

# BLUES<sup>IN</sup> BRITAIN

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## **Red Alert!**

The Return Of

*Bywater  
Call*

**The Fabulous  
Thunderbirds**

**Mickey Jupp**

**Thomas Heppell**

**Christopher Wyze  
& The Tellers**



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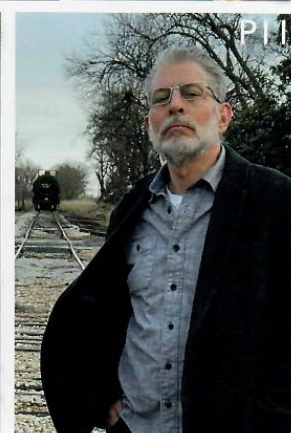
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Image by Michael McGrath



Image by Chris Griffiths



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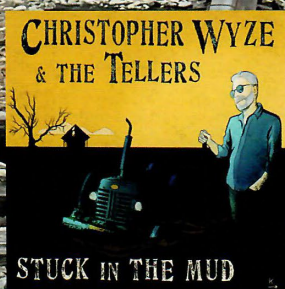


# STUCK IN THE MUD

## CHRISTOPHER WYZE & THE TELLERS

### THE TWENTY YEAR OVERNIGHT SUCCESS

**CHRISTOPHER WYZE** IS A NEW NAME TO READERS OF BLUES IN BRITAIN AND HE WAS A NEW NAME TO OUR FEATURE WRITER, PETE CLACK TOO. BUT THE TELLERS ALBUM, **STUCK IN THE MUD**, SUBSEQUENTLY BECAME A FIXTURE ON PETE'S CD PLAYER, SO IT WAS ONLY RIGHT AND PROPER THAT HE AND CHRISTOPHER WYZE GOT TOGETHER TO CHEW THE FAT AND GET TO THE BOTTOM OF A VIBRANT MUSICAL JOURNEY.

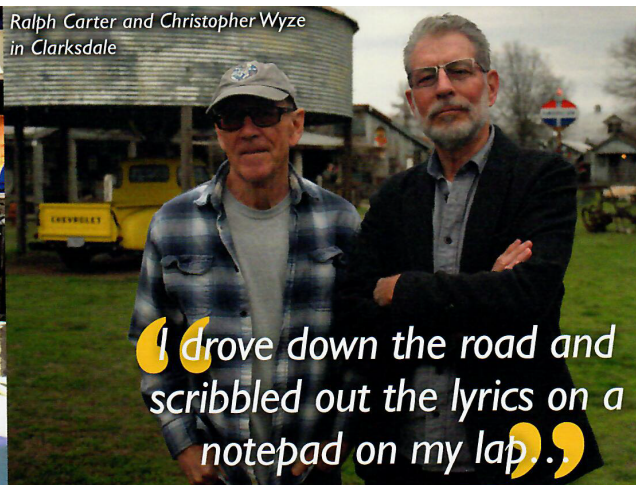


*The Mississippi Delta is a place to slow down and think about everything that's good and bad in this world*





Christopher Wyze and Ralph Carter



Ralph Carter and Christopher Wyze in Clarksdale

**I drove down the road and scribbled out the lyrics on a notepad on my lap..**

It started in earnest about twenty years ago when I got asked to be front man in a blues-rock cover band in Indiana. I was at a wine sampling dinner. There was a guy playing guitar – rock, blues, I'd had a couple of glasses – so when the guy took a break I wandered up, introduced myself and said I liked his blues stuff. He asked if I was a musician. For some reason, I said, "Yes, I sing," even though I hadn't sung or performed for years. Next thing I know, he asked me to join him on stage. We landed on a few blues standards we both knew and for the next forty minutes I sang and he played. The crowd got into it and when we wrapped up, he said, "We need a frontman for our band...you interested?" I'd never sang in a band before, but again, I said yes. A few days later, I met the guys, and we were off!

