

HOWLIN' WOLF



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1951-1973</i>	<i>Electric blues</i>	<i>Back Door Man (1960)</i>

Only Solitaire

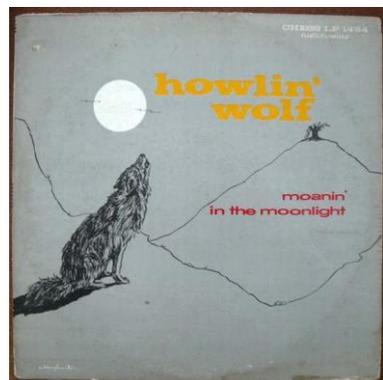
Artist: *Howlin' Wolf*

Years: *1951-1959*

George Starostin's Reviews

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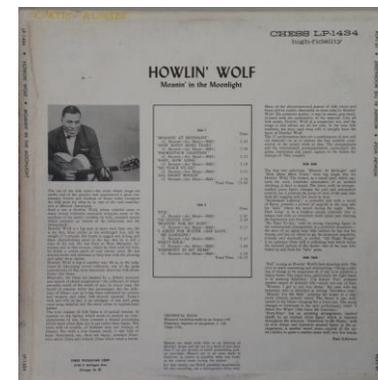
MOANIN' IN THE MOONLIGHT

Compilation released:

1959

V A L U E
2 4 4 5 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Moanin' At Midnight*; 2) *How Many More Years*; 3) *Smokestack Lightnin'*; 4) *Baby, How Long*; 5) *No Place To Go*; 6) *All Night Boogie*; 7) *Evil*; 8) *I'm Leavin' You*; 9) *Moanin' For My Baby*; 10) *I Asked For Water (She Gave Me Gasoline)*; 11) *Forty-Four*; 12) *Somebody In My Home*.

REVIEW

While the title and front sleeve of Howlin' Wolf's «debut» LP for Chess Records are naturally classic, in the context of the times "How Many More Years Have I Got To Let You Dog Me Around" would have been a more appropriate title. By the year 1959 (no data on the precise month in which the LP was released), Chester Arthur Burnett had been cutting records for the Chicago label for eight long years, with at least four big hits on the R&B charts at that, and yet they still would not risk putting out a proper LP of his material. (Admittedly, this was only a wee bit longer than the same ordeal for Muddy Waters, who had to wait seven years — rock'n'rollers like Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry fared much better on Chess, so it seems, than their blues elders).



When the LP finally did come out, it was a rather discombobulated affair: twelve songs, stretching out all the way from 1951 to the present in totally non-chronological order, mixing together legendary hits, curious obscure B-sides, and obvious filler in the totally baffling manner that often characterized such compilations in the early LP era. As a properly representative overview of Howlin' Wolf's 1950s career, **Moanin' In The Moonlight** is unsatisfactory, but since subsequent Chess LPs would continue to dive into the same old pool and mix archived oldies with newer material, I shall still try to limit the

discussion here to the exact songs that were included on the album, only occasionally referring to a few other tunes from the same time which have since then cropped up as bonus tracks on subsequent CD releases.

Wolf's «golden» period can essentially be subdivided into three stages: (a) the early years of 1951-53, when he was still dividing his time between Memphis and Chicago and had Willie Johnson as his main guitarist; (b) the middle years of 1954-58, with Hubert Sumlin joining as main guitarist and Wolf still writing most of his material on his own; (c) the late years of 1959-65, when Willie Dixon stepped in as the principal composer for Wolf. **Moanin' In The Moonlight**, for better or worse, deals with the first two stages, and it does manage to show the difference between them, particularly if you bother to rearrange the tracks in their proper running order, so let's get to it.

