compelling, memorable, and moving manner, and the set offers the fullest portrayal of this great songwriter thus far presented in a single release. Since a truly complete package of Lead Belly’s record-ings (combining his entire output on "folk" labels such as Folkways and also his many field recordings for representatives of the Library of Congress and other documentarians, along with his work for such commercial companies as the American Record Company, Victor, and Capitol) is unlikely to materialize in the foreseeable future, **Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection** is likely to remain the essential and central compilation of Huddie Ledbetter’s music for years to come.

Ted Olson

**Craig Johnson**

**Deep Woods & Hollows**

Blackfoot / Going Across the Sea / Old Ball / The Whip-poor-will Song / Shout All Over God’s Heaven / Crippled Turkey / Noah Built the Ark intro / Noah Built the Ark / Louisiana Breakdown / Wait ‘Til I Put On My Robe / Lost Love / Fire in the Jackpine intro / Fire in the Jackpine / North Country Tragedy intro / North Country Tragedy / Warfield / M & O Blues / Vampire Women / Ring / Ring the Banjo / Taking a Bath on Saturday Night in a Galvanized Washing Tub intro / Taking a Bath on Saturday Night in a Galvanized Washing Tub / The Vance Song / Sower’s Creek / Untitled Waltz in A / Untitled Tune in D / Don’t Let the Deal Go Down intro / Don’t Let the Deal Go Down / Pretty Saro / My Wife She Has Gone and Left Me / Foreign Lander / Factory Side of Town / Goodbye to the Lowlands / Smoky Row / Clogger Ladies

This collection of 34 songs and tunes, collected from the archives of Craig’s family and friends, reflects part of the vast and amazing world of music that was Craig Johnson’s life—sadly cut short by cancer in 2009. I’d known Craig since the late 1970s when he lived in the Washington, DC, area and our musical lives often intersected. After I moved to Galax, Virginia, in 1981 Craig would occasionally come down and hang out and play music with some of the last of the classic players, especially Luther Davis and Kahle Brewer. Always deeply and emotionally attached to what I’m carefully going to refer to as "true" and "authentic" old-time music—if he had a choice he listened to and learned from the old guys—Craig had the feel and the feeling. He had the sound. It was timeless and it was unique.

Mostly the songs and tunes on the CD are Craig unaccompanied or with just banjo, fiddle, or guitar. Other songs and tunes have minimal and just-right accompaniment. Many folks will know Craig’s work from his many years as a member of the great Double Decker Stringband along with John Beam, Bruce Hutton, and Bill Schmidt. Several cuts with them are on this CD. Just listen to Craig’s high voice on “Noah Built the Ark” and “Wait ‘Til I Put On My Robe!” Knocks me out every time I hear it. Various Double Decker members back him on others of the cuts, as well as Margaret Martin and Wayne Martin, who often played with him after he moved to North Carolina in 2001.

Craig was a wonderful fiddler (there are several of his original tunes on this CD) and banjo and guitar player, as well as a singer. But he was also, in my opinion, a great songwriter, and several of his finely crafted songs about working people and small town life—"Fire in the Jackpine", "Factory Side of Town", and "Goodbye to the Lowlands", and the wryly humorous “North Country Tragedy,” are on this CD.

I missed having information in the CD liner notes about where and when each song was recorded. Some of the cuts sound like informal living room recordings, some sound like they were recorded live in concert venues, and others are probably studio recordings; it would have been interesting to know the source of each cut. Maybe Field Recorders’ Collective could post this information on their website at some point. None of this detracts from what a fine album this is, however.

Thanks, Field Recorders’ Collective, for putting together this wonderful CD. And by the way, great cover photo by Bill Dillof. That was Craig. **Deep Woods & Hollows** is a fitting tribute to the wonderful Craig Johnson. His presence is missed in this old world.

Alice Gerhard

To order: fieldrecorder.org