

If among any group of record collectors one were to mention the name of Scrapper Blackwell, about the most likely response would be, "Oh, yes, isn't he the fellow who played behind the vocals of Leroy Carr?"

Yes, this is the Francis "Scrapper" Blackwell who did that. This is also the Scrapper Blackwell who for six or seven years lived and worked through the heart of a great economic depression in the United States making more money than he had ever imagined, playing and singing in an era which can never return. For this was the day of the blues singer ..... his close friend Carr, Big Bill Broonzy, Walter Roland, Bill Gaither, Bumble Bee Slim and many, many others. Most of these men fell on lean days; many ended their existences as anonymously as they had begun. Indeed Scrapper himself has been buried in Indianapolis for many years, and only recently has he been "rediscovered" by a small group of record collectors and jazz clubbers.

In fact, Blackwell spent his career in the shadow of Leroy Carr only in a relative way. To be sure the name of the singer on a record was and is an almost automatic guarantee of great semi-urban blues singing. But with all his fame, Carr depended upon his guitar-playing friend for much more than harmonic and rhythmic support. Scrapper was a self-taught blues artist of the first rank. Taste and dramatic impact run through even his most casual performances. The combination of the singer-pianist, and accompanist-soloist was unbeatable. Their initial record of "How Long Blues" (a Blackwell composition) zoomed to over a million sales so soon that the masters were worn out, and other versions were quickly made to both remedy the shortage, and cash in on the opportunity. This was their first joint effort, and the record that made them. Dozens and dozens of sides were issued over the ensuing years. Scrapper was kept busy writing original material for the recording sessions that would sometimes eat up as many as twelve tunes at once. To him must go the lion's share of credit for the many tunes the two performed. Songs would be written out of the air; a mood would inspire one, an experience another, and an unusual sight yet another. For instance, "Sally-in-the-Alley Blues" was written about a woman who still lives in town; "Shady Lane Blues" was inspired by a leafy street in Northwestern Indianapolis. "Christmas In Jail"

was written about some friends who had just that experience.

Carr and Blackwell soon shared billing on the record labels. They would make trips to New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, and other Mid-western cities for the making of records, personal appearance and special promotional stunts, such as one notable week spent in the window of a music store in Cincinnati, where they silently went through the motions of playing as a loudspeaker blared out their latest hits to the passers-by.

There was no royalty, no copyright on their efforts. Like so many others, they thought it would all continue for as long as they would wish it so. But perverse fortune pulled the string on Leroy Carr on Christmas Eve 1935, as he attended a party at home. He died sitting in a chair celebrating among friends as he had so often done. Scrapper who had gone home some time earlier, was urgently summoned by a friend. Grabbing his guitar, he asked, "Does Leroy want me to come back and play?" Then, as the news sunk in, he laid down the instrument and sorrowfully left his house.

A short time before, Scrapper had made his only solo guitar record. It had been a trying time for him. Leroy and he had quarrelled in New York, and for the first time in years, Carr made a record without his friend. Refusing to be sidetracked, Scrapper made "A Blues" and "D Blues", giving them to the recording company as a gift.

Scrapper is still an intensely proud man, no doubt due in part to a generous helping of Cherokee Indian blood. Perhaps it is this pride that has held him in anonymity for over twenty-five years, playing in cheap dives and walk-up apartments to small groups of acquaintances, and avoiding the young men of other generations who would taunt him as "old-fashioned". But the fact remains that except for one or two sides made with a girl pianist, Blackwell has been lost to the recording world since Leroy's death.

In this his first recording in all that time, Blackwell reveals a guitar style unimpaired by the years, an intensity of feeling only now caught by modern recording, and most unusual of all, a vocal style that is unpretentious yet compelling. For the most part the selections in this group are from the old repertoire, "How Long Blues" being given a workout on the piano in Scrapper's simple blues style.

This is the first hearing of this artist on this instrument and offers a clue to his innate modesty. The guitar being his chosen instrument, he was reluctant to do anything on piano, so this track was culled from a recording made at his concert of September, 1959, at the 1444 Gallery in Indianapolis.

The remainder of these selections were made in two sessions. On March 31 1960, Scrapper sat down to a microphone at the 1444 Gallery and made "Blues Before Sunrise", "Sally-in-the-Alley Blues", "Shady Lane Blues", and "Goin' To Jail About It", plus a guitar solo. At the home of the writer on April 14th, he made the remainder of the tracks. He complained during this latter session that he had lost the effective use of his left ring finger due to a fracas in an apartment the previous night. On listening to the music, it is hard to detect any loss of technique. Perhaps Scrapper could tell.

DUNCAN P. SCHIEDT.