

# THE OLD, WEIRD EVERYWHERE

## BRISTOL ROVERS AND “GOODNIGHT, IRENE”

BRIAN PHILLIPS

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LIKE MANY OF you, I’ve really enjoyed Jennifer’s and Vanda’s posts about football songs over the past couple of weeks, and I thought I’d add my own contribution with a look at the history of one of the strangest supporter songs in football – “Goodnight, Irene,” an American folk song about love and suicide that’s been the anthem of Bristol Rovers for almost 60 years.

Bristol Rovers Football Club and the musician known as Leadbelly were both born in the 1880s, but – for a while, at least – they both had different names. The football club was founded by a 19-year-old schoolteacher in 1883 in a restaurant in one of England’s major seaports; they happened to wear black kits, and to play on a pitch next to a rugby team called the Arabs, and to mark

both facts, they called themselves Black Arabs F.C. The musician was born, sometime around 1888, on a plantation near Mooringsport, Louisiana; he was named Huddie William Ledbetter – presumably to mark nothing at all.

Today, of course, Bristol Rovers are as associated with “Goodnight, Irene,” Leadbelly’s most famous recording, as any English club with any song. They’ve been singing it since the 1950s, a full decade before “You’ll Never Walk Alone” was heard at Anfield, 30 years before Manchester City fans began to chant “Blue Moon.”

But the path that led to the association was chancy and circuitous, and in many ways, both Rovers and Leadbelly are lucky that they survived long enough for the song and the club’s fans to find each other.

Leadbelly lived through the old, weird America, as Greil Marcus would call it: deep swamp dance hall nights, brothels at St. Paul's Bottoms, hobos on freight trains, chain gangs, Satan at the cross-roads, impossible stars overhead. He was a "musicianer" as early as 1903, and learned in the red-light districts of riverboat towns to channel the mournful twang of American folk music into something distinctive and personal, made from his clear voice and his oversized 12-string guitar. He drank rotgut and fought anyone, and his prowess at one or the other resulted in the nickname he would later take on stage.

He went to prison, not for the first time, in 1918 – for murder, after killing a man in a fight. He had a 35-year sentence, but was released just two years later after he wrote a song appealing to the governor for clemency. In 1930 he was in jail again, this time for attempted homicide; and it was here that he was discovered by John Lomax, the legendary musicologist, who traveled the country making recordings for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. With the help of another susceptible governor, Lomax arranged Leadbelly's release, and recorded his versions

of hundreds of songs – including "Goodnight, Irene," an obscure number from the late nineteenth century that Leadbelly claimed to have learned from an uncle.

Black Arabs F.C. became Eastville Rovers in 1884, then Eastville Bristol Rovers in the late 1890s. In 1899, under their current name, they joined the Southern League, just in time for the great era of regional league play before the formation of the national Third Division. They were champions in 1905. During Leadbelly's first serious prison stint, they were suspended for the First World War; they reformed, and joined the Football League as members of the new Third Division, around the time he was released. They stayed afloat during the '30s, but signed a bad lease on their ground that would cause them trouble for decades, and finished last in the division in 1938-39.

The same year, Leadbelly was back in jail for assault. He'd struggled throughout the '30s to make a living, despite the exposure he won as a protégée of John Lomax; record companies tried to turn him into a blues singer, which never really suited his style. But he was out of jail in 1940, and found himself in Greenwich

Village just at the moment when the folk scene was forming: he befriended and influenced Woodie Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and experienced greater success in the 1940s than in any other decade of his life. He died in 1949, after falling ill during his first tour of Europe.

That same year, Pete Seeger's group, the Weavers, released a cover of "Goodnight, Irene" that spent 25 weeks on the Billboard charts, peaking at #1.

It was the Billboard Single of the Year, and was quickly covered by any number of other musicians, including Frank Sinatra.

It worked its way to England, where it reached Bristol and became, by the end of the 1950-51 season, one of the Rovers fans' favorite songs. There are any number of legends to explain the supporters' adoption of a plaintive and slightly mystical American folk melody as their anthem, a song whose lyrics don't exactly advertise their suitability for the purpose:

*Sometimes I live in the country,  
Sometimes I live in town,  
Sometimes I take a great notion,  
Jumpin' into the river and drown.*

...

*I love Irene, God knows I do,  
Love her until the sea run dry,*

*And if Irene turns her back on me,  
Gonna take morphine and die.*

Possibly the most persuasive story is that Plymouth Argyle fans sang the song to taunt Rovers supporters after Argyle took the lead in a match. When Rovers went on to win 3-1, their fans turned the taunt around and began to sing "Goodnight, Argyle." And the song stuck. Something about it just fit.

I love thinking about the loose threads of beauty and meaning in this world and the way they sometimes come together in football. I love imagining Leadbelly playing in a smoky shack to an audience of hellhounds and moonshine runners while five thousand miles away a group of men with kestrel stares and pushbroom mustaches took the pitch in their high-waisted professional short pants. I love the way a game played by the children of lords and a suicide moan from the American folk tradition can make something bizarre and powerful today, something unifying, in a context that makes perfect sense to us, though it would baffle the people who invented them. **pi**