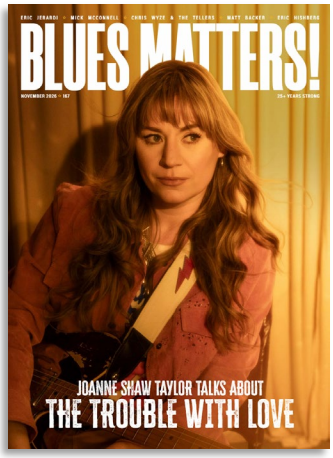
BLUES MATTERS! November 2026

ERIC JERARDI ☆ MICK MCCONNELL ☆ CHRIS WYZE & THE TELLERS ☆ MATT BACKER ☆ ERIC HISHBERG

Christopher Wyze & the Tellers – 8 page feature on *Naptown Blues*





FOLLOWING THE TRAIL

Christopher Wyze and the Tellers' Chris Wyze talks to Stephen Harrison about his fascination with Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell, the overlooked role of Indianapolis in early blues history, and why recording their music close to where it all began became something deeply personal.

Stephen Harrison Arnie Goodman

For Chris Wyze, the journey into the music of Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell began almost by accident. Like many blues listeners, he already knew Carr through "How Long, How Long Blues", and Scrapper Blackwell's name was familiar, but the pair had never been the focus of any serious study. That changed when Wyze took his band to Clarksdale to record Live in Clarksdale. On the drive south from Indianapolis, he suggested they add an old song to the set. "Why don't we throw an old song that we know into the mix? How about 'How Long, How Long Blues'?" Once in Clarksdale, the musicians worked through their own material before Wyze asked whether everyone knew the Carr and Blackwell classic. They did. They played it, filmed it and recorded it.

It was on the journey home that curiosity really took hold. The musicians began listening to more of Carr and Blackwell's recordings and discussing what they were hearing. "We just got into it and said, wow, this is just cool music. We didn't know this was out there. Who the heck are these guys?" Once back in Indianapolis, Wyze began researching properly. A binder filled with articles, printouts, and notes grew steadily as what began as curiosity became, by his own admission, something of an obsession. The deeper he went, the more remarkable the story became, not least because the story was unfolding in the very city where Wyze himself lives.

WHERE IT BEGAN

Carr and Blackwell first came together in Indianapolis in 1928, and Wyze has traced their meeting through a 1960 interview given by Blackwell. According to Scrapper's account, music-store owner J. E. Guernsey introduced the pair. Carr was asked to play piano for Blackwell and, not long afterwards, the idea of recording together was proposed. Blackwell initially rejected travelling to Chicago to make records because he had business in Indianapolis. Wyze laughs at what that business may have involved. "Turns out he was a bootlegger in our world," he says, adding that Carr may have been involved in the same trade.

A compromise was found. Rather than sending the musicians to Chicago, the recording equipment came to Indianapolis. Vocalion Records set up a portable studio in a building in the city and, within weeks of meeting, Carr and Blackwell were recording together. On or around 19 June 1928, the pair cut four songs: "My Own Lonesome Blues", "Kokomo Blues", "Penal Farm Blues" and "How Long, How Long Blues". The fact that such significant recordings emerged from two musicians who had only recently met still amazes Wyze. "They had just met a few weeks earlier. I don't know where the song came from. Maybe Carr had already written it and said, 'Hey Scrapper, play along', but there you go."

