

**An Interview with Scrapper Blackwell – Theodore F. Watts
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Indianapolis, Indiana, is not very often mentioned by historians tracing the development of jazz. Those of us who live here tend to think of Richmond, Indiana, as the nearest jazz Mecca of the early days, because of the Gennett studios. But even from rudimentary research it begins to emerge that a large group of jazz and blues musicians were associated with Naptown. And new leads are being discovered every year. Indianapolis probably functioned as a stopping-off place—it is on the route to Chicago and Detroit.

Probably the most exciting find of this past year was the discovery that Scrapper Blackwell, the blues guitarist associated with Leroy Carr, was still alive and living in Indianapolis. It was no less surprising when he told me that Indianapolis had always been his home. This experience underlines the great division that can exist between two cultures existing in the same place.

I first learned about Scrapper in a casual way from an acquaintance of mine who was learning guitar techniques from him. My first step was to talk to him, to interview him. The Scrapper I met was, and still is, unemployed and living with his nephew's family. His lack of money and the difficulty this causes him in making a presentable appearance in public is a constant source of embarrassment to him. He is essentially a shy, sensitive man very conscious of the contrast between his present state and his glamorous past. His most effective and moving vocal now is *Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out*. Scrapper's reading doesn't extend beyond the local newspapers. He was amazed to find that someone had listed all of his records in a book. The fact that anyone under fifty was interested in his kind of music is puzzling to him.

The longest interview that I had with him was at a time that he did not have a guitar. The talking that he did that night was obviously a substitute for playing. This is the story of his life as he tells it.

Watts: When and how did you pick up the name Scrapper?

Scrapper: Well, that was give to me through my Grandmother. See, we were all Cherokee Indians. We come from Syracuse, North Carolina. And when my Grandmother brought me here, my brother could walk and I couldn't. I was so bowlegged I couldn't walk. And I'd pull his feet out from under him, like that. Well I could crawl and get a hold of his feet. I'd pull 'em out and bump his head against the floor. So my Grandmother give me the name. Well, you dirty little scrapper, you. So that's what they call me. But my right name is Francis Hillman Blackwell. Nobody would know me by that name because nobody knows me by it. My public name is Scrapper Blackwell. Now when I'd write letters to the (recording) company, I'd write it Francis "Scrapper" Blackwell.

W: Did anyone else in your family play an instrument ?

S: Everybody. My sister plays, my brother-in-law plays. My brother plays now, Hawaiian. And my father was a lead violinist. Got a brother a drummer. And another one a singer.

W: How many brothers live here in Indianapolis ?

S: There's sixteen children. Eight boys and eight girls. My sister played the piano. I told you Mr. Guernsey (his manager) tried to get her to make records.

W: What was your sister's name ?

S: Mae Malone. But her right name was Mae Blackwell.

Scrapper discussed his style of playing the guitar and explained how he could play with his eyes closed. "I could play just as good blind as I could with my eyesight. Wouldn't make no difference. Piano the same way; 'cause I know the keys. That's the difference in knowin'. You've heard of blind people play the piano, look at blind, what's his name, Art Tatum, sure. Blind people play, but they have the gift of God. You got the gift of God, see. Ain't nobody never told me nothin' in my life, never showed me anything. And the first guitar I ever had in my life I made it myself."

W: What did you make it out of?

S: Out of a mandolin neck and a cigar box. That's the truth, that's the truth. Put six strings on it and played it. Because he could play the guitar without lessons, he feels he has a God-given gift: "A story about me from when I just grew up would be as surprising to me much less to another fellow. 'Cause he couldn't live the life I've lived. You couldn't live it, couldn't live it to save your soul. Then by music being God's gift. You can't just walk to over there and play on that piano without knowin' a note. I can't walk to a guitar, pick it up and play it cause I say I can. When I picked up my first one I played. Not only played it but I made it. Now the first (real) guitar I ever had in my life cost me seven dollars. When that guitar was bought it was the take-off from the crap game. I never gambled a day in my life. But I stayed around them. And they bought the first guitar that I ever played. Then when I got this guitar, real guitar, I told you Sevastabule's* all I know how to play in. And I couldn't play the blues. Finally I did. When I did went to playin' the real blues, I was gone too, just gone. Know who learned me that? Nobody. I t just come to me like anything else. Like you sit here and think about it. Maybe you go get some thin' next door; come to you while you're resting. And that's the way it come to me. And the minute I saw the string, I hit it. And when I hit it, it was the right string. But I couldn't tell you today how I ever started playing".

W: How did you start writing blues?

