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Indianapolis Literary Club Essay
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Bootlegging, Asphalt and Pugilism

Before I begin, I wish to make a disclaimer. However, with your indulgence I will make that disclaimer at the end of my essay. I do this for two purposes:

First, placing the disclaimer at the end is cheap insurance to keep my audience from leaving. Should you feel inclined to bolt early, perhaps wondering what comes at the end will keep you in your seat.

Second, research for this essay yielded an interesting Indianapolis Literary Club connection; demonstrating the depth of talent and untold stories within our membership. Telling my personal revelation at the end of this essay seems to make more sense than revealing it now.

End of disclaimer.

Clapton is god.

Wilbur D. Peat was president of the Indianapolis Literary Club during our 1964-1965 year. It was about this time that the graffito "Clapton is god" appeared on the wall of the Islington station of London's Underground. Soon, the phrase "Clapton is god" graduated from Graffito to Graffiti status and could be seen painted in several places throughout London.

I would be pleasantly surprised to see many of our members this evening nodding in fond recollection of the phrase "Clapton is god" but did not undertake this project assuming such a connection would be clear to a majority. For that reason, an explanation is in order before we proceed.

For those of you more familiar with the guitar players Andres Segovia or even Indianapolis's Wes Montgomery, you should know that Eric Clapton is a guitar player, born in March of 1945 in Great Britain. He is often thought to be "the best guitar player ever" but that is an accolade given by those already pre-disposed to his style of play. It is without dispute, however, that Clapton is an extremely accomplished guitar technician and songs that he has written or performed upon number in the thousands. Moreover, his tenure with the various groups in which he has played and his success as a solo musician make him, certainly, one of the most influential musicians since 1963.

"Legendary" is not too strong a word to describe Clapton and his influence.

So, you see, when it came to guitar playing in England in the mid 1960's, "Clapton was god."

I also need to point out that many of the great electric guitar players who became megastars in the 1960s and 1970s came from England, playing their American-made Stratocasters and Telecasters by Leo Fender and Gibson Les Pauls for audiences throughout London. Clapton was among a small group that included Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page and others who were developing their prowess by listening to and copying the sounds they were hearing on 78 rpm race records produced in America; records of The Blues that found a small, but mighty, audience in our country but which were the heart and soul of the new sound these musicians were creating.

But I am getting ahead of myself...

Mr. Clapton is alive, well and divides his time between Columbus, Ohio and Ewhurst, Surrey England. In the 50 years since he came on the music scene his life has nearly come to an end at least twice due to his excessive alcohol and drug use. After finally curing his addiction in the 1990s Clapton, in 1998, founded Crossroads Antigua, an "international center of excellence for the treatment of alcohol and other drug addictions" that continues to provide help to clients from all over the world.

Clapton is also the founder of the Crossroads Guitar Festival, a semi-regular orgy of music that this year is scheduled for June 26. The last Crossroads Guitar Festival was held in 2010 and from the inaugural Festival in 2004, this day-long musical extravaganza, featuring some of the world's best talent, has been a fund-raising event for Clapton's treatment facility in Antigua.

It was at the Crossroads Guitar Festival in 2007 that Eric Clapton, once rumored to be "god," admitted how his success as a musician did nothing to help him overcome his addictions. And it was at the Crossroads Guitar Festival in 2007 that Eric Clapton mentioned several other people in the music business who, despite *their* success and God-given talent, were not able to beat *their* own additions and died as a result.

And it was at the Crossroads Guitar Festival in 2007 that Eric Clapton told the world that among those who could not help themselves despite their enormous talent was a blues-playing piano man from Indianapolis by the name of LeRoy Carr.

At Floral Park Cemetery on the West Side of Indianapolis lie the remains of LeRoy Carr, one of the most influential yet underappreciated Blues musicians ever to play 88 ivory keys. Clapton, like McKinley Morganfield—better known as bluesman Muddy Waters—says that he has always felt a connection to Carr and cites him as one of his strongest influences. Carr's original compositions have been recorded, and rerecorded by a veritable "who's who" of blues singers. Had Carr not drunk himself to death at the

age of 31 it is certain that he would be held in the same regard as fellow musical Hoosiers Montgomery, Carmichael and Porter.