One really does not need to go any further than 'Moanin' At Midnight', the A-side of Mr. Burnett's very first single for Chess — and also his first *and* biggest ever commercial hit of his entire life — to understand the aura of supreme reverence paid to the man by just about every «bad boy» of the British Invasion era. Where most of the known bluesmen, either in the pre-war era or on the different post-war stages of the electric age, explored all sorts of dark topics but usually portrayed themselves as *victims* of the darkness, calling on the Lord and the angels to rescue them from impending evil, 'Moanin' At Midnight' has the Wolf clearly presenting himself as a *perpetrator* of the darkness. Formally, he may still be singing lines like "well, somebody knocking on my door / well, I'm so worried, don't know where to go" from the point of view of the poor soul haunted by the evil spirits — but as soon as you hear that voice, it's quite clear who really *is* the evil spirit... and, more importantly, it becomes quite clear that the evil spirit is, like, totally *awesome*, dude.

The opening "mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm" incantation, subtly faded-in to create the impression that the ground has just opened under your feet and Doom's clammy hand has grabbed you by the ankles, is one of the most iconic openings in the blues idiom — Wolf must have inherited that humming practice from the likes of Son House or other «voodooistically inclined» Delta practitioners, but for some reason, the association that crops up most frequently in my mind is the wordless murmur in Blind Willie Johnson's 'Dark Was The Night', a tune that completely bypassed lyrics because, in the mind of the artist, no words could do justice to the darkest tragic page in the story of man's relation with God. 'Moanin' At Midnight' does not bypass lyrics, but the lyrics hardly even matter next to Burnett's sonic impersonation of his transformation into a werewolf. As tame as the song sounds by modern day standards — it's no Ministry or Celtic Frost, after all — it was, without a doubt, the scariest, creepiest thing to come out in 1951, with Tony Bennett and Nat King Cole ruling the airwaves; and I think I might be justified in saying that the Wolf himself never would rise to the same standard again, even if he would

come close multiple times. 'Moanin' At Midnight' does the exact same thing that 'Black Sabbath' (the song) would do two decades later, and, might I add, does it with just a tad more class and depth than the Birmingham rockers.

I suppose that a song like that could really only have been recorded at that time by a man of Chester Arthur Burnett's caliber. He'd been through all sorts of hell on Earth by the time he hit forty, including the army, the jail, and the choir of the Life Boat Baptist Church in Gibson, Mississippi. He reportedly killed a man (hopefully, in self-defense, but who can really know the truth?). Had there been any backlash against the demonic powers of 'Moanin' At Midnight', it would be those businessman sissies at Chess who would be pissing their pants, not *him* — a big, burly, terrifying black man, the worst nightmare of every respectable middle-class white parent and the secret attraction of every rebellious middle-class white teenager. "I couldn't yodel, so I turned to howling", he would jokingly explain his style, but the joke revealed an important truth — everything that Howlin' Wolf did came *naturally* to him. Perhaps he was not really a werewolf (although who can really know the truth?), but he *did* have certain elements of lycanthropic nature, which can clearly be seen in the few existing pieces of his live footage — and expressing them on record was far more important to him than fame and fortune, for which he seemed to care relatively little. People like Muddy Waters certainly loved to be loved, but Howlin' Wolf? There is precious little evidence of that.

'Moanin' At Midnight' is not just a terrific vocal performance in a creepy werewolf story, though. The combination of Wolf's nagging, insistent, glass-cuttin' harmonica and Willie Johnson's proto-metallic distorted electric guitar is also one of the most outstanding sonic combinations of the early blues era. On its own, Johnson's guitar is not as interesting as, for instance, John Lee Hooker's; and on its own, Wolf's harmonica is nowhere near as innovative or technically masterful as Little Walter's. But together, they create a rough-and-ragged universe of tough harmonies — crude, knife-sharp, seriously painful on the ears, the roots of all things «retro-avantgarde» from Captain Beefheart to Tom Waits but without a shred of that later world's self-conscious «artsiness»: Wolf and Willie are simply telling their werewolf story as it is, to the best and the most natural of their abilities. There is no intentional, artistically bold, dare-to-be-different provocation here. It's just one man picking up a guitar, another one picking up a harmonica and channelling their minds and feels through it. It's not *their* fault, really, if the resulting sound makes mothers and fathers throughout the land run for cover. Blame it on biology, or on the stars, or on one too many bottles of Jack Daniels. Probably all three.

