

very nicely of course but not what we wanted. So he wasted a whole trip to England as far as he was concerned and as far as we were concerned.

**GA:** How did you become involved in Lonnie Johnson's show?

**LD:** All American musicians were banned from performing in England at that time by the Musicians' Union. So very quickly they got a hold of a couple of amateur [non-union] jazz bands, which were George Webb and His Dixielanders and The Anthony Donegan Jazz Band.

**GA:** The show was in 1951 and the popular music of the day was very far removed from the music of Lead Belly and Lonnie Johnson. What kind of audience did the show attract and what was their reaction to the show?

**LD:** They were all Jazz Club people. There were three thousand "Jazzers" waiting to get in the door. There was also a very good ragtime American pianist on the show, whom a lot of people have totally forgotten. He was a young white student who was excellent and the "Jazzers" got a little bit of recompense from him. But basically we'd all come to hear Lonnie Johnson. Actually, he wasn't the first blues singer to come into England but everyone thought that he was at that time. He was preceded by Josh White.

**GA:** Tell me about Josh White's visit.

**LD:** Josh White toured the Empire Theatres when I was seventeen, which would have been in 1946/7. He'd had a hit record with a thing called One Meat Ball, which of course was a sort of a lightly comic folk song, and so people went to the Chiswick Empire hall expecting to see a comic and they got a blues singer; the reverse of what happened with Lonnie Johnson! But Josh, I suppose intelligently or maybe coincidentally, maintained a very, very high degree of blues in his performance so we were all totally delighted with Josh and as I say, very unfortunately disappointed with Lonnie.

**GA:** At that time, in the early 1950s, how well known was Lead Belly in the U.K.?

**LD:** Almost unknown. Almost completely unknown.

**GA:** Because his music and the blues were so very obscure, did you regard yourself as a pioneer at the time?

**LD:** No. I just regarded myself as a kid learning to play the guitar. All this hindsight stuff is a bit bloody stupid, really, isn't it? It's like you saying did Churchill see himself as the white knight freeing the world. No, of course he didn't. He was just rushing to get to the office on time.

**GA:** And searching round for the cigars.

**LD:** (Laughs) Yes! Exactly. And what a bloody nuisance; you know during the war you couldn't get Havanna cigars.

**GA:** Yes.

**LD:** Hindsight is the most absurd way to judge things, absolutely absurd. You can say what happened but you can't say why it happened. You can't get into the minds of the people back in those times, and you mustn't put words in their mouths. Like your trying to do, now, with me

**GA:** Right. O.K.

**LD:** And if enough people tell me that I was the one that introduced Lead Belly to the world, eventually, I'll believe it. But I know I didn't do that.

**GA:** No, but you were there at the time.

**LD:** I was the first one to be lucky enough to get public recognition for what I was doing which was singing African American blues folk music. If I had waited another week someone else would have done it. You don't plan things in show business; things happen to you. One group of people who should get almost sole credit for the public recognition throughout the world of Lead Belly and folk music is The Weavers. It was The Weavers who recorded Good Night Irene and Bring A Lil' Water Silvy and On Top Of Old Smokey. It was The Weavers who pulled Lead Belly onto the concert stage. It was The Weavers who pulled Guthrie onto the concert stage. The Weavers were responsible for almost everything and the leader of The Weavers was Pete Seeger. Those guys have all become totally forgotten now; and everyone is saying, "Well, it was Guthrie who was the pure folk singer."

Guthrie was not a pure folk singer at all. Guthrie was a very, very well off, well employed, commercial singer who happened to sing in a certain style. And because he sang in a certain style he was hired all over the place to represent Americana. The Guthrie song that I get most results from is The Grand Coulee Dam.

Guthrie was actually employed to write that, exactly as it is, for the Federal Government who were opening a big water project on the Oregon coast, on the Columbia River. They wanted P.R. for all the bloody billions of dollars they had spent. And so they hired this folk singer to go out on the radio, which was the only medium available at that time, and sing a song supporting their project; and they totally instructed him what to write. That's become, like, the anthem of the folk world. It's not a folk song at all!

**GA:** It was a P.R. exercise?

**LD:** Yes! It's an advertising jingle. (Laughs)

**GA:** When you first went into the recording studios, you did record one or two Lead Belly numbers and covered them by this time; how much had Lead Belly's body of music influenced your music? Was he a central figure to what you were doing?

**LD:** Yes, very central.

**GA:** In your live performances did you mention Lead Belly to the audience?

**L.D:** Yes, always.

**GA:** How much interest do you feel that you generated in Lead Belly?

**LD:** Well, as you say in your lovely hindsight, probably ..Jesus, I don't know. Look, Rock Island Line was Lead Belly, on the B side was John Henry. This was the single record that introduced Afro-American music to Britain, and it