By now you have come to understand that LeRoy Carr liked to drink. A lot. It is time to let you know that Carr was born in 1905, which means that he died in 1935. The 18th amendment to the United States constitution, our Noble Experiment, was ratified by 36 states in 1919 and, through the Volstead Act effected in early 1920. Do the arithmetic and you will recognize, then, that for all but Carr's first 15 years it was generally illegal to manufacture or purchase alcohol in the United States, notable exception being made for alcohol's "medicinal use."

Note that I have written "illegal to purchase" not "impossible" nor even "difficult to purchase." As we now know, despite the efforts of the Federal Prohibition Agents (and the Klu Klux Klan) to enforce the law, alcohol was widely available; usually through an individual whose moniker was descriptive of the method by which enterprising frontiersmen once smuggled bottles of alcohol to Native Americans, to whom it was illegal to sell whiskey. They did this by concealing bottles in their high boots that they wore at that time, thereby becoming known as "bootleggers."

LeRoy Carr was born in Nashville, Tennessee but moved to Indianapolis, along with his mother, when his parents split during his adolescence. Indianapolis at that time was not without racial prejudice but, speaking generally, was friendlier to African-Americans than were the southern cities, despite the Klan's influence in Indiana. In reality, it was more of a tolerance than a friendliness in that blacks were generally expected to stick to their part of the city. In Indy, that place was the center of African-American culture, Indiana Avenue.

Carr was drawn to the music and alcohol scene on the Avenue and became, we think, a self-taught piano player. Certainly he created his own style and listening to Carr's music creates images that are, in fact, more like tickling the keys than pounding them. He could keep a beat, and did so by playing chords with his left hand as well as anyone else at the time, but his right hand would augment that beat with short arpeggios, rhythms and trills that gave most of his playing a lightness not necessarily utilized by other piano players.

So Carr's playing wasn't terribly sophisticated but, then, neither is the musical genre known as The Blues.

Ah, the Blues. With intended prejudice, I say "it all came from 'The Blues'" and, should I find myself on the proverbial deserted island I could be happy living my last days with a copy of Ann Rynd's *Atlas Shrugged*, a spring-driven Victrola and a stack of 78 r.p.m. "race records from the 1920s and 1930s, scratches and all.

There is something about The Blues that touches each of us in a primordial way, which may be why parents, white parents that is, of American teenagers took such offense at the rock and roll their children were listening to, which drew heavily from the tunes African Americans had been listening to for years on their race records.

It could be its simple rhythm, its twelve or eight bar predictable structure or, perhaps, the way the inevitable pain of life is put to song that makes The Blues so relatable for so many. I once heard an interview with B. B. King in which he said "you gotta feel 'em in order to play 'em."

LeRoy Carr felt them, that is for certain.

From Carr's *Papa's on the Housetop* we hear:

*The Blues they come
The Blues they come
Nobody knows where the blues come from*

*The Blues they gone
The Blues they gone
And everybody's happy when the old blues go*

And from one of Carr's best-known compositions, *How Long – How Long Blue,s* recorded in Indianapolis in June of 1928, we hear these words:

*Sometimes I feel so disgusted, and I feel so blue
That I hardly know what in this world to do*

And, later, Carr sings:

*And someday you gonna be sorry that you done me wrong,
But it will be too late baby, I will be gone
But so long, so long, baby so long*

Finally, Carr puts a cap on his sad tale by singing:

*My mind gets a ramblin' I feel so bad
Thinking about the bad love that I have had
But how long, how long, baby how long?*

Lost love and tough times are the "front stuff" of blues, with lyrics that can generally be sung in mixed and polite company.

But the story behind the story and the lyric subject matter that most customers in the clubs on Indiana Avenue (and Maxwell Street in Chicago) were not afraid to applaud was sex. And The Blues were not afraid to tackle this subject, sometimes laying it between the lines and often simply telling it like it was.