The B-side to 'Moanin' was a somewhat more conventional exercise in 12-bar blues — but only «somewhat», since in terms of straightforward influence and reverence 'How Many More Years' is arguably the second most important blues song of

1951 (the first one being Elmore James' perennial 'Dust My Broom'). Some musicologists, like Robert Palmer, claim that it contains the first use of the power chord in electric guitar history — I wouldn't want to jump on that bandwagon uncritically (couldn't somebody like T-Bone Walker, for instance, use them at least occasionally prior to 1951?), but yes, that is a croaky old distorted power chord twenty seconds into the song and many times later, played by Willie Johnson (ironically, Ike Turner, also known as an innovative guitar player, was instead bangin' up the old piano during the sessions). Meanwhile, Chester Arthur Burnett temporarily sheds his 'Moanin' At Midnight' werewolf hide and assumes his most common *emploi*, that of an innocent victim of the «bad bitch gone done me wrong» treatment.

Unlike the A-side, 'How Many More Years' does not bring any substantial, thematic innovation to the blues idiom — both musically and lyrically, it recycles decades-old patterns that had been popularized by Delta and urban bluesmen (and blues-women) when Howlin' Wolf himself was yet but a toddler. It is only the manner of presentation that is completely different. Not even Charley Patton, Wolf's former mentor, had a singing voice that *naturally* sounded like that of a chronically constipated Beelzebub. No electric blues player like the aforementioned T-Bone Walker would have agreed to play it so crudely and simplistically. And it is no coincidence that the song was recorded at the exact Memphis Recording Service studio (soon to be Sun Studios) where, just a few months earlier, Ike Turner and Jackie Brenston cut their 'Rocket '88', often designated as the «first rock'n'roll song ever» — and that both were produced by Sam Phillips, whose helping hand in the creation of rock'n'roll thus extends to a far earlier date than July 5, 1954; play 'Rocket '88', 'How Many More Years', and 'That's All Right Mama' back-to-back and you'll clearly see the similarities in production (I'm pretty sure Willie Kizart and Willie Johnson must have played their guitars through the same «broken» amp!).

And now come the bad news. While there was no denying the shock effect of Wolf's first single — which made it pretty high up the R&B charts through sheer novelty effect alone — that novelty effect wore off pretty quickly, and over the next few years it became clear that the vibe and the groove were not enough. Tellingly, the follow-up to 'Moanin' At Midnight' was... 'Morning At Midnight', a straightahead re-recording of the former with a slightly different and seriously more silly title, which predictably recaptured only a part of the original's vibe and landed Wolf in the same generic pool of blues performers who, like Arthur Crudup or Big Bill Broonzy or legions of others, would go on re-recording their hits until the studio ran out of vinyl. Admittedly, there was a technical reason behind that: 'Moanin' At Midnight' was cut for Chess Records, while 'Morning At Midnight' was made for RPM, a subsidiary of Modern Records, which seemed to be more closely tied to Sam Phillips' operations in Memphis and essentially reflected Wolf's bouncing back and forth between Memphis and Chicago. But the different contractual obligations really reflected a deeper problem: Mr. Burnett had trouble, *real* trouble when it

came to songwriting. He was The Wolf, a brilliant, magnetic performer and a loyal servant of Lucifer if there ever was one, but writing melodically intriguing songs with memorable hooks was simply not his thing at all.

