Huddie William "Leadbelly" Ledbetter

Born January 15, 1888, on the Jeter Plantation near Mooringsport, Louisiana, Ledbetter became interested in music when he was five years old. His uncle Terrell gave him his first instrument, an accordion. Young Ledbetter was a strong child, who could pick prodigious quantities of cotton, an ability that would assume legendary status while he was incarcerated as an adult. He took up the guitar in 1903, which together with his singing and dancing soon had him playing parties in Mooringsport. The next year Ledbetter, known as a "musicianer" for his instrumental prowess, began to prowl St. Paul's Bottom, a notorious red light district in Shreveport, Louisiana.

Ledbetter was exposed to a variety of music on Fannin Street, a row of saloons, brothels, and dance halls in the Bottoms. Between 1906 and 1908 he drifted through Louisiana, hearing Jelly Roll Morton at a Rampart Street dive in New Orleans, before arriving in Dallas, Texas. In 1908, Huddie suffered a serious illness and returned to his parents' home in Louisiana. Two years later he was back in Dallas and had acquired a twelve-string guitar. In 1912, Ledbetter adopted the working name Leadbelly and took up with Blind Lemon Jefferson, a blind singer/guitarist who would become the most commercially successful bluesman of his time. The partnership lasted perhaps five years, exposing Leadbelly to a variety of blues that he would incorporate into his work. His twelve-string cut through the crowd noise at dances and provided the perfect counterpart to his high, clear vocals.

Leadbelly began to have serious troubles with the law beginning in 1915, and by the following year he was an escaped criminal living under the alias of Walter Boyd. Leadbelly shot and killed Will Stafford in December 1917, while on the run from the law. He was quickly arrested, convicted, and sentenced to Shaw State Prison in Huntsville, Texas. Leadbelly spent the majority of the next seven years in the Texas penal system, becoming a legend for his labor ability and his singing. While in prison, he sang a ballad for Governor Pat Neff in January 1924, begging for a pardon that was granted a year later in one of Neff's last official acts. Soon after his release, Leadbelly first heard blues records by Bessie Smith, his friend Blind Lemon, and Big Bill Broonzy. He soon incorporated these songs into his repertoire, recasting them as his own. Leadbelly lived in Shreveport and Houston from 1925 to 1930 but, unlike Blind Lemon Jefferson, the Memphis Jug Band, and Jim Jackson, who all had hit records during this period, he did not make commercial recordings.

Leadbelly was arrested for attempted homicide in 1930 and was sent to the notorious Angola Prison, the state penitentiary of Louisiana. Huddie played his guitar on Sundays and in his spare time while imprisoned, gaining popularity with prisoners, guards, and Warden L. A. Jones. When folklorist John Lomax arrived at Angola with his son Alan in July 1933 to record "Negro work songs" for the Library of Congress, Warden Jones recommended Leadbelly. The Lomaxes were so impressed with
Leadbelly's ability that they returned a year later to record him again, several months before his release for "good time." After his release, Leadbelly accompanied the Lomaxes to other prisons around the South, helping with the recording equipment and demonstrating to the prisoners with impromptu concerts the type of songs they were interested in recording. The prisons included state work farms in Pine Bluff, Tucker, and Gould, Arkansas, where Leadbelly first heard "Rock Island Line."

Leadbelly became a sensation singing for linguistic societies, clubs, and colleges. He made his first commercial recordings for the ARC label in January 1935 and recorded the majority of his work in New York City over the next fourteen years. Leadbelly became a symbol of the burgeoning "folk movement" during the late 1930s and 1940s, recording and entertaining until his death.

Leadbelly died on December 6, 1949, in New York City and is buried in the Shiloh Baptist Church graveyard near Mooringsport.