

Yank Rachell, by Matthew Socey

If Indianapolis had a blues Mount Rushmore, there would be three faces. Leroy Carr, Scrapper Blackwell and blues mandolin player James "Yank" Rachell.

Rachell was born on a farm outside of Brownville Tennessee on March 16, 1910. While working on his family farm, according to his legend, an eight-year-old Rachell was tending to a pig when he encountered a man playing a mandolin. A trade and a legendary blues story were born.

Yank started in the blues world by playing in a jug band with Sleepy John Estes and Hammie Nixon. The group would head up to Memphis and play with Jab Jones under the name Three J'S Jug Band. They would record for the Victor label and make blues history with "Diving Duck Blues." Rachell's then struck up a musical association with harmonica player John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson (That's Sonny Boy Williamson I for those keeping score at home). The duo moved to Chicago in 1938 and recorded for Bluebird Records. Their association ceased in 1948 with Sonny Boy's death. Rachell moved to Indianapolis in 1956. In the 1960s, Rachell was a part of the Young White Kids Discovering Old Black Music Era for folk and blues. They toured the globe until Estes died in 1977.

After that Rachell stayed mostly in Indianapolis, enjoying being the elder statesman of the Indy blues scene. He would record Pig Trader Blues with David Morgan on the Slippery Noodle Sound label and his final album Too Hot For The Devil (featuring Allen Statyner and Pat Webb) for Flat Rock Records. Yank died on April 9, 1997 at the age of 87.

Even after this death, Rachell's musical legacy is still alive and well. That is part of why you're reading these liner notes to this album. Musicians like John Sebastian, Andra Faye and Rich DelGrosso all play the mandolin and owe a debt to Yank and his music. One of his songs, "She Caught The Caty," is probably being played on a blues stage somewhere in the world right now. At the same time, right at this moment, there are people hearing the song at the beginning of the film *The Blues Brothers* on cable or on their DVD players. We'll not address the legal problems Yank had when it came to royalties of this and other songs from his career.

There's never been a clear-cut answer as to how to pronounce Yank's last name. His granddaughter Sheena once told me "If you're from the north, it's (pronounced Ra-Shell). If you're from the south, it's (pronounced like the female name Rachel). Either way, they're still talking about him." Bravo.

There are several Yank recordings still available on CD. This collection you're holding now is proof that Rachell's legacy on the blues in Indianapolis and beyond is still strong today. Enjoy.

Matthew Socey is host of The Blues House Party on WFYI 90.1 FM in Indianapolis and a contributing writer for NUVO Newsweekly in Indianapolis. His articles have also appeared in Downbeat, Big City Blues, Blues Access and Blues Revue.