Let's see what else is there on this record (together with a few bonus tracks). 'Howlin' Wolf Boogie', a B-side from 1952 — great piano / guitar / harp / vocal groove on this thing, showing that the Wolf *did* know how to boogie with a fast, danceable tempo, but it certainly sounds just like a standard Wynonie Harris or Big Joe Turner jump blues number run through the magnificent «Wolf filter»; cool-sounding, yet by now you already know what to expect from the filter. OK then; next on the list is 'All Night Boogie'... *another* fast jump blues number, slightly more exciting because of the almost aerobical workouts on both guitar and harmonica, with Wolf and Willie sprinting toward the finale until both run out of steam and collapse around the two minute mark. Both tracks are certainly fun, except... they sort of don't have that voodoo spirit in them, you know? I have no problem with Howlin' Wolf trying to whip the crowds into a dance frenzy, but somehow he is not quite as good at preserving his demonic aura at fast tempos as, say, Muddy Waters with the likes of 'Got My Mojo Working'.

Skip ahead to March 1954, and things are completely different while remaining absolutely the same. Howlin' Wolf has made a permanent move to Chicago, unfortunately leaving his old band, Willie Johnson included, back in Memphis, and on the ironically titled 'No Place To Go', his first single recorded at Chess Studios, he is backed by the legendary Otis Spann on piano and the legendary Willie Dixon on bass and the not-so-legendary Lee Cooper on guitar... and the result is pathetically boring. The song is essentially just a recreation of 'How Many More Years' with new lyrics and a lack of everything that made the original so great. The guys are just standing there, vamping around a single riff with no passion whatsoever, as if they were all just getting together and working out a basic skeleton of a song.

Two months later, things were slightly improving. For 'Evil Is Goin' On' (simply retitled 'Evil' for the LP), Wolf enlisted the talent of two new guitarists — Jody Williams and Hubert Sumlin, the former of whom would go on to become a major general session player on the Chicago blues scene and the latter would become forever associated with Wolf in a classic singer-guitarist pair (like Gene Vincent and Cliff Gallup, or Ricky Nelson and James Burton). Furthermore, 'Evil' is the first song in Wolf's catalog credited to Willie Dixon — it would take the Wolf some time to understand that *all* of his so-called «songwriting» should be left over to Willie, but it is already understandable here that nobody understood the nature of the Wolf better than Mr. Dixon; 'Evil' is the first song in his Chicago catalog that is *almost* worthy of being the true sequel to 'Moanin' At Midnight'. Look closely at the lyrics and you shall see that it's just about a warning about female infidelity; do *not* look closely at the lyrics and the main thing you'll remember is "*that's EEEEEVIL, evil is goin' on!*", meaning that our

friend Beelzebub is finally back from vacation, and getting comfortably readjusted to the cold climate of Chicago from the formerly sunny skies of Memphis. My only complaint about 'Evil' is that the song is completely dominated by Otis Spann soloing like there was no tomorrow, largely leaving the Williams-Sumlin duo out of a job; but the song's stuttering rhythm, specially tailored by Dixon to fit his bass-playing preference, makes up for the deficiencies of the arrangement. (The B-side of the single, 'Baby How Long', also included here, is a much more generic piece of mid-tempo blues).

Neither 'Evil' nor its follow-up, 'Forty-Four', made any chart impact, which is rather shameful, particularly for the latter, which is where Wolf's backing band really began messing around with the musical formula — note how Spann opens the song with a deceptive chord pattern borrowed from the «soulful waltz» idiom rather than straight-ahead blues, and from then on the entire song has this odd vibe as if it is just aching to break into a *one-two-three, one-two-three* tempo, but Earl Phillips on the drumkit never lets the band do that in the end. The interplay between Williams playing that merry-go-round riff and Dixon ramming his bass into it, or taking a running jump over the merry-go-rounders every now and then, is even more mesmerizing, in a way, than Wolf's own vocals; and with this kind of geometric inventiveness, I'm even ready to forgive the lack of spontaneity and the triumph of discipline that seems to have replaced the original Memphis aura of barely controlled chaos.

