

Leroy Carr was born in Nashville in 1905, where he graduated from high school, left to travel with the circus, spent time in the army and in prison, worked as a moon-shiner and later at a meat-packing plant. He sang blues and played the piano in a driving, barrelhouse style, mostly around Indianapolis' Naptown area. Here he found Francis "Scrapper" Blackwell, a half-breed Cherokee from North Carolina who also made 'shine and also played guitar in a driving, barrelhouse style that complemented Carr's playing in a way few drunken musicians ever have. When their first disc together, "How Long How Long Blues," sold two million copies for Vocallion in 1929 they were on their way to stardom. They cut 162 sides from 1929 to 1935—even though they didn't work together for two years due to the Great Depression. Their recorded legacy is among the grandest in all popular music.

Their music was deceptively simple: lowdown blues. But it was not the music of cotton-pickers. It was the cool sound of men who slept all day and drank bonded whiskey in Naptown bars all night. Leroy Carr's lyrics were never strung-together "floating" verses. His songs were well-constructed, full of offbeat wit and subtle phrasing, so much so that men who would later be described as "poets" such as Robert Johnson and Bob Dylan would steal many of his best verses. He tackled the usual themes of ladies and spirits ("Straight Alkie Blues," "Alabama Woman," etc.) but also themes like suicide ("Suicide Blues," recorded shortly before Carr's death), circus animals ("Carried Water for the Elephant") and his own small dick ("It's Too Short"), handling these themes with style and an eye for odd detail.

Scrapper Blackwell's guitar work is generally regarded as among the finest in blues history (in his own era he was perhaps second only to Lonnie Johnson in technique) and his string snapping and peculiar turnarounds are imitated to this day.

A record dealer who acted as their agent for Vocallion, a Mr. Guernsey, remembered the duo: "Drunk or sober, Leroy was nice. Scrapper was a damn fool, drunk or sober." But together

HOUND'S eye view

by James Marshall

LEROY CARR & SCRAPPER BLACKWELL: Who they was and what they done

they had a winning formula, one that was soon imitated by other piano/ guitar duos like Peetie Wheatstraw and Charlie Jordan, Tampa Red and Georgia Tom, Roosevelt Sykes and Clifford Gibson, and many others.

If there was a main theme to their material, it was getting over, often on women. Like Abbott and Costello, a later duo with whom they had surprisingly much in common, Carr and



Scrapper (top) and Leroy.

Blackwell were very funny in their attempts to achieve riches without working. One of their first records—"Gettin' All Wet"—finds Leroy cold and hungry on a woman's back porch with his hand out. "Papa must eat or he will die/you've got porkchops, you've got pie," goes one of its more inspiring couplets.

Nothing good lasts for long, and Leroy Carr's constitution proved to be less than adequate to handle the liquor he poured into his face during his years of fame. On April 29, 1935 he died of nephritis (kidney poisoning) due to drink. Many singers cut tribute records, including Scrapper, who recorded the wistful "My Old Pal." One two-bit bluesman, Bill Gaither, found easy fame by billing himself as "Leroy's Buddy." Scrapper Blackwell carried on for one more session when he cut the driving "Alley Sally Blues," among others, in July of '35. Shortly after that he left music for 25 years, until 1960 when some white blues fans dragged him into the studio for one last session for the Bluesville label. A year later he was shot to death in a bar.

The knuckleheads at Columbia records, who own the rights to the Vocallion material of Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell, have seen fit to issue only one disc, 16 tunes on an LP (now on CD) titled *Blues Before Sunrise*. It's a fine introduction, but tiny collectors' labels have filled in many of the gaps. On compact disc are *Leroy Carr 1930-1935 The Piano Blues* (Magpie, UK), with 20 of their best numbers, and *Leroy Carr & Scrapper Blackwell 1929-1935 Best of Blues* (Wolf), with 23 tracks featuring Scrapper's last session. Yazoo has two CDs: *Naptown Blues* (with "Gettin' All Wet") and *The Virtuoso Guitar Of Scrapper Blackwell*, which only has two cuts with Carr but a healthy dose of Blackwell's solo material—a must for guitar kooks. The LP *Great Guitar-Piano Duets*, on Old Tramp, has 18 cuts not found on any of the other packages and features the unbelievable "Papa's on the House Top." If you can't find them at your local mail outlet (and you can't) they are all available from: Down Home Music, 6921 Stockton Ave., El Cerrito, CA 94530, the most reputable and well-stocked specialty-music mail-order company in America. ●