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Christopher Wyze *and* The Tellers

Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell recorded the song, "How Long – How Long Blues" in 1928. It became their breakthrough record and one of the telling blues recordings of its era. Over time, the song found its way into the set lists of artists like Ray Charles, B.B. King, Count Basie, Dinah Washington, Lou Rawls and countless others. It also became a curious fixation for Blues band Christopher Wyze and The Tellers.

It seems that Carr and Blackwell hailed from their hometown of Indianapolis, Indiana and that piqued their curiosity. After some research and a deep dive in to who these gents were, Wyze, John Boyle III and Gerry Murphy decided to record an album of their tunes. The outcome was a hip, 11-song collection called Naptown Blues that reintroduced Carr and Blackwell's career to the world.

I spoke to Christopher Wyze one day in September and he outlined the circumstances that led to the recording of some extraordinary Blues songs that had been forgotten for nearly 100 years...



METRONOME: What spawned the idea to do a recording of Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell songs?

Christopher Wyze: Well, it kind of came out of the blue. We did an album about a year ago called Live In Clarksdale. We were driving down to Mississippi to do this show, and I was in the car with a couple of my bandmates. We said, Why don't we do a couple of old songs? "How Long-How Long Blues is one we all knew. So we got the band together and rehearsed the day before the show and put that song into the show and recorded it.

On the way home, we were talking about it and we realized they Carr and Blackwell were from Indianapolis where we're from. I thought, I have to look into this. That's kind of where it started.

The more and more I looked into it, I was just amazed at what I found about these huge stars at the time that had just been so forgotten. So it kind of became an obsession.

I was working for a producer in Nashville and we started doing stuff for television and film and he said, Do you have any old Blues songs? I said, I have this one we've done. It's an old Leroy and Scrapper song and we recorded a couple of others here in Indianapolis.

Then John Boyle and I said, Wouldn't it be cool if we did a whole album like this? So Gerry Murphy, John and I got together and said, Let's pick out eight or ten of these tunes and record them in Indianapolis and do it mainly acoustically just like Leroy and Scrapper did it. Boom, there it was.

I wasn't planning on this. I'm not even sure I had the time for it, but it just had to happen. It was just one of those things.

METRONOME: How long did it take to record the album?

I think we had three different sessions. It was pretty quick. We had three guys, myself, John Boyle III on guitars and Gerry Murphy on acoustic bass. We did just three different sessions, put it all in the can and it was about 3-1/2 days. That was really how the thing all came together.

We did it in a local studio right here in Indianapolis which was a cool, old studio downtown in an old post office that I think might even have delivered Scrapper Blackwell's mail.

We only rehearsed a few times and channeled those guys. We had no drums and not a lot of instrumentation. So it was a simple process.

METRONOME: What's the name of the studio and who owns it?

The name is Postal Recording. It's owned by a couple of guys and they've had it for ten years. It has a really beautiful setup. They record people from all over. They're really pretty quiet about the business. I ran into them through a buddy who's a musician. I said I want to record locally because we had never really recorded here. He said, "Check these guys out." We started doing everything here.

METRONOME: I love the way you treated the song, "Naptown Blues." Were you happy with the way it came out?

Yes, absolutely. It feels like the real vibe that we were trying to capture. These were Indianapolis guys. They weren't from the Mississippi Delta. They weren't approaching their music worn out and tired everyday from picking cotton and singing about misery. Their blues were a little bit different. They were city guys. So I think that song really captures it. It was originally recorded in June of 1929. That was before the stock market crashed. They were at the height of the roaring '20s. It was upbeat and happening.

We didn't try to do covers of their songs. We did it our own way. John, Jerry and I have played together for so many years. I've gotta be honest with you, I really, really love that song. It's kind of hard to pick one of your favorites. It's a swinging tune. It's different. I can't believe it was originally recorded in 1929. That's wild. It's a fun song. We just played it here on TV in Indianapolis the other day.

METRONOME: I studied Leroy and Scrapper and they were dapper guys. They dressed well and weren't cotton field Bluesmen.

Yes, they were dapper guys. As I say, it was a swinging time and these were cool guys. People worked during the day and then went out to clubs at night. Indiana Avenue is what they sing about in "Naptown Blues." That was a whole district for the black community. It was a swinging, cool place. People dressed up and it had a sparkle to it. They were sharp dudes.

METRONOME: I loved the swing of "The Truth About The Blues." What made you choose that song?

They recorded 200+ songs but I love that one because they were doing well for a time. It was right before the depression. I read in an interview that Scrapper said they each made $4,000 dollars for "How Long-How Long Blues." I think they were rolling in it.

I do know that Leroy drove a fancy car and not everybody had one. I knew that because his car got stolen. It was in the newspaper. It got stolen here in Indianapolis. They probably saw the height of things. I loved the story of that song.

METRONOME: I also really liked "Kokomo Blues." Can you tell me why you chose that song?

Well, Kokomo is a little town that's about an hour straight north from the city. I happen to know there was a train between Indianapolis and Kokomo. I could see Leroy or Scrapper going up to Kokomo to call on a

lady or something like that. They would hop on the train.

The song "Sweet Home Chicago" by Robert Johnson is essentially "Kokomo Blues" by Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell. The original recording was just Scrapper on guitar.

I sometimes close my eyes and imagine Robert Johnson listening to Scrapper Blackwell's song and listening to Leroy Carr and Scrapper play it because they were big stars up until 1935 when Leroy passed away.

I think Robert Johnson recorded "Sweet Home Chicago" in 1936. Who knows, maybe Scrapper heard the melody from someone else and it was getting passed around. I've just gotta believe though that Robert Johnson was locked in on Scrapper Blackwell's "Kokomo Blues."