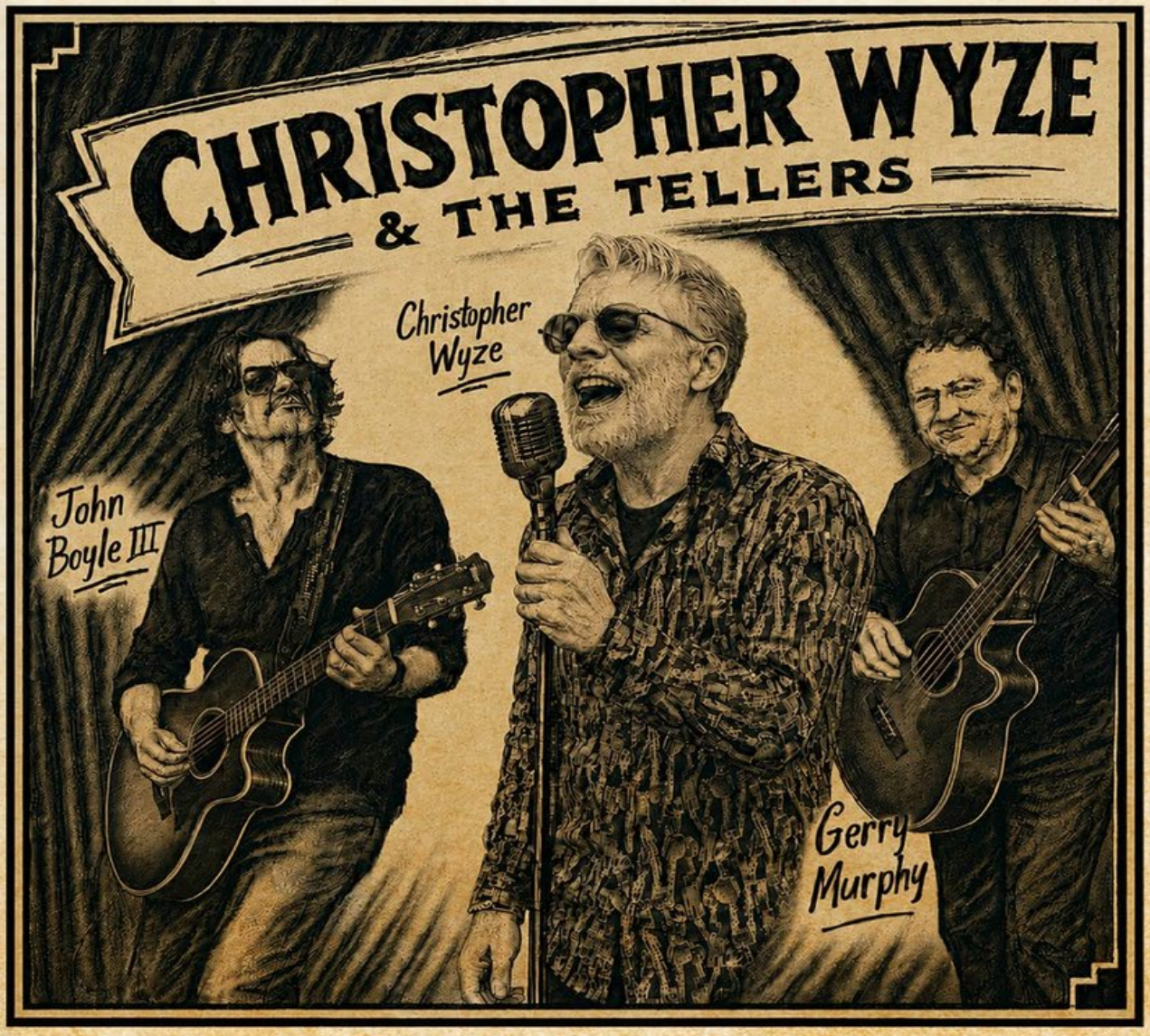
For Wyze, simply standing outside the building where those sessions took place has become an emotional experience. "If I could only climb into that room from almost a hundred years ago and understand how you got from meeting a few weeks ago to right here and you're recording music. And not only recording music, but it's amazing music." Carr and Blackwell would later record in Chicago and New York, but their partnership began in Indianapolis, a fact that Wyze believes deserves far more attention.

That has led him into the wider story of Indiana's place in the development and recording of early American music. The familiar blues narrative often runs from the





LISTEN
TO THIS
INTERVIEW





Francis 'Scrapper' Blackwell Buried In New Crown Thursday

Funeral services for Francis (Scrapper) Blackwell, well known guitarist, blues vocalist and composer, who died Sunday in General Hospital, were held Thursday at the Jacobs Brothers Westside Mortuary. Burial was in New Crown Cemetery. Mr. Blackwell was 65, and lived at 1116 N. Capitol Ave., Apt. 46.

