

## Long John Baldry: Remembering Leadbelly

A blues legend interprets the fascinating music of **Leadbelly**

There are times when the "legend" of **Long John Baldry** gets in the way of the man's music. This is, after all, the man who helped turn Reg Dwight into **Elton John**; the man who found **Rod Stewart** at midnight on a railway station platform ("playing harmonica under a pile of football scarves"); and the man who sang with the first British rhythm and blues bands, with Charlie Watts on drums and a callow youth called **Mick Jagger** singing occasional vocals. Long John Baldry is really one of the fathers of the British rock scene-and by extension carries some responsibility for the worldwide acceptance of British rock and roll. Not only was he influential as a performer who straddled the folk, blues, jazz and r&b scenes, he crossed over into the wider field of pop music. And now Baldry, in a musical tribute to Leadbelly, the great American artist, songwriter, performer and convict) has created an important new album that offers an insightful interpretation of some of the best-known songs of the 20th century. And in doing so, Baldry has taken his inspiration from the British blues, jazz, and folk artists of the '50s who were among the first to take Leadbelly's songs and interpret them for audiences raised on bland pop music and cabaret singers.

John Baldry was a tall, gangly 14-year-old when **Lonnie Donegan** blazed onto the pop charts with "**Rock Island Line**", one of the most off-the-wall hits of all time. It was enough to incite his conviction that American music resonated 3,500 miles across an ocean; that the music of an infamous "hard man" - twice convicted and jailed for murder - spoke clearly to young British musicians looking for music they could adapt and call their own. Baldry built his career in Britain to a level that made him a household name, with hit records, a collection of white suits, and a non-stop schedule of radio performances, television shows, concerts, dates in huge clubs, and even a Royal Command performance or two. For all that, the Canadian reaction to his arrival in this country in the early '70s was surprisingly nonchalant, considering that his two albums for Warner Bros. ("**It Ain't Easy**" and "**Everything Stops for Tea**") had considerable success on the sadly-disappeared free-form rock radio format of the time, and "**Don't Try to Lay No Boogie Woogie on the King of Rock and Roll**" became a hit by which he is still remembered. Even today, the response his presence among us-as well as to the broad range of excellent music he has made in this country over the last quarter of a century-has been surprisingly muted. Canadians almost take him for granted; this is in itself odd, since Baldry is a spectacularly eccentric, wryly amusing man, known for his height (oh, okay, it's still 6 ft. 7 in.) as he is for his near-pathological distrust of air travel.

After his first frightening winters in Ontario ("dear boy, the snow was up to here!" he recalls, waving a hand at shoulder height), he moved to Vancouver, which has been home for him ever since. His huge apartment gives him room for his collection of Victoriana, his plants, and his records-which include a surprising collection of opera recordings, as well as almost every record Leadbelly ever made. From time to time he emerges, either to make records for Stony Plain or get into the tour van -he visits Europe once a year- but he is more likely to be found in the vocal isolation booth at a recording studio, providing rich, deep-spoken voice-overs for commercials or television or movies. His acting ability and that voice can sell beer, dog food, cars, and then disguise itself as the villain in kids' cartoon series. He enjoys the simplicity of the work: "You go into the studio, read your lines, leave, and wait for the cheques to come in the mail," he says, adding: "You don't have to travel very much and you don't need a band."

All his five releases for Stony Plain, including this one-reveal an artist who seems more connected than ever to the music with which he started his career. That music was, of course, the blues-and the richness and variety of the idiom has rarely been demonstrated better than it is on this record. There is a depth to Leadbelly's remarkably varied songs that Baldry has tackled with enthusiasm as well as sensitivity. In the sleeve notes he comments on the sources of his youthful inspiration: Donegan, of course, and jazz cornetist Ken Colyer, folk-singer Alex Campbell, and early musical visitors to Britain like Rambling Jack Elliott and Derroll Adams.

Listeners to **"Remembering Leadbelly"** will also discover, at the close of the CD, a bonus track in which Baldry talks about his hero - and there's also a remarkable track in which Stony Plain label head Holger Petersen chats with Alan Lomax, the man who discovered Leadbelly, sprung him from jail, and introduced him to the world.

Baldry says **"Remembering Leadbelly"** is the most "complete" record he's ever made. "His songs touched me when I was a kid; they still talk to me, all these years later. His music is timeless; they can be tackled in many different ways, and there is an amazing variety in the topics and themes he wrote about. "Leadbelly was a bluesman, a storyteller, a folk singer, a social activist, a balladeer, and a man who wrote children's songs with the same conviction that he wrote about his travels through America 65 years ago. He was a unique artist, and I am honoured - and humbled - to perform his music."

- Richard Flohil

Other music by **Long John Baldry** on **Stony Plain Records**:

**It Still Ain't Easy** (Stony Plain SPCD-1163)

**On Stage Tonight: Baldry's Out** (Stony Plain SPCD-1192)

**Right to Sing the Blues** (Stony Plain SPCD-1232) (**Juno Award winner**)

**Long John Baldry Trio Live** (Stony Plain SPCD-1268)