



# COUNTRY BLUES GUITAR

EDITED AND TRANSCRIBED BY STEFAN GROSSMAN

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# SCRAPPER BLACKWELL

While he's virtually unknown today, Scrapper Blackwell was among the most influential of the early blues guitarists, mostly due to the enormous popularity of his records with pianist Leroy Carr. Francis Blackwell was born in Syracuse, North Carolina, in 1903, and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana. His grandmother provided his famous nickname, "Scrapper," due to his feisty nature, and, like Jimi Hendrix, he was part Cherokee Indian. His father was lead fiddler in a string band, and Scrapper fashioned his first instrument from a cigar box and mandolin neck. Once some crapshooters gave him a real guitar, he began teaching himself folk songs and blues. "When I did, went to playin' the real blues, I was gone, just gone," he remembered decades later. "Know who learned me that? Nobody. It just come to me like anything else. The minute I saw the string, I hit it. And when I hit it, it was the right string."

An inveterate drinker, Blackwell was selling moonshine for a living when he met pianist Leroy Carr at Indianapolis house party in 1927. They began playing together, and launched their recording career in June 1928 with the sentimental "How Long How Long Blues." The 78 became a runaway hit and made them the most popular piano-guitar team in the country. So many copies of the 78 were pressed that the original metal masters wore out, causing Vocalion to record the duo's "How Long How Long Blues No. 2" and "How Long How Long Blues No. 3" in November 1928. The original, though, is the version that became a blues staple. Young Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters were impressed enough to make it one of the first songs they learned to play, and a decade after its release, Johnson recast its melody as "Love In Vain."

During the Depression, when few other blues artists recorded, Carr and Blackwell made dozens of 78s and reportedly became rich men, netting between \$300 and \$500 apiece at sessions. The mournful-voiced Carr manned his piano keys with a mellow, rolling touch, playing stride bass patterns, walking octaves, chords, and solo flourishes. He preferred the keys of Ab and Eb, and Scrapper typically accompanied him with ringing chords and melodically inventive solos that were usually played in standard tuning with a capo. In all, the duo's infectious, swinging sound graced more than 160 sides, many of them co-written with Blackwell's sister Minnie. The well-promoted duo played Chicago, Nashville, and New York City, and occasionally

performed promotional stunts such as appearing in the window of a Cincinnati music store, mouthing lyrics as a loudspeaker blared their latest hits to passersby.

Scrapper Blackwell made his final sides with Leroy Carr on February 25, 1935. After an all-night party that April, Carr died of acute alcoholism, just one month past his 30th birthday. The *Indianapolis Reader* reported that "thousands thronged the Patton Funeral Home for one last look at the man whose bizarre combination of bluish notes struck a deep sympathetic response in the souls of thousands of colored people throughout the country." Ironically, the last song the duo recorded was "Six Cold Feet in the Ground."

Heartbroken, Blackwell never quite got over Carr's death. He cut "My Old Pal Blues (Dedicated to the Memory of Leroy Carr)" and a few other sides with pianist Dot Rice in July 1935, and didn't record again until for 23 years. He continued to play at house parties and taverns, but earned his wages laboring in an asphalt factory. "Rediscovered" in the late 1950s, Blackwell cut a couple of albums worth of material in Indianapolis. Tragically, he was gunned down in a back alley on October 6, 1962. A generation later, his music became a stylistic cornerstone for Rory Gallagher, who introduced his songs to audiences around the world. "I like Scrapper Blackwell a lot," Rory enthused. "Even when he recorded late in life, he was in great form! To my ears, he had actually improved as a player."

Recorded in November 1931, Scrapper Blackwell's fingerpicked "Blue Day Blues" displays his uncanny ability to produce a great tone on record. Among its highlights are his dead-on beat, intriguing approach to soloing, and flirtation with string bends. The key to Blackwell's style is in a good, strong right-hand approach. As the man himself sang during another song recorded on the same day, "I do believe I was born with blues in my right hand."

While he was most famous for his duets with Leroy Carr, Scrapper Blackwell made many records on his own. His first was one of his best: "Kokomo Blues," cut for Vocalion in June 1928. Blues and rock aficionados will quickly recognize this song as an inspiration for Robert Johnson's "Sweet Home Chicago," which, in turn, has also been covered by Eric Clapton and countless others. Again, the key to Blackwell's approach is in the right hand.

# BLUE DAY BLUES

as performed by  
Scraper Blackwell

Standard Tuning

INTRO

Bass Brush and Damp Throughout...

Bass Brush and Damp Throughout...

1st VERSE

Bass Brush and Damp Throughout...

Bass Brush and Damp Throughout...