Even the more highbrow among our group will, no doubt, be familiar with a song sung by Bill Haley and his Comets called *Shake, Rattle and Roll*. This song had originally been recorded by Big Joe Turner, an African-American and was released by Atlantic Records. Shortly after Turner's version was released Haley recorded his version for the white teenage audience, bowdlerizing the lyrics to obfuscate the song's original rawness.

Haley sings, in the second verse:

Wearin' those dresses, your hair done up so nice □
Wearin' those dresses, your hair done up so nice □
You look so warm, but your heart is cold as ice

In Turner's original he sings:

Well you wear those dresses, the sun comes shinin' through
Well you wear those dresses, the sun comes shinin' through
I can't believe my eyes, all that mess belongs to you

Haley, singing again for the white kids goes on to tell us:

I'm like a one-eyed cat, peepin' in a sea-food store □
I'm like a one-eyed cat, peepin' in a sea-food store □
I can look at you and tell you don't love me no more

Turner, singing the original, sung these more descriptive lyrics:

I'm like a one-eyed cat, peepin' in a sea-food store
I'm like a one-eyed cat, peepin' in a sea-food store
But I can look at you and tell you ain't no child no more

At this point I am compelled to pause, in order to make certain the double-entendre has taken hold. (*I'm like a one-eyed cat, peeping in a sea-food store*).

I think you would agree that when a man admonishes his woman to "Shake, Rattle and Roll" it has a clearer meaning when sung after Turner's verses; although Turner, himself, toned down the salaciousness of one verse which describes the urgent nature of his desire by saying:

I been "holdin' it in way down underneath" which he then changes to:

"I been o'er the hill, way down underneath."

In either case whether he was "holdin' it in" or going "o'er the hill" Turner leaves little to the listener's imagination when he finishes by saying

"you make me roll my eyes, baby, make me grit my teeth."

This verse, as you might expect, was also absent from the Bill Haley version.

Prior to both Turner and Haley, Carr had recorded a song in which he would enthusiastically tell us that "papa wants a 'pork chop.'"

I leave it to you to draw your own conclusion as to what he was implying papa really wanted.

The aforementioned Mr. Clapton recorded Carr's other best-known song, *Blues Before Sunrise*, in 1994 utilizing the same method of recording employed by Carr when he recorded his original composition in 1934 (this time in St. Louis). That is to say some musicians gathered in a studio and played a song that was recorded without the use of overdubs, a technique made possible by the also aforementioned Les Paul... (but that is another topic for another essay).

Clapton's version of *Blues Before Sunrise* emits the same sentiment as does Carr's:

*I have the blues before sunrise, with tears standing in my eyes
I have the blues before sunrise, with tears standing in my eyes
It's such a miserable feeling, a feeling I do despise.*

The song goes on to lament a miserable life existence with long, lonesome days; the stuff of blues for sure and probably indicative of Carr's life at that time, since this song was recorded about a year before his death. Carr even says that "*the blues start to rolling and they stop at his front door.*" He promises to change his way of living and no longer feel bad.

Clapton leaves it at that, a sad song about feeling bad.

Carr "finishes" the song by solving what he views as the source of his problems a bit more directly.

*I love my baby but my baby won't behave
I love my baby but my baby won't behave
I'm gonna buy me a hard-shooting pistol and put her in her grave*

Carr's song *Six Cold Feet in the Ground*, recorded just two months before his death, may have been prescient.

*Just remember me baby when I'm in six feet of cold, cold ground
Always think of me mama, just say "there's a good man gone down"*

*Just lay my body baby in six cold feet of ground
Just lay my body in six cold feet of ground
Well I've always been the loser when the deal goes down*

There was one other significant difference between Clapton's version and Carr's. Although both used the same "get together and just play" recording technique, Clapton's band comprised six accomplished musicians. Carr's lone sideman was a local guitar player who would augment Carr's rhythm left hand and tinkling right hand with little bits of single note--as opposed to chord--business of his own.

The guitar player's name was Francis Hillman Blackwell.

