Christopher Wyze on Naptown Blues

Interview by Michael Limnios for Blues.gr · Oct. 27, 2026

Christopher Wyze speaks about his philosophy surrounding music—a music that, as he emphasizes, transcends borders and cultures to give voice to universal human emotions



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Christopher Wyze's answers from his interview draft, organized by topic. The published interview includes the original questions and edited responses.

Read the published interview on Blues.gr





Returning to Indianapolis

Well, it had tremendous influence. In fact, Naptown was the inspiration for the album. Indianapolis is where Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell lived, met and made their first recordings. It's also where my bandmates Gerry Murphy and John Boyle and I first met, recorded and performed together. My own musical journey has been centered around this city, just as theirs was. So there was a strong personal and emotional connection from the beginning. The seed for the album was planted when we recorded 'How Long, How Long Blues' for our Live in Clarksdale album a few years ago.

That performance was almost spur of the moment. We came up with the idea the day before the show, ran through the song a couple of times and played it live. We all knew the song was by Leroy and Scrapper, but we didn't know nearly enough about them. I vaguely knew Scrapper was from Indianapolis; I'm not even sure I knew Leroy lived here, too. On the drive home from Clarksdale, after the show, recording and filming, we listened to their music in the car and talked about how amazing those two men were.

I think that's where the idea for Naptown Blues really began. I've recorded in Nashville, Memphis, Muscle Shoals and the Mississippi Delta. But recording this album at Postal Recording in Indianapolis carried an extra weight and importance because of the connection to Leroy and Scrapper. From the first time we walked into the studio, there was a feeling of reverence among us. We were recording the songs of our hometown blues heroes, here in our hometown. That mindset was with us from the start, and it made the atmosphere extra special.

Why Carr and Blackwell matter

Leroy and Scrapper are a big part of my respect and reverence for the blues. They were enormously important in helping the music move beyond the South and the Mississippi Delta to other parts of the country. When people talk about the blues migrating north, they usually think of Chicago. And of course that's part of the story. But the music stopped in Indiana, too. Indianapolis was home to Leroy and Scrapper, and Richmond, about an hour east of me, was home to Gennett Records, which recorded major figures in early American music, including Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller and Jelly Roll Morton.

Indiana deserves a place in the story of how this music developed and spread. It saddens me that Leroy and Scrapper have become so unfamiliar to many listeners. They were among the most important and influential blues musicians of that early recording era,

yet their career together lasted only about eight years, with recordings made during seven of them. In that short time they recorded roughly 200 sides. They began in the Roaring Twenties and kept making and selling records through the Great Depression, when the economy had been turned upside down. That's remarkable. And they weren't obscure performers in their own time. From what I've been able to find, 'How Long, How Long Blues' sold around a million copies. I've also seen estimates that there were about 12 million record players in America then, perhaps 3 million of them in Black households.

Leroy and Scrapper were marketed primarily to Black listeners as 'race record' artists. If those numbers are anywhere close to accurate, the reach of that one record was extraordinary. Today

people may know that song without knowing much about the men who made it. That's one reason I wanted to make Naptown Blues. Of course I hope people listen to our album. But my bigger hope is that they'll discover Leroy and Scrapper themselves: their music, their stories and those hundreds of recordings. I want listeners to feel some of the admiration for these two hometown bluesmen that Gerry, John and I feel.

They shouldn't be forgotten.

Recording as a trio

It really wasn't that challenging. Gerry, John and I have known one another and performed and recorded together for 10 or 15 years. We communicate so easily when we're making music that we can concentrate on the one job in front of us: delivering the song, whether it's something I've written or something written by Leroy and Scrapper. In our trio, each of us occupies his own musical space. There's very little overlap, and the parts fit together. We didn't need to sit around saying, 'Gerry, make sure you do this; John, you do that; and I'll do this.' We already know how to listen to one another.

That's why working without drums or percussion didn't feel like stripping anything away. We rehearsed the songs a few times, but we deliberately didn't over-rehearse. We wanted the performances to stay fresh. Leroy and Scrapper's recordings were made live, with the musicians playing together. They had microphones and electric recording technology, rather than the purely acoustic methods of the earliest years, but none of the modern options for patching and enhancing a performance. The takes we can hear today captured real performances. If something went wrong, they couldn't simply fix a passage with an overdub the way we can now.

We did use a few overdubs ourselves, so I don't want to pretend we recreated their recording process exactly. But we tried to keep that live feeling. Each of us paid attention to his individual contribution while listening closely to what the other two were doing. The result, I hope, is the sound of three musicians making something together, each putting his heart into it. That's what I mean by the authentic soul of the tracks.

Making the songs our own

First, I would say we didn't feel any need to put a modern stamp on the music. We performed it the only way we know how. Is that a modern stamp? I suppose it is, simply because we're musicians making music today. But we never sat down with the conscious goal of making Leroy and Scrapper sound modern. The respect came first. Just contemplating recording their songs took me aback a little. I felt we should do it only if we could approach the music with the utmost respect and do the best job we possibly could in our own way.

We weren't trying to imitate them or be impersonators. We're not the musicians, or the virtuosos, they were, and we don't pretend to be. Gerry, John and I each have our own way of playing, and we've developed our own way of working together. So naturally the songs sound like us. I suppose that's where our stamp comes from. It wasn't something we tried to impose on their music. Our love for their music started this whole journey, and I hope that respect comes through in what we recorded.

