



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**HE SURVIVED POST-SLAVERY LOUISIANA AND YEARS IN PRISON TO BECOME
ONE OF THE MUSICAL GIANTS OF THE 20TH CENTURY**

LEGEND OF LEAD BELLY

**BLACK HISTORY MONTH SPECIAL PREMIERES ON MONDAY, FEBRUARY 23 AT
8PM ET/PT ON SMITHSONIAN CHANNEL™**

New York, January 20, 2015 – Lead Belly has inspired generations of musicians, from The Weavers to the Grateful Dead, from Van Morrison, to The Beach Boys and even Nirvana. And yet few people today know his remarkable story, and even fewer know when they are listening to his music. His story is told in the new one-hour Smithsonian Channel special, **LEGEND OF LEAD BELLY**, premiering Monday, February 23 at 8 p.m. ET/PT.

Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly, was born in 1889, into a post-war South plagued by extreme poverty, poor education, racism and a corrupt justice system. With the odds stacked against him, Lead Belly emerged as one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century.

In **LEGEND OF LEAD BELLY**, author John Reynolds cites a quote from George Harrison who once said, “no Lead Belly, no Beatles.” And Kurt Cobain called Lead Belly his favorite performer before playing Lead Belly’s “Where Did You Sleep Last Night” to conclude Nirvana’s 1993 “MTV Unplugged” show. **LEGEND OF LEAD BELLY** features interviews with Van Morrison, singer/songwriter Judy Collins, Robby Krieger of The Doors, Roger McGuinn of The Byrds, and other musicians, who talk about how they were and are inspired by Lead Belly. Also heard from are members of his family and those working to keep his memory and legacy alive.

The Black History Month premiere of **LEGEND OF LEAD BELLY** is timed to coincide with the Smithsonian Folkways release of ‘Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection,’ the first career-spanning box set dedicated to the American music icon, on February 24. More information can be found at <http://www.folkways.si.edu/leadbelly>.

Lead Belly’s journey was long and arduous. An accomplished musician at a young age, he landed on a prison chain gang in 1915 under murky charges. Though he escaped, he was back in prison by 1918, this time charged with murdering a relative in a fight over a woman. He had served just seven years of his 35-year sentence, when Texas Governor Pat Morris Neff pardoned Lead Belly in response to a song he wrote seeking

freedom. Neff had regularly brought guests to the prison on Sundays to hear Lead Belly perform.

Lead Belly returned to prison in 1930, this time to Louisiana's infamous Angola Prison Farm, after he stabbed a white man during a fight. It was there in 1933 that pioneer musicologists John and Alan Lomax arrived with recording equipment on a quest to collect folk songs. In his initial session with them, Lead Belly played "Goodnight Irene" - the first time the song was ever recorded. Years later The Weavers would record it and it would go to the top of the pop charts - selling some 2 million copies. With his remarkable memory for music, powerful voice and blistering playing on his famous 12-string Stella guitar, Lead Belly would go on to record hundreds of songs -- bridging the musical gap between the Civil War and the 20th century, and helping to preserve music which would otherwise have been lost.

After his release from Angola in 1934, Lead Belly worked briefly for John Lomax, but soon chafed under his control. By the 1940s, he was living in New York City at the heart of a vibrant political folk music scene that included Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, Josh White, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. He had come a long way from his impoverished youth, but in 1949 he tragically passed away from Lou Gehrig's disease. Within a year of his death, his songs started appearing on the best seller charts, from "Goodnight Irene" and "Midnight Special" to "Rock Island Line," "The House Of The Rising Sun," "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?", and "Black Betty." He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988.

LEGEND OF LEAD BELLY is produced by Eagle Rock Entertainment for Smithsonian Channel. Executive producer for Eagle Rock is Peter Worsley and director is Alan Ravenscroft. Linda Goldman, David Royle, and Charles Poe serve as executive producers for Smithsonian Channel.

Smithsonian Channel™, owned by Showtime Networks Inc. and the Smithsonian Institution, is where curiosity lives, inspiration strikes and wonders never cease. This is the place for awe-inspiring stories, powerful documentaries and amazing entertainment across multiple platforms. Smithsonian Channel combines the storytelling prowess of SHOWTIME® with the unmatched resources and rich traditions of the Smithsonian, to create award-winning programming that shines new light on popular genres such as air and space, history, science, nature, and pop culture. Among the network's offerings are series including *Aerial America*, *L.A. Frock Stars*, *Secrets*, *Mighty Ships*, *Mighty Planes* and *Air Disasters*, as well as critically-acclaimed specials that include *Civil War 360*, *9/11: The Heartland Tapes*; *MLK: The Assassination Tapes* and *The Day Kennedy Died*. Find out more at www.smithsonianchannel.com.

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