Mr. Blackwell first became known to the entertainment public back in the '20s when he was a featured artist with the late and popular vocalist-pianist Leroy Carr, who died in 1935. The pair is remembered for their recordings of "How Long Blues," "Blackwell-Carr," "Soft Blues" and many others.

Blackwell was rediscovered recently after many years of gigging around the state by a small group "Shady Lane Blues," and "Goin To Jail About It Blues."

This musician should certainly be called the "Blues King" of our country and England, wrote Bob Womack back in January. All of his numbers are on sale in England, and can be obtained by writing to the Jazz Record Shop, 77 Charing Cross Rd., London W.C. 2, England.

Blues songs featuring Mr. Blackwell have been made into a long-playing record by Arthur Rosenbaum, graduate of Shortridge and now attending college in the East. Mr. Rosenbaum and associate Kenneth S. Goldstein made five recordings here last summer of the label Bluesville 1047.

"Scrapper" and Leroy Carr made more than 80 records during





The Indiana Album. Evan Finch Collection

Mississippi Delta to Memphis and then Chicago, but Wyze believes that leaves out an important piece of the map. He points to the importance of Gennett Records in Richmond, Indiana, where musicians including Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Fats Waller made important early recordings. The company grew out of a piano business and, crucially, was willing to record Black musicians at a time when many other companies and institutions were not.

"For my version of the blues in America, it goes from the Mississippi Delta through Richmond, Indiana, and Indianapolis, and then to Chicago," Wyze says. "It was quite different music that Leroy Carr and Scrapper played from the music of the Mississippi Delta. It was not the same at all. They added something and created something so very different from what was thought of as the blues at the time."

CARR, BLACKWELL AND THE MUSIC THAT FOLLOWED

The more Wyze has studied their recordings, the more connections he has begun to hear with what came afterwards. One particularly fascinating example is Blackwell's "Kokomo Blues", recorded in 1928. Its melody and structure will immediately sound familiar to anyone who knows Robert Johnson's "Sweet Home Chicago", recorded eight years later.

"You could say, well, where did Scrapper get the song? Who knows?" Wyze says. "So many blues melodies and blues chord progressions have been traded around a million times. That's part of what makes the blues really cool. There's a lot of similarity in all of it, but it can be so very different."

Wyze credits Blackwell with the tune that would later surface in Johnson's recording, while remaining careful not to claim that Blackwell necessarily invented every part of it. The trail may stretch further back still, and that uncertainty is part of what keeps him searching. The same is true of Robert Johnson himself, whose life remains wrapped in missing information and competing stories. Carr and Blackwell, Wyze discovered, present many of the same problems.

"I thought, I'm gonna go find all this amazing information and photographs and posters and handbills and where they performed and stories. You know what? I'm striking out."

That absence is particularly striking given just how popular Carr and Blackwell appear to have been. They recorded from 1928 until Carr died in 1935, and Wyze believes they made around 200 recordings during that relatively short period. He has also come across claims that "How Long, How Long Blues" sold around a million copies. By looking at the number of phonographs likely to have existed in American homes at the time, Wyze began to appreciate what that figure could represent.

"You talk about incredibly popular and huge stars, Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell," he says. Yet the surviving photographic, biographical and performance record is surprisingly thin. Wyze believes race played a considerable part in that. The pair were marketed within the record industry's so-called "race record" catalogues, aimed specifically at Black audiences, and did not receive the same mainstream documentation afforded to many white performers.

"That's very sad for folks like us who want to find out more. There's not much."

SUCCESS, DISAPPEARANCE AND REDISCOVERY

Carr died in 1935 at only 30 years old, with his death certificate attributing his death to acute alcoholism and nephritis. Blackwell recorded briefly afterwards, including four songs with pianist Dot Rice, then effectively disappeared from the recording world. For almost a quarter of a century, the trail goes remarkably cold.

"We think he lived in Indianapolis during that time," Wyze says. "But I'm not sure anybody knows whatever happened to Scrapper Blackwell."

His rediscovery in 1959 has become another major strand of Wyze's research. Journalist and photographer Duncan Scheidt found Blackwell in Indianapolis and began attempting to help him return to music. Wyze has spent hours working through Scheidt's surviving archive at the Indiana Historical Society, reading correspondence between Scheidt and record labels as he tried to persuade them that Blackwell was ready to record again.