In my 54 years I have never had a nickname of any sort. The closest I have ever come is that one of the ushers at my church calls me "Douger" but, alas, I have never led a life upon which someone could hang a nickname.

Francis, however, did have a nickname. It seems that he was forever getting into fights with one of his 15 siblings, more tussles or scraps really than fisticuffs or outright pugilism. As these things go, his grandmother, upon observing his behavior, nicknamed him "Scrapper."

Scrapper was a bit older than LeRoy Carr, having been born in 1903. Like Carr, he found himself in Indianapolis, although he moved to Indy at an earlier age, 3, than did Carr. As Arthur Rosenbaum writes, "the (African-American) community of (Indianapolis) was largely a transplanted one and the music Scrapper grew up with was the music of the rural south." Scrapper was part Cherokee and, in the photographs I've seen of him, he appears to have dark skin and would have easily fit in on Indiana Avenue. Other anecdotal evidence suggests that Scrapper lived very near the Indiana Avenue area and would have had significant African-American influence on his early life. We can hear the spoken voices of both LeRoy and Scrapper in *Depression Blues* and Scrapper either adopts the affect of an African-American dialect or, perhaps, he fakes it for the recording.

Blackwell crafted a guitar for himself when he was a child using wire, a cigar box and a neck from a mandolin. The story goes that he would play this homemade guitar for his father and his pals while they shot craps (further lending credibility to the idea that Scrapper's family lived within walking distance of Indiana Avenue). Finally, the men in

the game took pity on the young boy and redirected 7 dollars from their game so that Blackwell could get a "real guitar." It was after the acquisition of this store-bought guitar that Blackwell began to learn the songs of the neighborhood.

Trouble will always find boys with time on their hands and trouble found its way to Scrapper in the form of the blues, for which he would find an out-of-the-way place and practice. Later in life, Scrapper would say that his music was the result of God-given talent, that the notes would just find themselves. Like Clapton, Carr and most other musicians, however, Blackwell no doubt heard something he liked and worked to incorporate it into his repertoire.

Carr and Scrapper met in the 1920's and soon found that their styles complemented each other. Magic was made when they recorded *How Long-How Long Blues* for Vocalion in 1928. Earlier I mentioned that this song was recorded in Indianapolis, probably at the studios of WFBM, which was located at 229 N. Pennsylvania Street on the 3rd floor of the Armstrong Building. While *How Long-How Long Blues* was the number one Blues song of 1928, most people in 1928 were listening to *Sonny Boy* by Al Jolson.

Scrapper and Carr continued to record as a duo, trying to make the magic happen again. Many of the songs were variations on the basic blues themes the two knew, with changed lyrics and a few extra bits of business thrown in by both to make the tune sound fresh. They were a popular duo destined for what would pass at that time for "stardom" and nearly 100 recordings of them survive. Sometimes they were high-rollers and, in later years, Scrapper would recall how a Vocalion Record executive would give he and LeRoy a roll of \$20 bills to amuse themselves prior to a recording session. Suffice it to say that they were, at least, regional stars after their *How Long-How Long Blues* was released. Their effort to recreate the magic went so far as to have them record *The New How Long Blues* in 1929, this time in Chicago. Same tune, different words.

Scrapper also made solo recordings; sometimes traveling to Richmond to record at the too-often-overlooked by historians Gennett Recording Studio in "the gorge." It was during a Blackwell solo effort that he wrote a song entitled *Kokomo Blues*, later covered by James Arnold as *Old Kokomo Blues*. After release of this song, Arnold became known as Kokomo Arnold and may be best known for his version of *Milk Cow Blues*. However, neither Scrapper—who should rightly get credit for this very popular blues song—nor Arnold, who did what nearly every blues musician of the early 20th century did and that is take a song, alter it slightly and make it his own, is known for *Kokomo Blues*.

Heck, even the Hoosier city 50 miles north of here isn't known for the song.

Unfortunately, Chicago is best known for the song *Kokomo Blues* and Blackwell's composition unjustly remains in the shadows.