Inside Postal Recording

Yes, absolutely. I think we all felt that spiritual connection. It was almost impossible not to. On our way to the studio we drove near the places where Leroy and Scrapper met and first recorded. Postal Recording itself is roughly five kilometers from the site where they made their first four recordings, including 'How Long, How Long Blues,' their biggest and most enduring hit. We'd be driving to a session and talking about that history along the way. It was like getting a little history lesson before we even arrived.

And Postal is in an old post office building from the 1930s. Between the building and the streets we passed on the way there, it felt almost as though we were walking back in time. Then we'd go into the studio and begin playing the music of these two men who had lived and worked so close by. By then we'd spent roughly a year listening to their music, talking about it and learning as much as we could about their lives. So, yes, I felt an extra responsibility, and I think the other guys did, too.

These weren't just songs we'd chosen to cover. They were songs made famous by two of the great bluesmen from our own city. That gave the sessions an emotional significance that was with us every time we played.

Telling the forgotten stories

Before I became a songwriter and recording artist, I was a journalist, a magazine writer, a book author, an advertising writer and an ad agency owner. I've spent more than 40 years writing, and history has always interested me, whether it's music, sports, architecture, advertising or art. So researching the stories behind the music comes pretty naturally to me. I guess I see my role as more than just recording songs by a couple of great bluesmen. Almost as soon as we got home from Clarksdale, I started trying to find out more about Leroy and Scrapper.

And the more I learned, the more I realized how much I still didn't know. Information about their lives wasn't easy to find. I spent several days at the Indiana Historical Society going through the personal files of Duncan Scheidt, a writer and photographer who worked mostly with jazz musicians and helped bring Scrapper Blackwell back to public attention in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I worked through box after box of photographs, letters and documents. Among them was correspondence concerning Scrapper's rediscovery and a recording agreement that Scheidt helped arrange with a label in the UK.

There was even an original copy of a contract signed by Scrapper and the record label. To be able to read those papers was extraordinary. What struck me was the contrast between their tremendous success and the sadness of their personal stories. Scrapper said in a 1960 interview that he and Leroy were each paid $4,000 for 'How Long, How Long Blues' in 1928. That was a huge sum at the time. You'd think that kind of success might have set them up for life. But it didn't. Leroy struggled with alcohol, and his death certificate, which I've seen, lists acute alcoholism as the cause of his death.

He was just 30 when he died in 1935. Imagine that. After Leroy died, Scrapper made only a few more recordings and then stopped. One of them was 'My Old Pal Blues,' dedicated to Leroy's memory, which he recorded in Chicago with Bumble Bee Slim and Dot Rice. It's a heartbreaking

song. To my ears, you can hear how deeply Leroy's death affected him. As far as I've been able to find out, Scrapper made very little music, perhaps none, for years afterward, until his rediscovery around 1959. He died in 1962 at age 59.

Their stories almost seem too improbable to be real. But they were real. Once I learned these things, I felt an obligation to share them. The music on Naptown Blues is one way of doing that. Another is the 24-page booklet that comes with the CD. It tells the story of where Leroy and Scrapper were born, how they came to Indianapolis as youngsters, where they lived, how they met and recorded, and what happened to them. I wanted people to have a way to learn about the men behind the records, not just hear our interpretations of their songs.

Does the blues itself have an obligation to tell forgotten stories in order to stay alive? I don't know if I'd put it that way. What I do know is that I love the blues, and I care deeply about its history. Once I found out what I did about Leroy and Scrapper, I couldn't keep it to myself. Every blues fan deserves a chance to learn about them. Whatever more I discover, I'll be delighted to share it.

That same urge to share what I've learned led me to create a YouTube video series called Leroy & Scrapper's Naptown. I traveled around Indianapolis with a camera, filming places connected to their lives and deaths. I went to Indiana Avenue, including the site of the Indiana Avenue Music Shop where Leroy and Scrapper met in 1928, the Madame Walker Theater where Leroy performed, and to the Indianapolis Athletic Club building where Carr and Blackwell recorded their first four songs – including How Long-How Long Blues in June of 1928.

I visited the location of Leroy's last home on Northwestern Avenue and Scrapper's apartment on North Capitol Avenue, the place he resided at the time of his death. We also go to some especially sad places: the alley behind 527 West 17th Street where Scrapper was found murdered in 1962. I went to Floral Park Cemetery where Leroy was buried in 1935 and New Crown Cemetery where Scrapper was laid to rest. There's something powerful about seeing the actual places where these men lived and where their stories unfolded. For me, they went from being old bluesmen who recorded nearly 100 years ago, to being real people who lived in the same city where I now live in.

I wanted blues fans, wherever they are in the world, to be able to take this same trip, with me – even if they've never been to Naptown. People can sign up to get these videos plus additional ones we'll be filming delivered to their email inbox. People can go to this link and enter their email: https://christopherwyzeandthetellers.com/naptown-blues-videos. There's no charge for the videos. My hope is that these plus our new CD will inspire people to explore Leroy and Scrapper's original recordings and appreciate their lives and contributions to the history of the blues that happened right here in my hometown: Indianapolis, Indiana (Naptown).