METRONOME: "Prison Bound Blues" had a lazy cadence to it. What was that about?

I did a lot of research on these guys. I don't think either one of these guys went to prison, but I know Leroy was in jail. I happen to know he was arrested in Indianapolis on December 22, a couple of days before Christmas, so maybe he was sitting in the slammer right before Christmas.

This is a Leroy Carr tune. It's one of their better-known songs. I particularly like that one. It has that desperation of, Hey, what did I do to myself? I love the story and it's a beautiful song.

METRONOME: What did Leroy go to jail for?

Drunk driving. There was a story in the Indianapolis papers about the mayor cracking down on drunk driving. It talked about Leroy Carr getting arrested, so they were making an example of a famous guy in town. He died at age 30 from inflammation of the liver, so you can just imagine what that was from.

METRONOME: Did "Birthday in Jail" have something to do with that same event?

"Birthday In Jail" was actually a rewritten set of lyrics that we did and actually a rewritten song. So it's different music from the original. The original one was titled, "Christmas In Jail - Ain't That A Pain?"

They wrote 90% of the songs they recorded, but they didn't write that one. This one was written by J.E. Guernsey and Floyd Thompson. Two local guys and Guernsey was the guy who introduced Leroy to Scrapper in 1928.

He owned a record shop on Indiana Avenue. Guernsey opened the record shop because he was a Vocalion Records dealer. Vocalion is the record label that ultimately Leroy and Scrapper ended up recording for.

Guernsey actually interviewed them and asked them, "Would you guys be interested in going to Chicago to record some Blues?" Scrapper said, "No. I'm not going to Chicago. That's not going to happen." As it turns out, he was a bootlegger here and he had a business to run.

So Guernsey comes up with the idea, "What If I could have them bring down the gear to Indianapolis and record here?" They both said, "Yeah, we could probably do that." That's exactly what happened.

Guernsey convinced Vocalion Records to send some recording equipment down here in 1928 and set up in a spare office in a building downtown. They recorded Leroy and Scrapper's first four songs ever. They did it right here in downtown Indianapolis. "How Long - How Long Blues" is still being played today and it was recorded right here in Naptown.

METRONOME: Why did they call Indianapolis "Naptown."

Yeah. That was kind of a hip, swinging term. It's kind of a Jazz-era term. There used to be a college radio station here in the 1970s with the call letters, WNAP for Naptown.

Later, the word Naptown became a negative because it was perceived to be a sleepy, nothing-going-on-here town. It's origins were from the roaring 20s.

METRONOME: Did you have a lot of songs to choose from for the album?

It was a little daunting, but some of the songs were no-brainers. With an album called Naptown Blues, I had to have some Blues songs on there. Many of their songs were in the public domain, as well as most of these, so that kept it in the checks and balances. That made it very doable and gave us some leeway for what we could do with the songs. That gave us the freedom to make them our own.

We would all listen to the songs and say, That's cool. Oh, and that's cool. Did I listen to all 200 that they had recorded? Quite possibly. We would pass songs around and share them and boom, there we go.

METRONOME: How long of a process was that?

We came to this from the live show and live album that we did in Mississippi. Scrapper's music was on our mind. It was probably over the period of a year before we were actually going to do anything. John in particular just became smitten by Scrapper's guitar playing. He was a sophisticated player doing songs that when you listen to them now you say, that's a very modern sound. It was jumbling around in our minds for a long time and then we decided to make the record.

METRONOME: Carr and Blackwell were clearly ahead of their time. Just the way they dressed was not indicative of their time period. I think they were treated like royalty.

Most blues men of that period lived a tough life. Their life was different. Their lens was different because there was a hip, upbeat, happening scene here in Indianapolis. I did some research on Indiana Avenue where that record shop was located. It's pretty certain that he introduced the two of them in his record shop. It was more than just a record shop, it was a music shop. He had pianos and instruments. He sold all of that stuff.

The day he introduced them, he asked Leroy to sit at the piano and play some stuff for Scrapper.

I think people had disposable income back then. They spent money on records, going out to clubs and being entertained. These guys came right out of that. They were huge stars and probably had some wealth. They were a different kind of people making the Blues than we think of the traditional blues that was being made in the 1920s.

METRONOME: What attracted people to Indianapolis as far as work at that time?

It's really interesting. They were building cars. Quite a few of them. The Stutz-Bearcat factory is still standing downtown in Indianapolis. There was a number of automobile companies here. The guy that invented the headlamp for the car was here in Indianapolis, the Presto Light Corporation. Carl Fischer was here. He was the guy who created the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. This was the center of automobile technology. They built a track to showcase automobiles. There were a number of automobile manufacturers here.

It was a big city so I also know that there were meat packers here and farm related work. A guy could get a job in a factory and make a good income.

METRONOME: What's coming up in the future for you?

I'm headed to Muscle Shoals the last day of this month for ten days to record another album of original music. I'm working pretty much full time at writing and producing, marketing and recording music that we're doing. I feel like I have an opportunity here to make some music and have some fun doing some important projects. I'm putting all my energy in to it.

Recently, I just finished recording nine different videos on location here in Indianapolis that I call The Naptown Blues Story of Leroy and Scrapper. I went to the record store where they first met and filmed a short video there. I went to the building where they recorded their first four records and recorded a video there. I went to both of their grave sites. They're both buried here at two different cemeteries. I shot video there.

I did a bunch of these history videos, and I'm making them available on YouTube. People can go to my website and find them. I'm also doing videos on each one of the songs. I'm talking about where they were recorded and when. It will be cool for people to watch.

-- Brian M. Owens