Here is the original Blackwell first verse, set to a traditional 12 bar blues theme:

*Umm, baby don't you want to go?
Umm, baby don't you want to go?
Pack your little suitcase, papa's going to Kokomo*

If that sounds familiar, it's probably because your ear is tuned to the Robert Johnson (quote) composition (end quote) in which he sang

*Ooh, baby don't you want to go?
Ooh, baby don't you want to go?
Back to the land of California; to my sweet home Chicago*

Johnson recorded his song in 1936 and died before anyone could ask him about the confusing geographical reference. Over the years, the lyrics have settled to the point where we now hear:

*Come on, baby don't you want to go?
Come on, baby don't you want to go?
Back to that same old place, Sweet Home Chicago*

To be fair to Arnold, Johnson and, frankly, Blackwell, the origin of the tune used by each artist is murky and the Carr-Blackwell recording *Baby Don't You Love Me No More*, recorded in 1928, seems to use vestiges of the tune. The words of the song that Chicagoans claim as an anthem, however, clearly originated with Blackwell.

Perhaps Blackwell's more enduring legacy is more dubious than the being the tunesmith behind one of the most played and recorded blues tunes of all time. While somewhat speculative, no great leap of faith is required to suggest that Scrapper's affiliation with Carr was directly responsible for Carr's untimely death.

Both Carr and Blackwell were bootleggers, this we know. Carr spent some time behind bars, probably because his skin was not white, for bootlegging and used his experience to write *Prison Bound Blues* in late 1928. However, unlike Blackwell, Carr was more fond of drinking what Scrapper called "corn" than he was of selling it.

For Blackwell, music was a sideline, bootlegging was where he made his money. For Carr, music was a way to make money to buy more liquor. After Blackwell was finally persuaded to initially record with Carr—ostensibly because Carr purchased Blackwell's entire inventory of liquor and temporarily put him out of business—he continued to supply liquor to Carr, quite possibly contributing to Carr's death at the age of 30 and

prompting a world-renowned guitar player to bring up Carr's name 72 years later as someone whose success in the music business was no help in overcoming his addiction.

This idea is substantiated by Blackwell's profound sadness upon Carr's death and his subsequent decision to exit the music business after recording *My Old Pal Blues* as a tribute to Carr. It should also be noted that Blackwell's last meeting with Carr was not on the best of terms, with each leaving the recording session without speaking to each other.

Leroy Carr was born on March 7, 1905. He died on April 29, 1935. He was an unnaturally handsome man, slender and far from plain looking with a remarkable underbite that contributed to his manner of vocalization and his unnaturally-disarming smile. The photographs of LeRoy we have show him impeccably dressed. An early photograph of him at the piano shows him with a bit more "meat on his bones" than the later photographs in which it seems evident that Carr's alcoholism is contributing to his exceptionally slender appearance.

Scrapper Blackwell was born on February 21, 1903. As has been noted, Blackwell left the music business after his partner's death and became a laborer at an Indianapolis Asphalt plant, trading his guitar for a shovel. Blackwell continued to live in obscurity on Senate Avenue, near Methodist Hospital. Arthur Rosenbaum had become acquainted with a woman in Indianapolis in 1958 who told him of a man who "could sing blues and Christian songs" and "play the guitar so well it makes the hair stand up on your neck."

As Rosenbaum tells the story, he "went to the shabby house" and met a slender, soft-spoken man who said that he would play for (him) if he got him a guitar, as he did not have one." The man said he had once been a blues recording artist and had played with LeRoy Carr. At the time of this meeting Blackwell's wife had passed, Blackwell had been unemployed for two years and he was living with relatives. The contrast between his high-rolling days and his present state was not lost on Blackwell, but he seemed resigned to his fate.

It was about this time that, in the country on whose empire the sun once never set, John Mayall, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page and, coincidentally, Eric Clapton were honing their nascent guitar skills by playing blues tunes they were picking up from the American Blues artists of the 1920's and 1930's, artists who had gone largely unnoticed by white audiences in this country. When the Rolling Stones made their debut in the States in 1964 they were asked by a reporter what they wanted to do while they were in America. They replied that they wanted to go see Muddy Waters to whose records they had been listening for years. The white reporter, reflecting his own ignorance of American roots Music, asked them where was Muddy Waters located, thinking it was a place instead of a person.

