Bring Judgment Day
Reclaiming Lead Belly’s Truths from Jim Crow’s Lies
by Sheila Curran Bernard
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“Sheila Curran Bernard rescues the legendary ‘Lead Belly’ from a swirl of fabrication and racist presumption, and simultaneously illuminates the systemized oppression that cruelly stalked Black artists and ensured, for a century after the ostensible end of slavery, that bitter chords of racial injustice would remain as central to the American chorus as any melodies of freedom.” Douglas A. Blackmon, author of Slavery by Another Name, Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

“A beautiful tribute to Lead Belly’s legacy. This book will forever change the way we think about one of America’s most iconic musical legends and one of its most misunderstood.” Talitha L. LeFlouria, author of Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South

“Sheila Curran Bernard is the first to give us a biographical book on Huddie Ledbetter as he really was: a complicated man tactically negotiating a complex, racist, and overwhelmingly unforgiving world.” Gustavus Stadler, author of Woody Guthrie: An Intimate Life

Known worldwide as Lead Belly, Huddie Ledbetter (1889–1949) is an American icon whose influence on modern music was tremendous – as was, according to legend, the temper that landed him in two of the South’s most brutal prisons, while his immense talent twice won him pardons. But as this deeply researched book shows, these stories were shaped by the white folklorists who ‘discovered’ Lead Belly and, along with reporters, recording executives, and radio and film producers, introduced him to audiences beyond the South. Through a revelatory examination of arrest, trial, and prison records; sharecropping reports; oral histories; newspaper articles; and more, author Sheila Curran Bernard replaces myth with fact, offering a stunning indictment of systemic racism in the Jim Crow era of the United States and the power of narrative to erase and distort the past.

About the Author

Sheila Curran Bernard is an Emmy and Peabody Award-winning filmmaker, author, and educator. The recipient of an NEH Public Scholars award, Bernard is an associate professor in the Department of History at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

For more information, please contact:
Josh Hamel  |  Cambridge University Press  |  josh.hamel@cambridge.org