

**CATHY WURZER:** Oh, do we have a story for you from our history series, "Minnesota Now and Then." This time, we're going to go back to November of 1948. Folk and blues singer Huddie Ledbetter, known by his stage name Lead Belly, had just finished a tour of Minnesota college towns when he turned up at a friend's Minneapolis home and gave a short concert. It was a moment that would have been lost to music history, except that somebody decided to record it.

Here are MPR producers Robbie Mitchem and Jamal Allen, with a story by Britt Aamodt. It's called "Lead Belly's Minneapolis Private Party."

[PIANO PLAYING]

[ROBBIE MITCHEM] Lead Belly didn't get around like he used to. His legs ached so bad it hurt for him to get out of bed. But at 60, the folk and blues singer was still on the road, lugging his booming 12-string guitar, peddling his repertoire of songs, some 500 of them all tucked away in his memory, which was still good. It was his body that was giving up on him.

**LEAD BELLY (ON RECORDING):** (SINGING) My girl, my girl, don't lie to me. Tell me. Where did you sleep last night? Come on. Tell me, baby. In the pines, in the pines, where the sun don't ever shine, I would shiver the whole night through.

[ROBBIE MITCHEM] It was November 21, 1948. For the past nine days, Lead Belly's road had taken him on a tour of Minnesota college towns-- Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Collegeville. Tonight, Lead Billy would be in Minneapolis, possibly on one of those many tours that had brought him to many cities around the country. It would also turn out to be one of his last recorded performances.

[GUITAR PLAYING]

**LEAD BELLY (ON RECORDING):** (SINGING) In the city--

[ROBBIE MITCHEM] Lead Belly's guitar had been his ticket to a different kind of life. It took him off the farm and put him on the road, where he absorbed all types of music-- blues, jazz, work songs, lullabies, children's songs, even cowboy songs. He bought his first 12-string after he heard a Mexican worker strumming one. In Dallas, he began playing with another future legend, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and wrote a song about it, "My Friend, Blind Lemon."

**LEAD BELLY (ON RECORDING):** Hear the song like a poem about my friend, Blind Lemon. We run together for so many years in Dallas. He went away to stay away from his wife. He got [INAUDIBLE] gets his job spending five years on Pea. old And his wife lie down and dreamed about him one night. When he woke up the second night, here's what she said.

[CLANKING METAL DOORS]

[ROBBIE MITCHEM] Then for a period of 15 or more years, Lead Belly was in and out of prisons for carrying a gun or attempted murder, for murder, for getting into fight with a white man. The reasons have been confused by time and myth.

In 1933, he was serving a sentence in Louisiana Angola Prison when John and Alan Lomax asked to record him singing and playing his guitar. The father and son were on a marathon song-collecting journey through Great Depression America for the Library of Congress.

[GUITAR PLAYING]

Released from prison a year later, Lead Belly returned to his roaming way of life. He had ambitions for his career, but he was a Black man coming against a segregated society. And his country folk songs always seemed to be out of step with the current music bands that would have brought him closer to mainstream success. Still, he carved out a space for himself on the touring circuit of university venues and clubs.

Tonight's performance in a Minneapolis living room was just one of a lifetime of nights spent singing and for an audience, but on a smaller, intimate scale. There's background chatter, the noise of a child. It was the sort of casual performance that never had been recorded for the public, except it was.

**LEAD BELLY  
(ON  
RECORDING):**

(SINGING) Come a cow cow yicky, come a cow cow yicky yea.

It's so good, I'm just about to forget about the intermission. But anyhow, we're going to do a number for the children, and its title of it, "Skip to My Lou." Now, Abraham Lincoln used to dance to this tune, and we sang it. And when I was a little boy, I used to play with-- when we was children, we'd sing and dance to it. Now we're going to sing it, and a favorite of children.

["SKIP TO MY LOU" PLAYING]

[GUITAR PLAYING]

(SINGING) Hey, hey, skip to my Lou. Hey, hey, skip to my Lou. Hey, hey, skip to my Lou. Skip to my Lou, my darling.

Come with me, everybody.

(SINGING) Hey, hey, skip to my Lou. Hey, hey, skip to my Lou. Hey, hey, skip to my Lou. Skip to my Lou, my darling.

They really singing here too. I see them. Now, the first verse here, a little red wagon, hey, hey--

[ROBBIE MITCHEM] It would also turn out to be one of his last recordings. In the new year, he would take his guitar and his aching body to Paris.

[GUITAR PLAYING]

That's where he was when he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, and that would later take his life that December.

After death, Lead Belly became a legend. As for that 1948 reel-to-reel recording, it enjoyed a second life too too, as a bootleg shared among fans under the title, "Lead Belly, the Minneapolis Private Party."

**LEAD BELLY (ON RECORDING):** What happened down there? (SINGING) My husband was a hardworking man killed a mile and a half--

**CATHY WURZER:** Oh, that is fantastic.

**LEAD BELLY (ON RECORDING):** (SINGING) --from here.

**CATHY WURZER:** That was "Lead Belly's Minneapolis Private Party" by MPR producers Robbie Mitchem and Jamal Allen, the text by Britt Aamodt. This story was made possible in part by the Minnesota Legacy Amendments Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.