S: Just write 'em. Just started by sayin', let's write a blues. Name it. Just like you say, if this is Falls City (Beer). I'm falling in the city. Gotta have the city in there. Then you got to compare it, compare your words with the last word in your title. And when you do that, then the blues come out. Then there are so many words, then you can put in the verse. You can't put in too many words to the verse, if you do, you're squeezin' 'em. That's the reason I say Leroy was good; cause he could get seven words to one verse of blues and get 'em in there. I can't get over five words to a verse. And at that time there wasn't over five verses to a record. That's your eight-inch (ten-inch) record. And they was two minutes and twenty seconds. That was the end of your record. You run over that, you overrun. And under that, you cut it short.

W: You said your manager, Mr. Guernsey, went back to Louisville.

S: Last time I heard he's in Louisville.

W: He's still alive?

S: He has a record shop. Fine fellow. He's an Englishman. He's a fine fellow.

W: How did he get interested in this?

S: Well, he met Leroy first, somewhere. Must been on Indiana Avenue. I'll tell you what I think, I think he had this music shop before he ever seen Leroy. Little John used to run the music shop for him. And he met Leroy and then Leroy, somebody, told him 'bout me. Then he brought—located me, how I don't know. But he located me then he come to see me. You know I was busy and I couldn't . . .

W: What kind of business were you in?

S: Well, It was against the law. Well, I was sellin' my corn. Plenty, of it. I was makin' money then. J was too busy to fool with him. 'Cause I wasn't studyin' 'bout no records. 'Cause I played for my own company see. So he come to me and I told him about my business, so he bought all the alcohol I had. That put me out of business. And then he said well, we come to see you about makin' some records. I said, I wouldn't want to. I had a guitar at home and I said, Oh, I play everything like that. And the people around me, my neighbours and things. I said what you gonna do here? I said, who's that fellow? This is Mr. Leroy Carr. Well I said, Mr. Leroy Carr, this is Mr. Blackwell. He says, Leroy, would you mind playin' a piece? He said, you don't mind, do you? I said no. Sure 'nough, he get down and played the blues pretty good. I said that sounded good. I kinda liked that myself. But he want to know if you still want to make a record with me. I said, why I don't know nothin' about it. I said I don't know nothin' 'bout no records, I just play it for myself. So he says, well, I'd like you to make a record. Do you like that piece? I says, oh yes, when you're playin' I like it. Sounds like the blues, guess it is the blues. He says, well that's the

blues. He says, think you can play with him ? I says, oh well, I can play with him. I know the blues. Anytime, anywhere, I says. I'm not gonna make no records 'cause I'm not interested. He says, well, how 'bout talkin' to you ? Can't we take a ride or something? I says, well, yes, bein's you done bought all my stuff out, I'll take a ride with you. So we rode around in a Red Cab for about a hour or so. So he says, will you let me know somethin' tomorrow? Well I might, you come back.

Talkin' to Leroy. He said, glad I met you. I said, well, I'm glad I met you too. I said, I kinda like your blues old boy you can come down and play the blues for me. So next day he come back see. And after that we kept on talkin' and I said oh, all right, I'll go with you, I said. So we set down and played together. I said it does sound pretty good, see. So I said, now where all the record makers at ? He said Chicago. I said, oh no. Cain't go away from here, not no Chicago. I said no. Not now. I'm too busy for that. He say, now I'll tell you what I'll do. Says, there's no recording offices here, but I'll contact WFBM and see if we can't get a machine brought down here. I said man, you mean to tell me you gonna get a recordin' machine brought down here just for us to make a record? Said, sure. Said I think it'd be a nice thing, don't you ? I say, oh yes, it'd be pretty nice, I said, Just for us to make a record. He said yes. I think I'll contact Chicago. If I can get it down here, will you make a record? I said, oh yes. I said, you get it down. So, two days after that, he had it. That was the first record we ever made—*How Long*. And we was the first ones ever recorded in the city of Indianapolis. And we recorded that by special machine he brought here. And the first record we ever made on the other side, I think it was *Kokomo Blues***. And *How Long* went on, don't know what *Kokomo* done. *How Long* went on. It went eight thousand some odd records above Gene Austin's and he'd been in the record business. It went above his records and all he made in the years he'd been recording. Eight thousand some odd records above him. The records sold so fast that the company couldn't keep them, that's the truth. And I went to Jack Kapp and talked to him about it. He said man, don't bother me now, said we got orders for these records, don't know how we're gonna get 'em out. Well, Chicago used enough of 'em, they needed right here. He said, I'd be all right if it wasn't for the State I'm in. They takin' most of 'em. I'm trying to get them out, out of the State. That was the best sellin' record that we had. But we got our money's worth.

W: Did you get a royalty percentage ?

