

Tough Troubadour

NEGRO FOLK SONGS AS SUNG BY
LEAD BELLY. By John A. Lomax and
Alan Lomax. New York: The Macmillan
Company. 1936. \$3.50.

Reviewed by CLIFTON JOSEPH FURNESS

"LEAD BELLY" is a tough troubadour. Is he merely vulgar? The answer will depend on the particular feeling you have for folk songs. This collection certainly provides entertainment for jaded musicians, as well as the musically unsophisticated, who unashamedly like a good tune. It furnishes some still unexploited "matter of the Deep South" for the increasing audience looking for fresh songs from the Negro. What "Lead Belly" sings, but especially what he says, may be requisitioned as new evidence by scholars who are interested in folk origins. But the book is not for the casual reader. It is hardly possible to transpose the charm of a Negro voice, singing "between the keys" to the accompaniment of a "twelve-string guitar," to printer's ink and paper. The music that has been caught in this book bears about the same relation to "Lead Belly's" actual improvisations that the choral "spirituals" retailed in "Green Pastures" bear to the real religious singing of a negro meeting in a log cabin.

The history of popular music, some day to be written profitably, will take leaves

from this contribution of the Lomaxes. Specialists in the question of "communal composition," such as Professor G. L. Kittredge and Mr. R. W. Gordon, will be grateful to these excellent collectors and editors. This is not to say that any of the songs are authentic "ballads" in the technical sense. At least the "broadside" on the sinking of the *Titanic* might bid to be considered American ballads. Unforgettable local history gets itself perpetuated in "Blind Lemon" and "Mister Tom Hughes's Town."

The best thing in the book is the life story of this Negro double-murderer. In singing his way from penal farm to Harlem he is a true "Worldly Nigger." But, different from most, he will not naturalize in New York. Although featured in "March of Time" news reels, he is not allured. "When I get to Louisiana, gonna walk and tell, New York City is a burnin' hell."

The Lomaxes honestly acknowledge that many of their songs offer little that is new. Citations are made to Carl Sandburg, and the editors characterize their original source as "Lead Belly's Song-bag." Enough of novelty is added to justify the inclusion of "Frankie and Albert," "Boll Weevil," and "Careless Love." There is wider deviation from the usual in the tunes than in the words.

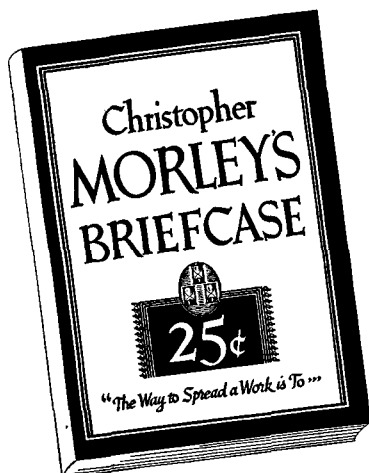
The American language is enriched by real talk. "Jelly" means either "Big fat woman wid the meat shakin on her bone," or just "Woman." (This suggests the collegiate sense of "jam.") There is Negro mind-stuff in the raw in such patter as: "He tol de l'il girl to play on de piano. De l'il girl commence to whip it to a gravy." Occasional professional platitudes creep in, such as "Contrast is wholly American." If that be true, this is a wholly American book, for the racy Negro language is very different from such scholarly comments as "This stanza has its roots in some Elizabethan lyric."

Musically, the book is a distinct advance over most attempts to capture folk song. It is a question whether much is gained by the editors' devices to indicate microtones, unless they could be written more definitely as, perhaps, quarter-tones. But the metronome markings furnish a helpful guide. The range of pitch is usually too high for the ordinary singer, but this is inevitable in what is essentially a faithful transcript of the peculiarities of one singer. There are fortunately no accompaniments and arrangements. This is not so much a song album as it is a mine of suggestion. Its final appeal may prove to be that of a historical record of certain elements in the growth of jazz. We have still among us adherents to Dvorak's theory that Negro music is American folk music.

Clifton Joseph Furness is a teacher of music and English, and the author of "Walt Whitman's Workshop."

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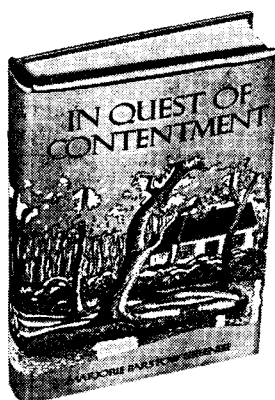
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McGRAW-HILL BOOK CO., NEW YORK

The Story of Our Foreign Policies

A DIPLOMATIC HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES. By Samuel F. Bemis. New York: Henry Holt & Company. 1936. \$5.

Reviewed by DEXTER PERKINS

THE most striking thing about this book is that it makes judgments, as well as narrating the facts. It is solidly based on the materials; in this respect, indeed, it excels any earlier work on the same theme; and it deserves high praise as a survey of American foreign policy. But what distinguishes it from other volumes on the same theme is the freedom with which the author states his opinions, fearing not at all to depart from the pallid neutrality often affected by scholars.

The most important of his opinions are these. The taking of the Philippines at the end of the Spanish-American War, was the ghastliest of American mistakes, giving us territory to defend far outside the area of our legitimate interests and activities; John Hay's Open Door policy was in no sense worth the candle, for it meant merely that we picked England's chestnuts out of the fire in the Orient; Roosevelt's mediation in the Russo-Japanese War was another blunder, since it earned us the ill-will of Japan; in short, this country has no business to pursue an aggressive diplomatic policy in the Orient. It should rather keep out of trouble there, and it could only gain, so Professor Bemis implies, by the development of China under the tutelage of a strong power.

As for Europe, the best thing for this country to do is to take no chances. The policy of non-participation in European affairs was sound. Roosevelt blundered when he led the United States into the Moroccan conference of 1905. Wilson blundered, not so much in finally entering the World War, as in entering unconditionally, without committing the Allies to terms which this country could accept; and all that was gained was the crushing of Germany, which might have united with Japan against the United States. The League of Nations, favored by Professor Bemis in 1920, is now seen to be of doubtful value. No great power is willing to sacrifice its own interests to the general welfare, as that welfare is expressed in the maintenance of peace. If European powers will not do this, *a fortiori*, the United States, more isolated and self-contained, cannot be expected to do it. We should certainly oppose no obstacle to the enforcement of sanctions by the League; and our new neutrality legislation, plus President Roosevelt's pronouncements in the Italo-Ethiopian war, seem to imply that we will oppose none. But we should not join the League.

On this side of the Atlantic, our policy should be one of friendship with the other nations of the New World. We have vital interests in the Caribbean, but they can be secured without intervention. We have blundered when we have bullied, and we made an egregious mistake when we "took" the Panama Canal. We would