

## Lonnie Donegan Interview Transcript and Reader Reaction

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I was three years old in 1959. Although rock and roll had arrived, it would not be for another couple of years that the vibrations or the British rock boom would even begin to reverberate around the world. Musicians up and down the country and in particular in London, Liverpool, and Newcastle were still gathering in information. This information came by way of messengers, musicians who had been lucky enough to visit the United States and see, first hand, the birthplace of rock and roll and evidence of its forefathers. Some information was given by interpreters, British musicians who were among the first to hear the actual records of African-American music, which was capable of expressing the emotions of the human soul in a way never before achieved by Europeans.

Not allowed to work the new electric record player myself, I would ask my father to play the 78 rpm records. He would tell me, very trustingly, to make a small pile of the records that I wanted to hear. Not yet able to read, I would choose the records by the colour of the label. Consequently, the first records that I consciously listened to were Hank Williams on the yellow and black MGM label and the crimson PYE-Nixa label that introduced me to the music of Lonnie Donegan. Donegan was one of the new interpreters and the message that he interpreted was Lead Belly. On May 6, 1995, I interviewed Lonnie Donegan on the phone at his home in Spain on behalf of the *Lead Belly Letter*.

**GARY ATKINSON:** You have been touring in Europe, including a few dates in London. Was this a return, full circle, to when you played with Chris Barber in the 1950s? For this tour did you play banjo and return to your musical roots such as blues and in particular to Lead Belly?

**LONNIE DONEGAN:** The answer is yes to everything that you have said. We have put the original Chris Barber Band back together again, with the original style and in the original way.

**GA:** Are you including any Lead Belly numbers in the set?

**LD:** Yes. I started off with Oh Boy, Can't You Line 'Em, which is a number that I got from Lead Belly. I don't know if anybody else has recorded it.

**GA:** I want to go back to your beginning, but will come fairly quickly to Lead Belly's influences. Your father played violin. What type of music did he play?

**LD:** He was a classical violinist but he was mostly out of work.

**GA:** How much of a musical childhood did you have?

**LD:** None at all.

**GA:** So when did you become aware of musical influences?

**LD:** Four.

**GA:** It is argued that the broad range of Lead Belly's repertoire included some Celtic influenced music, drawn from white American folk music. Did any of Lead Belly's music remind you of what you heard as a boy?

**LD:** Well what you are saying is something that we all know, any of us that has studied folk music. What ended up as African-American music was the result of many influences; some of it was French, some Irish, some Scottish and so on. I mean what you're doing here is you're giving me a little lecture on folk music and I don't need this, I just want to answer the questions. I know all about folk music.

**GA:** Right, O.K. Sorry. How old were you when you began to play an instrument?

**L.D:** Fourteen.

**G.A:** What type of music did you begin to play?

**L.D:** Folk music.

**G.A:** Would that be English or American?

**L.D:** Everything.

**GA:** How old were you when you moved away from Glasgow to London?

**LD:** Two.

**GA:** When did you first hear Afro-American music such as blues?

**LD:** Probably around fourteen years old [1945], through the BBC Radio Rhythm Club.

**GA:** When did you first hear Lead Belly?

**LD:** I would have been about eighteen, which was about the time that Lead Belly's [Weavers'] Good Night Irene got on the charts.

**GA:** And so it was that which you probably heard?

**LD:** It probably was, yes.

**GA:** Were you aware at the time that Lead Belly had performed in Paris in 1949?

**LD:** At that time I wasn't. I became aware of it about two years later.

**GA:** At the age of twenty-one, you played at the Royal Festival Hall in London along with the legendary bluesman Lonnie Johnson from whom you took your first name. What are your memories of this show?

**LD:** Well, it was a disaster really. Lonnie Johnson, the great blues singer, and jazz and blues guitar player came to England and we expected wonderful things. Instead fans got a little nightclub act because Lonnie didn't know what was expected of him. He didn't realize that we wanted him to play early twentieth-century blues. But he went on stage with an electric guitar and played; sort of Smoke Gets In Your Eyes and Stardust, stuff like that,