In between 'Forty-Four' and the next truly epochal song for Wolf is squeezed a little, completely forgotten single, only available as a bonus track on some CD editions, which nevertheless strikes a small chord in me and deserves a brief mention: 'Come To Me Baby' may be just another well-disciplined, stereotypical and generic mid-tempo blues number, but I just love how the Wolf's shredding vocals match so well its almost military time signature. Chronologically, this is the first equivalent of a "Howlin' Wolf Love Ballad" — more like a "Howlin' Wolf Love Order" — on the album, and there is something perversely fascinating about the effect of his "come to me baby, come to me baby, come to me baby" incantation, bringing on associations with boa constrictors and rabbits and the like. And what's that last line in the chorus? All the lyric sites give it as "sigh a little love to me" (which is ungrammatical anyway), but I clearly hear an extra consonant at the end of 'sigh' ("sign a little love?" "side a little love?" — none of that really works either). [Phoneticians to the rescue!](#)

Next in line was the world-famous 'Smokestack Lightning' — a one-chord vamp that had actually been out there in Wolf's repertoire since at least the 1930s, and, in fact, he'd already put it down on record years earlier, as a B-side on his second single for RPM in 1951, when it was called '[Crying At Daybreak](#)'. That, however, was just a shadow of a song, with Willie Johnson barely, faintly marking out the contours of the guitar riff which it took Hubert Sumlin to flesh out and turn into

one of blues music's most easily recognizable hooks of all time. However, Wolf's spirit — that of endless, confused, abstract yearning for freedom from suffering — rules supreme over both recordings, and this time he is not so much a cackling, sinister, bad-boy werewolf as simply an old, battered animal howlin' at the moon for no reason in particular and for all possible reasons there ever might be. *Mostly* it's once again about being let down by your woman, but with all those train metaphors weaving in and out, there's an escapist vibe as well, and who cares, anyway? If there is a magic effect to the song, it is created by the smooth juxtaposition of Wolf's *woo-hoo* howling and Sumlin's monotonous, but utterly hypnotic riff. Sometimes, really, it's all about the power of a single chord (not to be confused with "a single power chord"!), and with 'Smokestack Lightning', is all about that second chord — the rest of the riff is just grumble-grumble working its way back to the lifeblood intensity of that note which is at once painful, inquisitive, mysterious, and vivacious. Most importantly, it's just magically unexplainable. Throw in the *woo-hoo*, and you get the perfect voodoo recipe for every aspiring blues-playing artist around the world.

The commercial success of 'Smokestack Lightning' — Wolf's biggest R&B chart success since 'Moanin' At Midnight' — inevitably prompted the artist to repeat the same formula, which Wolf and his band did with 'I Asked For Water', a song whose lyrics and some of whose howling style were borrowed from Tommy Johnson's old song 'Cool Drink Of Water', but whose melody is essentially just a minor — and, unfortunately, inferior — variation on 'Smokestack Lightning': same tempo, same «mystic-note-based» circular riff, same "whoah-oh" vocal introductions, but the whole thing just sounds a little less convincing. It's still classic Wolf, but you can sort of reconstruct the session — "hey Hubert, give me a line that'd be just like 'Smokestack Lightning', but a bit different, you know?", "er, uhm, whatever..." — and you can actually hear that guitar spending most of the time searching and not quite finding that "similar, but somewhat different" approach. In defense of the song, I'll say that this tentative riff goes down pretty well with the line about "the church bell tollin', the hearse come driving slow". There's a slightly more funereal mood to the whole thing anyway than with 'Smokestack Lightning'. Less soul-searching, more graveyard, that sort of thing.

