

Impact Statement

Caitlyn McCoy, Grade 10.

Lead Belly's Legacy, 2018.

Acrylic paint on guitar, 29.5 x 10.5 x 3 Inches.

Capital Christian High School, Sacramento, CA

Unsung Hero: Huddie William Ledbetter

For the Unsung Heroes project, I chose to do an art piece inspired by Huddie Ledbetter, who is best known as "Lead Belly". Lead Belly was a folk-blues singer who lived in the 1800 - 1900's, and was most well-known for the influence his music left on the 20th century, as well as all the artists, bands, and songs, that gained inspiration from him.

The main reason I chose to do my piece on Lead Belly was because I wanted an unsung hero who wasn't a popular choice, and who I had something in common with. I have always been really interested in music, and I play the piano and am beginning to learn how to play the guitar. Lead Belly is inspiring to me because of how he used hard work and his musical gifts to overcome the many obstacles in his life and for how his music reached people, and continues to do so even after his lifetime.

Lead Belly was born in 1888 on a plantation in Louisiana. At the age of 16, he left his family and headed out across the south to establish himself as a musician. He traveled and played on street corners, and often worked as a laborer. Lead Belly had a very troubled and violent life, but I like to believe that he turned his life around after meeting John and Alan Lomax, who actually discovered him in prison. They recorded over 100 songs with Lead Belly and even brought one of Lead Belly's songs, "Goodnight Irene", to the state governor at the time, which may have played a role in his early release from prison one month later. After this release, Lead Belly moved to New York, where he began to become more well-known, but not in a positive way. The first newspaper article to ever publish Lead Belly's name was The New York Herald Tribune, which referred to him as a "Negro Minstrel: Sweet singer of the swamplands here to do a few tunes between homicides". Lead Belly dealt with a lot of public backlash against both himself and his music throughout his career. But he didn't let this sway him. He was determined to continue making music and recording, and he shared his story with several people. It wasn't until later that Lead Belly began seriously recording music, and it seems that his music has impacted more people after his lifetime than it did during.

For this piece, I chose to paint a guitar because that was Lead Belly's signature instrument. I started by taking the strings off of the guitar, then sanding down the area I wanted to paint. I put gesso on it as a primer, and white paint as a base coat. Then I sketched out my idea and painted it in black and white. For this piece, I tried to represent some of the things Lead Belly left behind when he began making music. Off his right shoulder is the inside of a jail cell, and off his left is a cotton field and an outline of Louisiana, to represent where he was born and what he left behind when he departed at an early age. But towering above it all is Lead Belly himself, along with his guitar, which traveled with him throughout his lifetime and journey.

I shared this project and Lead Belly's story, with my art class. I also plan on talking about it in a few of my classes and displaying it for a week in another classroom, in honor of black history month.