Through the efforts of Arthur Rosenbaum and Indianapolis Literary Club member Duncan Schiedt, Blackwell enjoyed a resurgence in popularity after being rediscovered in 1958. Young white audiences were discovering Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon and others and Scrapper was poised to rightly claim his place in music history. Duncan recorded and photographed Blackwell and I will be the first to testify that, if anything, Blackwell sounded better at this time than he had in 1930. Listening to Blackwell's *Goin' Where the Monon Crosses the Yellow Dog* is pure delight; Scrapper incorporates most of what we come to expect from a great Blues song: Leaving, love that done me wrong, a perfect use of a both a 7th and a minor chord in the verse. As promised by the woman who introduced Rosenbaum to Scrapper, his guitar playing makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. To be fair, recording technology had advanced by this time so that Blackwell's technique was presented in the better light and, on the 1961 recording his version of *Little Girl Blues* is Carr incarnate as Scrapper captures both the piano technique and vocal phrasing utilized by his former partner.

Interesting, since *Little Girl Blues* is a Blackwell composition not recorded by Carr.

Scrapper Blackwell died on October 7, 1962 after being shot in his neighborhood. Some say it was a mugging, others say it was a dispute between neighbors that got out of hand. The crime was never solved and I am speculating, with some malice, that had Scrapper's skin been lighter and had he lived a bit east and north of his Senate Avenue residence, additional police resources might have been employed to solve the crime. Blackwell is interred in the New Crown Cemetery in Indianapolis.

LeRoy Carr's headstone is a piano keyboard; Scrapper Blackwell's headstone has a guitar impressed upon it.

Simple and tasteful reminders of the great talent that lies beneath each marker.

And now the disclaimer.

I grew up listening to popular music, Monitor Radio and rock and roll. In my 30's, while working at Deaconess Hospital in Evansville, Indiana, a colleague introduced me to The Blues. Since then, I have never looked into the rearview mirror, except as it relates to learning more about the individuals who created this uniquely American music from the music of the fields in the South. Most of the stories of the early Blues artists go untold but the story of LeRoy and Scrapper with its local connection is too great to ignore.

However, there is much more to be told, I realize now, more than I did before.

Furthermore, some 18 or so fearless members of this audience will recall an essay I was scheduled to deliver on February 16, 2010. You were fearless if you attended on that night because the wind chill that evening was somewhere

around 10 or 15 degrees Fahrenheit. The title of last year's essay was published as "Cold Feet Before Sunrise" and astute members will note that earlier this evening I mentioned the compositions *Blues Before Sunrise* and *Six Cold Feet in the Ground* by LeRoy Carr.

It was during the preparation of last year's essay that I became aware of the depth of the story I needed to tell and that I had barely scratched the surface with the preparation I had completed to that point. When my research led me to the Scrapper Blackwell connection with club member Duncan Shiedt, who met, photographed and recorded Scrapper, I decided to shelve the project and, instead, prepared the *Monitor Radio* essay heard by our small audience last year.

In resurrecting this topic, I am again overwhelmed by the story of LeRoy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell. One would think that, in 45 minutes, one could do justice to that story. I fear that, once again, I have fallen painfully short but have done my best to introduce this audience to a two individuals from our village who are largely forgotten, but who need to be remembered for the significant contribution they made to this truly American musical genre. While others such as Robert Johnson get credit for this uniquely American music, LeRoy and Scrapper deserve their rightful place in music history.

Thank you, Duncan, for lighting my path as I work toward that goal. Club member Ron Calkins has given me the privilege of shaking the hand of the man who shook the hand of Ray Harroun and Duncan has given me the honor of shaking the hand of the man who shook the hand of Scrapper Blackwell. If you will indulge me and allow me to assume that Scrapper shook LeRoy's hand along the way, I will complete my essay a happy man with the knowledge that I am only two degrees removed from LeRoy Carr.

Thank you.