**You've been leading your own bands for, as you say, twenty years now. How did music become such a part of your life?**

Growing up, I was into classic rock and blues-rock and I sang and performed all through school. So being in a band was heaven, singing 'Stormy Monday', 'Help Me', 'Killing Floor', 'Key To The Highway', 'Born In Chicago', 'Ain't Superstitious', tons of blues standards. I couldn't get enough of it. I bought blues CDs, read blues books, learned blues harp, watched old blues videos on YouTube – you name it – so, when I eventually landed in Clarksdale, Mississippi at a blues harmonica workshop, I was prepared to go to the next level. It changed me and my music and I keep going back to Clarksdale several times a year. In fact, we did a Christopher Wyze & the Tellers show there last week, which we filmed and recorded. We did songs from our new album *Stuck In The Mud*, plus two classic blues numbers written in the 1920s by 'Scrapper' Blackwell, who's from my hometown of Indianapolis.

**Who most inspired you?**

The first big inspiration for me was the great English blues-rockers Long John Baldry, a guy mostly forgotten today. My brother had one of his albums *Everything Stops for Tea*. Man, his singing knocked me out! So, when I joined the band, I convinced the guys to try some of Baldry's blues covers: 'Can't Judge A Book', 'Seventh Son' and some others. In turn, the guys turned me on to Howlin' Wolf, Jimmy Reed, Savoy Brown, Junior Wells, Freddie King and others. Then, at my first harmonica workshop in Mississippi, I met RJ Mischo, a great bluesman, harpist and singer. RJ has played European blues festivals for years and has a big fan base there. RJ became a mentor. He taught me a lot about leading a band, playing harp and performing.

**So when did you find your own voice and start writing your own songs?**

It goes as far back as I can remember. My mom played records all the time: big bands, Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Louis Prima, The Mills Brothers, Ray Charles, Broadway musicals and I sang and whistled along. I remember paying particular attention to the lyrics. Later, I "studied" writing in university – I say "studied," because mostly I listened to music, partied, hung out and had way too much fun. Eventually, I got a real job, as a writer – newspaper, magazine, advertising, books. And I drifted away from music.

Joining the band brought me back to music. Then, a dozen years ago, I met an amazing guy at a harmonica camp in Clarksdale. Ralph Carter's a musician, songwriter, performer and producer. He wrote songs, performed and recorded with the great U.S. rocker Eddie Money.

At that point, I was singing and performing blues covers and playing harp and I just wanted to get better at all of that. Ralph challenged me. He said, "You need to be writing songs." I asked him why, and he said, "Someday you and I are going to make a record together...of your songs!" I thought he was crazy. But here we are – it happened! *Stuck In The Mud* has thirteen original songs, recorded in Muscle Shoals, Alabama and Clarksdale. None of this could have happened earlier in my life.

**You are now recognised as a first-rate songsmith which must give you great encouragement going forward -**

Late last year, the Nashville Songwriters Association (NSAI) International recognized me as a "one to watch" songwriter. The feedback and the award got me attention and it gave me confidence to look for a record label for the album. I knocked on doors, making cold calls on record label people. I drove hours and hours to their places of business, knocked on their doors, uninvited, introduced myself and asked if they'd put my album on their label. I wasn't intimidated; I had a ball. I was pumped up, excited and confident. None of those labels signed us, but all of them listened to our music, and they all said we had some great songs, terrific musicians and delivery.

About that time, a music producer and NSAI member in Tennessee connected me with Johnny Phillips in Memphis. Johnny runs Big Radio Records for Select-O-Hits, a company founded by two brothers, Johnny's dad and Sam Phillips. Sam is the guy who first recorded Elvis Presley. A couple of weeks after Johnny heard our music, I signed a deal with Big Radio Records. We added some new songs to the album and we recorded them in Clarksdale, Mississippi. *Stuck In The Mud*, hit #2 on the RMR Blues album chart in late July and 'Back To Clarksdale' hit #1 on the RMR blues song chart. A #1 song...oh, man! Soon, reviews started hitting music media around the world. They've had wonderful things to say about our album and that's brought in lots of listeners, so it's been a wild and crazy last few months, but, guess what? After twenty years, I'm an overnight success!