S: Sure. We got flat payment four thousand dollars. That's apiece. Flat payments. And the royalties came in later. Cheque every sixty days. My mother said if you don't stop boy, never mind, you're goin' kill yourself. Every sixty days. See it just took sixty days from the time we made a record for it to hit the market. We know'd the day that the record'd be out.

W: Did they do much advertising of your records in those days ?

S: Plenty of it. We had pictures, them back-ups, all them big pictures. Lights, you know, flash cameras. Scared me to death. Then they made that long folder. Just a regular folder hang in the window. There's where I messed up on my picture. Didn't put on no tie, you know. Didn't bring my collar, put my tie on. I just folded my collar down and put my tie down. Mr. Miller said, you gonna take your picture thattaway ? I said, yes. If you don't want it thattaway, you don't get it. So he just took it, but it went on. See Leroy took a good picture. Took the picture right in the studio.

W: You must have spent long periods in Chicago.

S: Oh, yes, we'd go there some time and after record time, after we's done with everything, we'd stay maybe a week or so. Have to give away some of that money. I left lot of money under different pillows. I left eighty dollars one time and a pint of whiskey one time under this same girl's pillow. Then after I got to the bus station on my way home, the first stop we had, for a rest period, I telegraphed back that I had left it, but never did get it. And these people we stayed with in Chicago, they name was Carr (no relation to Leroy—*TFW*). Her name was Helen Carr and her husband's name was John Carr. We just happened to run into 'em—4746 Prairie Avenue—and we run into them and they was nice people and we took a room with them and that's where we stayed every time we go to Chicago. She showed us around—the ropes, you know—what to get into and what not to—And, very nice

woman, when we first went there we didn't know which one was goin' to love her first, but we found out that, huh, that didn't work see, the woman treated us so nice see, made us 'shamed of ourselves. Every morning she come to our beds, we had ten dollars, I'll tell you that. Five on my side and five on his. She'd ask us what you want. Anything you cook. She wouldn't have that. Just tell me what you want. We just want to eat this morning, eggs, anything, you know what to cook for breakfast. Cook like you would for your husband. So she'd give us sausages, and that was her way. And when it come to run around, she say as where to go and where not to go. Who to be with and who not to be with.

Their last big recording session was in New York. Josh White played in place of Scrapper on a couple of sides: "But during the year that we was in New York City—1934—we made forty-four numbers just before Christmas, that was in December, colder than Johnny Brown. And we wouldn't take a travelin' check which we shoulda took. We had a fellow that was supposed to bring us home but we found the fellow out through Joshaway White. This fellow was gonna put the stuff on us. He wanted us to go home in a car instead of the train, company forbid it. You was insured, all your money was insured—on the train, but not off the train. So little bit before we left Grand Central Station— old man Guernsey seen to that—he come and found us and say, I heard you're plannin' to go home in somebody's automobile, we cain't have that, we can't tolerate that because the company's responsible for you. And we have insurance to that effect. You can't leave here thattaway." They made it home all right, with their money. And Scrapper says that Leroy used some of that money for the party he gave the night he died.***

Scrapper reminisced a little about the later days and his friend Police Sergeant Helms: "Sergeant Helms was the best man. Sergeant Helms had a voice you could hear from here to over across the street. 'Well now, get Scrapper Blackwell outta the middla that track. (I'm layin' in the middle of the streetcar tracks.) Pick him up there boy. Be a good boy over there. Climb over on that track there. Done got drunk. Layin' there in the street. (He come over there, man I was drunk). What's matter with that Scrapper? Pick that guitar up there, boy. Don't break that guitar. Say, anybody round here know him? Well, who'll take this guitar home and keep it? (Maybe some body say, Why, I'll take it home.) Well take it home and keep it then. Call the ambulance and send him off there. You know where he's gotta go. Fulla God damn alcohol. Man done got drunk, fell out in the middle of the road. Streetcar tracks.' (I was, yes I was.) (I caught everything he said, but I was scared to get up. If I'd got up then he liable to slap me. Make you shamed of yourself.) Another officer would have said: 'Boy you mean to tell me playin' guitar down here drunk. Pick that God damn guitar up and go on you way, will ya ? Go up Fayette Street. Don't you know your way home ? Don't fall in the Canal . But Helms, he was good. Great big fella.'"

The last episode about the Negro Police Sergeant Helms gives a good picture of one side of the life that Scrapper has led, the life no one else could live for him. He has appeared in several concerts this past year and has cut several tapes—on both piano and guitar. Real steps are being taken right now for his first new recording in over twenty-five years. It will appear on a British label.

*See Paul Oliver's discussion of Sebastopool tuning in this issue. EDITOR.

**This title was actually issued under Scrapper Blackwell's name. EDITOR.

***According to the Bluebird files, Leroy Carr's final session was actually recorded in Chicago in February 1935. EDITOR.