

“Goodnight, Irene”--Lead Belly (1933)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Christopher Lornell (guest post)*



Lead Belly

“Lead Belly and ‘Goodnight, Irene’”

As early as 1908, Huddie Leadbetter (aka Lead Belly, born 1888, Mooringsport, Louisiana) was apparently singing “Goodnight, Irene” and family members suggested that he created the song while singing lullabies to his infant niece, Irene Campbell, in Leigh, Texas. One of Huddie's friends—Starling Myers--later told Campbell that, “I was there when he wrote that song. He was entertaining you while your mother was getting you some food.” According to Myers, Huddie was casually strumming and “he just stumbled on that song. That's the way he did. He could just make up songs.” Lead Belly liked the idea of a song named for a niece and continued to sing it to the baby.

“Goodnight, Irene,” however, has a more complex and lengthy history than this family memory suggests. Lead Belly told Alan and John Lomax that he had first heard the core of the song (the refrain and a couple of verses) from his Uncle Terrill, his guitar playing uncle from West Texas, who seems to be the family source for the song. In October, 1940, after Huddie had gained his fame in the North, John Lomax traveled to Oil City, near Mooringsport, to make a series of field recordings by Bob Ledbetter, another of Huddie's uncles, who grew up in nearby Mooringsport. For Lomax, Bob Ledbetter recorded several selections, including “Irene.” His version was virtually identical to that sung by Huddie, and after he was finished, he recalled, “I learned that from my brother, the one that's out west. He brought it home to me. That's first how I heard it. That was Terrill, about 19 or 20 years ago.” When Lomax directly asked him if Huddie had made the song up, Uncle Bob answered categorically, “No sir! It came from my brother. I don't know who made it up. Huddie got it from us.” The song itself is typically rendered as a tender, moving waltz about the courtship of a young girl who is deemed “too young” to get married. And the famous chorus wistfully laments, “I'll kiss you in my dreams.” This is a pop song that points to a parlor song or to a Tin Pan Alley origin, which John and Alan Lomax probably suspected when they heard Huddie perform it. However, no one has been able to track down any printed 19th century song that exactly matches the words and music that the Ledbetters sang.

Nonetheless, evidence exists that the chorus, at least, was circulating among another folksingers beside

the Ledbetters. In November 1936, the exact date that the MacMillan Company published John A. and Alan Lomax's "Negro Folk Songs as Sung By Lead Belly," a Library of Congress field recording unit recorded native Louisianan Gilbert Fike in Little Rock, Arkansas. He performed "The Girls Won't Do To Trust," which used some uncommon and misogynistic verses to set up a familiar chorus:

*The girl will chew tobacco, but she will raise a fuss
The girls will drink good whiskey, boys, but they
won't do to trust.
Irene, goodnight, Irene,
Irene, goodnight, my life,
I'll kiss you in my dreams.*

Though it is impossible to know, it seems most likely that both men heard the song (or at least the chorus) as it circulated among rural singers in Texas and Louisiana.

Interestingly a text of a song called "Irene, Goodnight!" can be found in an 1888 souvenir songbook published in Buffalo, New York, for a major touring minstrel show called Haverly's American-European Mastodon Minstrels that maintained contracts with some of the era's best songwriters. The first verse of this song:

*Irene, good-night!
Think, love, of me; my pretty Irene,
Good-night! good-night!
Irene, good-night --
Keep me alway [sic] in thy dreaming'
Think, love, of me.
When the night closes day with its twilight
Irene good-night!
Softly the moonlight gleaming,
Would I ne'er could leave thee,
My pretty Irene, good-night!*

Though the basic chorus and idea of the song are the same as the Ledbetters and Fike's, the rather florid uncredited 1888 version remains far removed from the kind of verses Huddie sang. It resonates with the language used by early Tin Pan Alley songwriters, some of whom were enamored with Victorian prose. Despite the differences, this songbook provides evidence that a much earlier song about Irene was popular in the decade of Huddie's birth and that its popularizers were doing shows in the general area in which he grew up.

Gussie Lord Davis (1863-1899), a prolific and successful songwriter, died at the height of his popularity. The composer of a remarkable string of sentimental favorites that became immensely popular with early country musicians and folk singers, Davis scored with "Maple on the Hill," "In the Baggage Coach Ahead" (reportedly a million seller), "Little Footsteps in the Snow," and "The Fatal Wedding." Davis was an African American—perhaps the first black songwriters to really become a financial success—who began his career in Cincinnati writing for local publishers about 1880. In 1886, Davis published "Irene, Good Night" in association with a Cincinnati white man named George Propheter—one of some 300 songs the two published together. In 1892, the same song was reprinted, giving Davis credit, by a major publisher, Witmark and Sons, in New York City. "I have made a specialty of waltz songs," he told a reporter for the "New York Evening Sun" in 1888. Davis further

noted that he had numerous songs “in all minstrel troupes in the country, including ‘Irene, Goodnight’; and the singers prefer them now rather than the lively songs of the South.”

Significantly, Huddie's text is highly reminiscent of the original sheet music published by Davis and Propheter suggesting that his “Irene, Good Night” was the primary source for Huddie's song. Either the Ledbetters, or other anonymous singers, altered its archaic diction, simplified the text into a standard verse and chorus pattern, and added new verses derived from other black folk song stanzas. A creative singer like Huddie could have easily grafted some of them into the foundation of the older, composed song. The music for Davis' printed version is also somewhat different from the melody Leadbelly sang. The Davis melody is in 3/4 (waltz) meter, whereas Huddie's was in 6/4. Despite the different time signatures there are enough basic similarities between the two to suggest a relationship and to argue that the Davis' music, like his words, indicates a prototype for Leadbelly's version that perhaps came to him from older kin.

The first time Lead Belly recorded the song on disc, in 1933, he sang only two verses and two choruses, including the slightly ominous refrain “I'll get you in my dreams.” A year later, he recorded it with four verses and four refrains. By the time the Lomaxes had transcribed the song for their 1936 book, it had grown to six verses and the same number of refrains as well as an extensive spoken part. In short, “Irene” slowly evolved into a rather sprawling, complex conglomerate that would display Lead Belly's ability to take different parts of an old song and yarn and create something new and unique out of it. And though Leadbelly couldn't know, it would eventually become the most famous song to be associated with him.

Christopher (“Kip”) Lornell began teaching at George Washington University in 1992 and has published 16 books about American vernacular music since 1988.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.