The last three songs on the album, chronology-wise, are even less fortunate. 'Somebody In My Home', released in July 1957, is another variation on 'Smokestack Lightning' — this time, the main difference is that they just take it at a slightly slower tempo, and I don't like my Wolf being *too* «draggy», if you know what I mean. You would probably think that 'Moanin' For My Baby', from May 1958, is another variation on 'Moanin' At Midnight'... and you'd be dead wrong, brother, because it is actually a variation on 'Moanin' At Midnight' *and* 'How Many More Years' at the same time, *hah!* (The *mm-hmm* moaning is from the former and the guitar riff is from the latter, to be precise). Finally, 'I'm Leaving You', from November 1958, is

essentially a rewrite of 'Come To Me Baby' and, on the whole, a fairly standard stereotype of what a generic Chicago blues number should sound like. But — it's still a Howlin' Wolf number, and in all honesty, I would much rather hear Howlin' Wolf howl "I'm leavin' you woman, I got to put you down" through the iron squeezer of his vocal chords than hear it belted out by the likes of, say, Paul Butterfield or even Robert Plant.

Giving this entire selection of Mr. Wolf's one last look-over, my ultimate conclusion is that we should neither overlook the true uniqueness of his character, which is, after all, responsible for his iconic status, *nor* go completely head-over-heels in trying to ultra-mythologize his already ultra-mythologized status. He had his obvious and outstanding virtues, but he was also a product of his time, who considered it absolutely normal to stick like glue to one or two winning formulae rather than constantly expand and reinvent himself — which is why the record consists of three great classics, three decent songs, and six more attempts to squeeze extra drops of juice from the same ideas that powered the great classics. He was also tremendously lucky — some might say, «tremendously wise» — about finding just the right partners to complement the unique properties of his own voice; without Willie Johnson or Hubert Sumlin, these records would only have, at best, half of their cumulative magical effect. But these partners, too, had their moments of inspiration ('Moanin' and 'Smokestack') and their moments of just-fiddling-about ('Crying At Daybreak' and 'I Asked For Water'), so there is no sense insisting that everything the Wolf did always turned to "shinin' just like gold". On the *other* hand, digging into Howlin' Wolf's catalog deeper than just the obligatory **Best-Of** compilation from Chess can still be occasionally rewarding — for instance, if you don't, you'll totally miss his potential as a dance-oriented jump-blues entertainer, which... okay, maybe it's not his *greatest* side, but it does add a fun angle to his personality. Even a professional werewolf likes to let it loose and just boogie down every once in a while.

Finally, any such general criticism, or any specific criticism of the relative weaknesses of some of the songs, should naturally take a back seat to the overall recognition of Howlin' Wolf as one of the first and most prominent post-war bluesmen to simply stick around and do his favorite schtick. Look at how little chart success he had over those eight years — and how firmly he stood his ground anyway, refusing to search for a more «commercial» sound while some of his fellow bluesmen on the Chess label, like Muddy Waters, poured out hit after hit. It's not that this lack of success did not worry him at all — we all have to eat, after all — and all those re-recordings of 'Smokestack Lightning' under various other titles sort of hint that it did; but compromising his true identity clearly seemed a bigger crime to him from the get-go than lack of popularity, and this is a decidedly «modern» attitude that he shared with the other Godfather of «spooky blues» at the time, John Lee Hooker. It's almost a wonder that Chess kept him on for all those years, despite 'Smokestack Lightning' and 'I Asked For

Water' being his only significant money-bringers to the label — then again, I suppose that after signing a contract with a man who looks like Mr. Chester Arthur Burnett, one is liable to *always* having second thoughts before approaching Mr. Chester Arthur Burnett with the idea of terminating or not prolonging that contract. No big surprise here — as The Wolf explained it himself, "*I'm not here to say please, I'm here to tell you what to do and if self-preservation is an instinct you possess you'd better fucking do it and do it quick*"...

...oh, wait. That was actually a *different* Wolf. Then again, this looks like a perfectly misattributed quote if there ever was one, so I'm leaving it in. There are much worse crimes to be found on the Internet, anyway.

