

went straight into millions of people's homes and they all switched on to this new kind of sound, or what was to them a new kind of sound. So Lonnie Donegan and Lead Belly are responsible for British Rock and Roll. That's it in a nutshell. Now, all the rest is just salt and pepper on the dinner.

**GA:** Alan Lomax was living in England during the early fifties. Did you meet him?

**LD:** Yes. He came to The Jazz Club in London at 100 Oxford Street where I was working. [Today, known as the 100 Club, this venue is still a major place for the performance of blues music by visiting American musicians.] He walked in and it was packed, as usual; it was always jammed with teenagers and he couldn't see me. I was singing, probably Boll Weevil or something of Lead Belly's; I was always singing Lead Belly. Lomax nearly fainted, apparently, because he thought that he had heard the ghost of Lead Belly. Those were his words. And after that we met and he actually wrote songs for me to record, which I did on my second album.

**GA:** Bearing in mind the Lomaxes' protective attitude towards Lead Belly's songs, did this cause any difficulty in you wanting to record Lead Belly's material?

**LD:** No, not at all. Their protective attitude was simply they wanted money out of it. The Lomaxes had copyrighted Lead Belly's songs with a publisher and that's where their alleged protectiveness was. They were only concerned with making a buck.

**GA:** It has been suggested that Lomax came to Britain in the early 1950s to escape McCarthyism in America. Did you know anything about this?

**LD:** At that time no. To tell you the truth I still don't. I'm not interested in politics.

**GA:** It has been written "Donegan could dazzle with his virtuosity on twelve-string acoustic guitar." Would it be true to say that the popularity of the twelve-string guitar in Britain was due to Lead Belly by way of yourself?

**LD:** Absolutely. First of all there was nobody else in America that even played twelve-string guitar; I had never heard them. Funnily enough, it came to my attention recently that Lonnie Johnson played twelve-string on many of his early records and now I'm listening to the Lonnie Johnson records again and wondering which of them are just bad acoustics and which of them are twelve-string.

**GA:** Looking back at your career, could you sum up the importance that discovering Lead Belly, his music and his social background has had on you?

**LD:** His social background, nil. I wasn't there; I don't live like that. But Lead Belly as an artist was absolutely essential to my existence, artistically.

**GA:** Well, that's the end of the questions so, I would just like to thank you very, very much in putting up with my...

**LD:** That's all right my son.

**GA:** ...extremely amateurish approach but it's greatly appreciated.

**LD:** No, it's not amateurish, it's just that you don't know me well enough. But then most people who interview me don't know me. So you're not different, you're just another one. Can I just point out a couple of little bits you didn't ask, which you may want to know?

**GA:** Surely.

**LD:** The name of the company who published Lead Belly through Lomax and also published Guthrie, is Essex Music. In America it's about three different company names, one which is owned partially by Lomax; and one which is owned by Harold Leventhal; and then the Folkways Music Publishing Company which now belongs to the Museum in New York. When I started with Rock Island Line almost the first stop I made when I was in New York was to meet the music publisher. At his suggestion we formed two charity funds; one was the Martha Lead Belly Fund, and the other was the Children of Woodie Guthrie Fund. The way that these Funds would operate, and I hope they did, was that I think ten percent of the profits that anybody made from recording songs written by Lead Belly would go into the Martha Lead Belly Fund. The other Fund would try and educate some of Guthrie's children because he had many children but he didn't necessarily have them in wedlock. I think one of the ones to benefit from that Fund was Arlo Guthrie. So you might infer from that, that Lonnie Donegan educated Arlo Guthrie, which not many people know that. (laughs)

**GA:** Have you ever heard of the musician, Taj Mahal?

**LD:** Yes.

**GA:** Two years ago he told me that when he was a kid he used to pick up the home service [British Radio-BBC] and he said, "One of the first people to inspire me was Lonnie Donegan." He reeled off a list of your songs that he had heard on the radio. It just seems to me fascinating how the whole thing of musical transfer and influence tends to go in circles.

**LD:** There is another instance of that in Phil Spector who was the biggest record producer in America and did all the coloured groups in the 1950s. He had The Checkmates, The Rubettes and all those Doo-Wop groups, and Tina Turner. He was responsible for creating their careers and on his own album sleeves Spector wrote "I first got my interest in music from listening to Rock Island Line by Lonnie Donegan." (Laughs) So you might tell Tina Turner that she owes her career to Lonnie Donegan.

## **The following appeared in the following edition of *The Lead Belly Letter*;**

Lead Belly and Lonnie Donegan, the feature article in the last issue, is generating much interest. Although I haven't yet heard from Lonnie Donegan himself, the Lonnie Donegan Archives in England wrote, wishing to "circulate details of the Letter to Lonnie fans."