## REV. GARY DAVIS

***"The first time I ever heard a guitar played I thought it was a brass band coming through. I was a small kid and I asked my mother what it was and she said that was a guitar. I said, 'Ain't you going to get me one of those when I get large enough?'"***

—Rev. Gary Davis, interviewed by Sam Charters in *Rev. Gary Davis: Blues Guitar* by Stefan Grossman (Oak Publications, New York, 1974).

His guitar was Davis's lifelong companion, an alter ego he would often verbally encourage ("talk to me now!") during an inspired solo. Both blues and the parallel sacred song tradition in African-American music were magnets for an extraordinary talent pool of brilliant, blind singer guitarists: Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Blake, Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Blake, Blind Boy Fuller, and Blind Willie McTell are among the best known. They sang variously on streetcorners, in storefront tabernacles, in jukejoints, anywhere a blind singer with a guitar might earn a few coins. Davis was part of that tradition of survival, though artistically he was a tradition unto himself. Fortunately, his distinctive style today has many heirs.

Davis grew up in rural South Carolina at the turn of the century. The guitar players there had an affinity for the piano ragtime which flourished in the late 19th century, and were finding ingenious ways to fit this syncopated keyboard music onto guitar. By the time he was 15, Davis's skills were keen enough to play with the legendary Willie Walker in a Greenville string band. (Davis, who passed praised sparingly, remembered Walker as a "master musician...a guitar dog.") After some years of wandering in the Carolinas, Davis settled in Durham, North Carolina in 1931. It was there that he met Blind Boy Fuller, and his first opportunity to record arose. "Blind Gary's" initial discs met with little acclaim, but he had a formidable reputation in Durham, where Fuller reportedly called to his superior musicianship. A welfare case worker who went to observe Davis noted: "His sensibility as a guitarist is unbelievable. I have never heard better playing."

The scene of Davis's playing to New York City in 1944, when his wife, Annie, obtained employment with a family there. The streets were tougher and colder than those of Durham, but Davis, street smart and self-assured, was equal to their test. Moses Asch became aware of Davis some ten years after he arrived in New York, and this extraordinary "street minstrel," as he was touted, was recorded extensively in the later 1950s and throughout the '60s. Peter, Paul & Mary's success with Davis's "If I Had My Own Way (Samson and Delilah)" considerably eased his need to sing on Bronx street corners.

Davis's exposure to the urban folk audience put him in great demand as both a performer and as a teacher. He loved sharing the fine points of his guitar style with anyone who was seriously interested, and the list of guitarists who learned from Davis, either directly or by osmosis, includes Stefan Grossman, David Bromberg, Taj Mahal, Jorma Kaukonen, and Bob Weir. Woody Mann once wrote, "Davis's technique is best described as a cross between the tight discipline involved in the ragtime of Blind Blake and the contrasting formlessness of Blind Lemon Jefferson." As much as they were awed by Davis's music, his students were equally struck by Davis's resourceful spunk. Dave Van Ronk recalled in a *Guitar Extra!* interview Davis telling him about the theft of his guitar on Harlem's streets: "It ain't gonna happen again," Davis informed Van Ronk, and proudly displayed a .38 pistol. "He said, 'I call this pistol Miss Ready,'" Van Ronk recalled. "I said, 'Gee, Gary, I don't want to talk out of turn, but you are blind.' He said, 'That don't matter. If I can hear it, I can shoot it!'"

# CININNATI FLOW RAG

by Rev. Gary Davis

Standard Tuning

The musical score is written for guitar and banjo in standard tuning (E2-A2-D3-G3-B3-E4). It is in 4/4 time and consists of four systems of music. The guitar part is written on a single staff with a treble clef, and the banjo part is written on a single staff with a treble clef. The score includes various chords and melodic lines. The first system has chords G, D7, and G7. The second system has chords C, G, and D7. The third system has chords G7, C, Bb, Am, and Ab. The fourth system has chords G, D7, G7, and C. The banjo part includes various fret numbers and techniques such as triplets and bends.

**System 1:** Chords G, D7, G7. Banjo part includes fret numbers 0, 1, 2, 3, 2, 0, 0, 2, 0, 3, 0, 3.

**System 2:** Chords C, G, D7. Banjo part includes fret numbers 3, 2-5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 3, 2, 0, 0, 2.

**System 3:** Chords G7, C, Bb, Am, Ab. Banjo part includes fret numbers 1, 0, 0, 3, 0, 1, 3, 3, 3, 1, 1, 0, 0, 0, 4, 4, 3.

**System 4:** Chords G, D7, G7, C. Banjo part includes fret numbers 3, 2, 1, 0, 0, 3, 2-5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 3, 3, 3, 2-5, 5, 5, 5.