**Tell me about the blues scene in Indiana -**

There's a great blues scene there that goes way back with Indiana natives Hoagy Carmichael, Cole Porter and jazzman Wes Montgomery, all the way up to Michael Jackson and John Mellencamp. Students of the blues might know about Gennett Records, a record label and recording studio started by the Starr Piano company in Richmond, Indiana in 1917. Starr thought records would help sell pianos, but it was the studio and their records that took off. Jazz and blues musicians flocked to Indiana to record – Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Big Bill Broonzy, Duke Ellington, even 'Scrapper' Blackwell and Leroy Carr. Blackwell and Carr became huge stars in the early days of blues recording: they wrote and recorded some of the all-time great blues standards such as 'How Long Blues', 'Blues Before Sunrise', 'Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out' and 'Midnight Hour Blues' (**Editor's note: 'Scrapper' Blackwell and Leroy Carr recorded 'Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out' but it was written by Jimmy Cox, as Christopher pointed out.**) At our live show and recording session in Clarksdale, we recorded eight songs from *Stuck In The Mud* and as a tribute to our fellow Hoosiers (Indiana natives) 'Scrapper' and Leroy, we recorded two of their songs and we'll release them in a few months as part of a live album.



**The Mississippi Delta obviously informs a great deal of your music?**

Talking about what's special in the Delta, 'Kingfish' (**Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram**) probably said it best: *"There's something in the dirt."* There's such a history in the Delta: the music, hard work, hard times, cotton, farming, the river. You can feel it. We all know a lot of that history isn't good, but damn, the music that came out of the Delta, it'll live forever. For me, the Mississippi Delta is a place to slow down and think about everything that's good and bad in this world. I hope our music captures some of the feel of the Delta and the blues. I also wanted our album cover art to represent the Delta – flat land, stark trees, shacks and a tractor stuck in the mud. Super-talented illustrator and friend Koldo Barroso created it and he illustrated me into the scene. There I am, leaning on a shovel, with a smirk on my face. The tractor's stuck and there's not a damn thing I can do about it, expect maybe smile and shrug. The lyrics of another song on the album, 'Cotton Ain't King', is my effort to express the origins and importance of the Delta blues and 'Back To Clarksdale' is my personal story about what the Delta means to me.

**Stuck In The Mud had a long gestation period didn't it?**

About four years ago, I read an article about a new recording studio in Muscle Shoals, a live-in home, where musicians stayed and hung out, ate meals together, had a few beverages and made music. As I read the story, I flashed back to what Ralph [Carter] said about us making an album together. As a joke, I snapped a pic of the story and texted it to him saying, "Here's where we're going to make our album." I was kidding...maybe! Ralph texted back, "Let's do it. When do we record?" At this point I hadn't started writing songs, I had written maybe one song fragment, so I called Michael Wright at Ivy Manor Studio, booked his studio for a week and started writing lyrics. When I had a pile of them, maybe fifteen finished songs, I met with Ralph for three days in Clarksdale to make my stories into songs. Guitarist Eric Deaton, who plays and records with The Black Keys, Robert Finley, Hank Williams Jr. and others, joined us the last day. We made cell phone demos of each song we intended to record and, from there, Ralph rounded up studio musicians, wrote charts and planned out the recording sessions. In May 2022, me, Ralph, Gerry Murphy (Murph) and Eric Deaton arrived at Ivy Manor. The next day, Muscle Shoals session musicians Justin Holder (drums) and Brad Kuhn (keyboards) joined us. With Ralph Carter producing we started recording. Five days later, we had laid down all the parts of ten songs that made it onto the album.

Over the next year, as I mentioned earlier, we decided to record some additional blues songs – two that I wrote in Clarksdale with Mississippi singer-songwriter Cary Hudson. We decided to record in Clarksdale, at a local studio, for the feel and for the convenience. Cary drove up from Sumrall, Mississippi to join on guitar. We snagged Doug Banks from Memphis to play drums. On the drive to Clarksdale, the head of the studio called to say he couldn't do the session as he'd come down with Covid. Plan B was recording in the Juke Joint Chapel at the Shack Up Inn in Clarksdale. We brought in videographer, Coop Cooper to shoot video of the session - check out the video of *Stuck in the Mud* on YouTube.