The letters paint a moving picture. Scheidt wrote of Blackwell coming to his home, his singing and playing gradually returning, and the hope of securing a new recording opportunity. Eventually Blackwell was recorded in Scheidt's house, with the resulting music finding its way to 77 Records in London. Wyze has even held Blackwell's own copy of the recording contract.

"Francis Hillman Blackwell. I held it in my hands a few months ago, Stephen, and I could scarcely believe what I had in my hands. Tragic, exciting, uplifting, sad, all of that in one moment."

Other correspondence reveals how little money Blackwell had by then. There are requests for relatively small sums to be sent because, as Scheidt explained, he needed the money. It is a painful contrast to the success Carr and Blackwell appear to have enjoyed decades earlier. In the 1960 interview, Blackwell said the pair had each received around $4,000 from "How Long, How Long Blues", an



enormous amount in the late 1920s. How much survived the Great Depression, Carr's drinking and the years that followed is impossible to know.

Wyze has found other fragments of Carr's life scattered through newspaper archives. One report details his arrest for drunken driving just before Christmas, leading Wyze to wonder whether the experience may have been connected with "Christmas in Jail, Ain't That a Pain", a song Carr and Blackwell later recorded. Another reports the theft of Carr's expensive Hupmobile from outside his Indianapolis home. They are small details, but when so much has disappeared, every surviving piece matters.

"As a researcher and as a historian, I'm just looking for anything I can find, even if it's the fact that his car got stolen."

BRINGING THE SONGS HOME

The research eventually fed directly back into Wyze's own music. His interpretations of Carr and Blackwell are not intended as museum pieces, nor has he attempted to copy every original arrangement. He has taken songs including "Prison Bound Blues", "Kokomo Blues" and "How Long, How Long Blues" and approached them from his own perspective while maintaining respect for the material.

For Stephen Harrison, "Prison Bound Blues" is perhaps the clearest example of why these songs still matter. If he had to introduce somebody to the emotional essence of blues with one recording, he says, that would be his choice. The opening lines tell of waking with the blues, locked in a cell and thinking about home, while later verses turn towards abandonment and the fear that freedom and love may both be gone.

Wyze understands exactly why it struck him. Whether Carr himself ever spent time in prison is uncertain, although Wyze has found evidence that he spent time in jail. That uncertainty says something important about blues songwriting itself. Some songs are autobiography, others are invention, and the best can make the distinction irrelevant.

"You can imagine," Wyze says. "How can people write novels and movies about things that they never experienced? Same thing with the blues."

When Christopher Wyze and the Tellers came to record this material, they did so at Postal Recording Studio in downtown Indianapolis, around two and a half miles from the place where Carr and Blackwell first recorded together. Wyze, Jerry Murphy and John Boyle recorded acoustically, without drums or percussion. The location mattered.

"There was a spirit in that building," Wyze recalls. "It's an old post office. It just felt really special, and we were honoured to be able to record their music."

He has even found reason to believe that the building may once have handled mail for Blackwell, who lived nearby for a time. Whether or not every historical thread can ever be tied together, the sense of connection was undeniable.

"To be in that studio and say go and sing 'Prison Bound Blues' and 'Kokomo Blues' and 'How Long, How Long Blues' and 'I'm Going Back to Tennessee', all these great songs, it was a little hard not to get choked up because it is really, really special."

After months of research, Wyze describes Carr and Blackwell almost as people he has come to know rather than simply musicians from history. There are still huge gaps, unanswered questions and stories probably lost forever, but that only seems to have strengthened his determination to keep digging.

"I feel like I know these guys," he says. "And I sure wish I knew them better."

Perhaps that is the real purpose behind the project. It is not simply about recording old songs again. It is about reconnecting names, places and stories that could easily slip further into history, and reminding listeners that the blues did not travel along one simple road.

For Wyze, Indiana belongs on that map. So do Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell.

And nearly a century after they first climbed the stairs of an Indianapolis building and made music together, their story is still unfolding.

EXPLORE



"There was a spirit in that building"