

= The Bourgeois Blues =

" The Bourgeois Blues " is a blues song by American folk and blues musician , Lead Belly . It was written in June 1937 in response to the discrimination and segregation that Lead Belly faced during a visit to Washington , DC to record for Alan Lomax . It rails against racism , the Jim Crow laws , and the conditions of contemporary African Americans in the southern United States .

The song was recorded in December 1938 for the Library of Congress and re @-@ recorded in 1939 for commercial release . It has been remixed and covered by a number of artists including Pete Seeger , Ry Cooder , Hans Theessink , and Billy Bragg .

" The Bourgeois Blues " is regarded as one of Lead Belly 's best original works , but it also drew controversy . There is doubt over the song 's authorship , with some scholars contending that Lead Belly was unlikely to have written a work in a genre new to him without a collaborator . Questions have been raised over his role in the American Communist Party and whether he and the song were used to further the party 's political goals .

= = Background and creation = =

Most music historians date the writing of " The Bourgeois Blues " to Lead Belly 's June 1937 trip to Washington , DC , when he was invited by the folklorist Alan Lomax to record for the Library of Congress 's folk music collection . On the first night Lead Belly and his wife Martha spent in the city , they encountered racially discriminatory Jim Crow laws similar to those found in their native Louisiana : most hotels refused to rent rooms to African Americans and the few that would were either full or refused to serve him because he was with a white man (Lomax) . Lomax , in some versions of the story described as an unnamed " white friend " , offered to let the couple stay for the night in his apartment near the Supreme Court Building . The next morning , Lead Belly awoke to Lomax arguing with his landlord about the presence of a black man , with the landlord threatening to call the police .

While in Washington , Lead Belly encountered several other incidents of segregation that are believed to have contributed to the impetus of the song . For instance , when Lead Belly , Lomax , and their wives wanted to go out to dinner together , they discovered that it was impossible for the mixed race group to find a restaurant that would serve them . Lead Belly was told that if he returned later without Lomax , he would be served .

In response to one of these incidents , a friend of Lead Belly 's , variously identified as either Lomax or Mary Elizabeth Barnicle joked that Washington was a " bourgeois town . " Though Lead Belly did not know what the word " bourgeois " meant , he was fascinated by the sound of it , and after its meaning was explained to him he decided to incorporate it into a song about the trip . The song came together quickly ; one account claims that it only took a few hours for Lead Belly to write it . Lomax liked it because it was partly based on what happened in his apartment .

= = Lyrics , themes and music = =

" The Bourgeois Blues " is a blues @-@ style protest song that criticizes the culture of Washington , DC . It protests against both the city 's Jim Crow laws and the racism of its white population . Its structure includes several verses and a refrain that declares that the speaker is going to " spread the news all around " about the racial issues plaguing the city . The song , particularly in the refrain , conflates race and economics by referring to Caucasians as " bourgeois " .

The first two verses speak of the segregation that Lead Belly encountered in Washington DC : the first recounts the fact that during the trip , Lead Belly was " turned down " wherever he tried to get served due to his race , while the second recounts the argument between Lomax and his landlord over Lead Belly staying in his apartment . The third verse sarcastically cites " the home of the brave , the land of the Free " , juxtaposed with the mistreatment he received at the hands of white people in Washington , DC . The fourth verse speaks of the racism of the white population of the city , leading to the song 's end , which suggests that African Americans boycott buying homes in the

district .

The song 's tone implies that the speaker feels powerless against the discrimination and racism that he encounters ; despite this , by " spreading the news " of his poor treatment in a song , the speaker uses what power he has to tell both southern African Americans and northern whites that the status quo is deeply flawed and that something needs to change .

" The Bourgeois Blues " follows a traditional twelve @-@ bar blues format . It is written in 44 time but annotated to note that the song rhythmically should swing at medium shuffle . The song was written in B ? . It uses twelve measures with verses one to four repeating , followed by the final two verses and a coda .

= = Recordings and adaptations = =

Lead Belly first recorded " The Bourgeois Blues " in December 1938 in New York City , for donation to the Library of Congress . He re @-@ recorded the song in April 1939 for Musicraft Records , for release the same year as a 78 rpm record . The version that was commercially released features Lead Belly singing and playing the twelve @-@ string guitar without any other accompaniment .

The song has been covered and reinterpreted by a variety of artists including Pete Seeger and Hans Theessink . Seeger recorded and released both live and studio versions of the song on several of his albums . In Australia , the song was reworked as " Canberra Blues " by The Bitter Lemons , an R & B band . The lyrics speak of the problems faced by young Australians in the Australian Capital Territory in the 1960s . Theessink adapted the song to his style of European blues for the album Journey On in 1997 .

In 2006 , Billy Bragg reworked the song as " Bush War Blues " . Bragg 's cover is a topical protest song about the Iraq War . In one verse , Bragg claims that the Iraq War was not for democracy but instead was to " make the world safe for Halliburton " . In another , he takes on the Christian right , asking where the moderates are . Finally , Bragg chides the United States government for not dealing with poverty at home before going to war .

= = Legacy = =

" The Bourgeois Blues " is one of Lead Belly 's most famous songs and is remembered as his most " heartfelt protest song " . There is disagreement among music scholars as to its importance . Robert Springer claims that the song is " peripheral " to the wider study of the blues , while Lawson points to it as a watershed in the way African Americans see themselves in the fabric of the United States . There is debate over the relationship between the song and radical politics . After its release , it became popular with left @-@ wing political groups . Lead Belly was invited to perform at Camp Unity , the Communist Party USA 's summer retreat , and the FBI subsequently opened a file on him in the 1940s . This led to the accusations that the Communists were taking advantage of him and using him as a platform . The party claims , to the contrary , that they were some of the few people who respected him and gave him a chance to perform .

Jeff Todd Titon and several other writers have suggested that Lead Belly had significant help with its authorship and claim it is not a genuine protest song . This theory stems from the idea that Lead Belly did not have a history of protest music before he was discovered by Lomax . Since the music that Lomax recorded was sold to northerners sympathetic to Civil Rights , it has been suggested that Lomax helped him write a song attractive to a white audience . Lead Belly admitted that the term " bourgeois " was unfamiliar to him , and it seems out of place compared to the vocabulary of his past work .