**You say it's your first solo project but all those years on the road bring a real "life lived" feel, through the stories of each song, and your voice gives them real lived in feel.**

Some of my songs are about me and my life: 'Three Hours From Memphis', 'Back To Clarksdale' and 'Good Friend Gone', but others aren't everybody's story – feelings, the blues that we've all had. One reviewer said I write songs "regular folks can relate to." I don't know why, but I've always related to stories about regular folks, people down on their luck. Everybody, me included, has gone through losing streaks. I think of 'Life Behind Bars', 'Stuck In The Mud', 'Soul On The Road' and 'Hard Work Don't Pay' as my deep-down blues songs. Other songs I write are stories about lovable losers - 'Someday', 'Looking For My Baby' and 'Money Spent Blues' come to mind. Songwriting comes easily to me - take 'Three Hours From Memphis' as an example. I was driving to meet Ralph Carter to pick him up at the airport in Memphis then drive to Clarksdale to work on songs. I looked down to see where I was. The GPS said three hours from Memphis and those words hit me. "Damn...that's a song!" Over the next hour, I drove down the road while I scribbled out the lyrics on a notepad on my lap!

**What does the road ahead look like?**

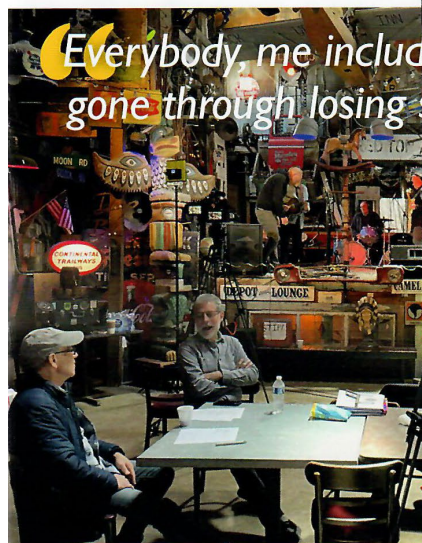
It's to perform at European Blues Festivals in 2025. So, to all you European Festival talent bookers, take a look and see what Christopher Wyze & the Tellers can offer. European blues festival people...call us!

Pete Clack

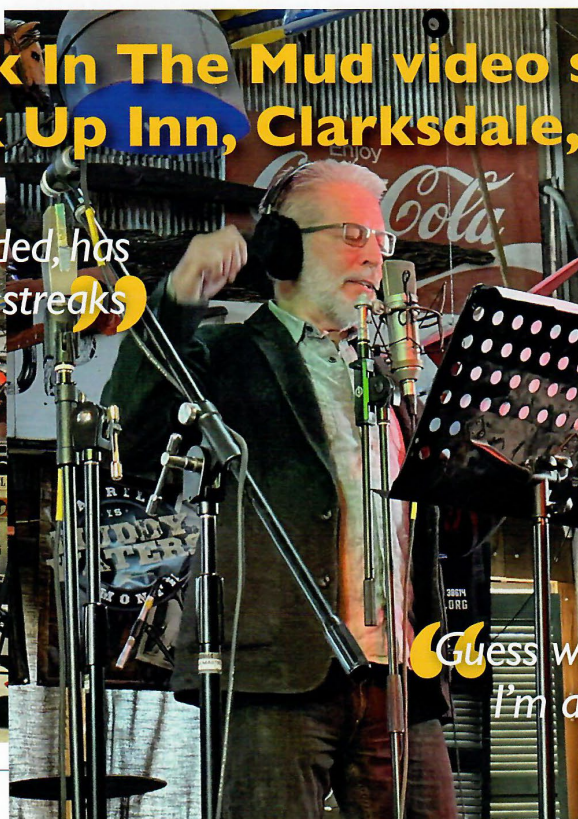
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*Stuck In The Mud* is out now via Big Radio Records

## Stuck In The Mud video shoot: The Shack Up Inn, Clarksdale, Mississippi



Everybody, me included, has gone through losing streaks



Guess what? After twenty years, I'm an overnight success!

