

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

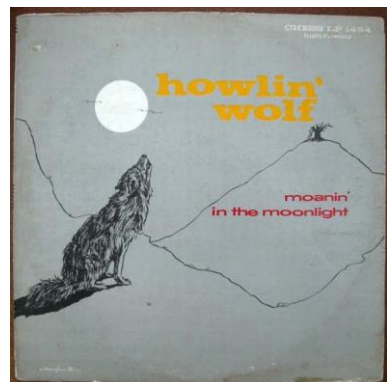
Artist: *Howlin' Wolf*

Years: *1951-1962*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [Moanin' In The Moonlight](#) (1959)
- [HOWLIN' WOLF](#) (1962) 🌟



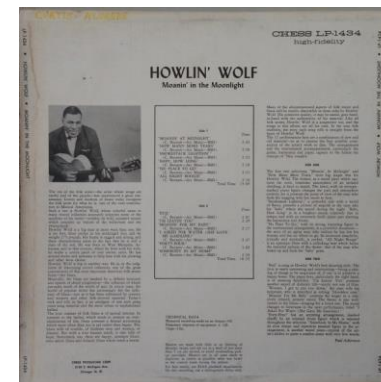
MOANIN' IN THE MOONLIGHT

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 aerobic 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.

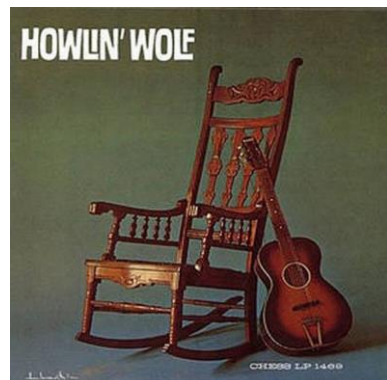
Giving this entire selection of Mr. Wolf's one last look-over, my ultimate conclusion is that we should neither overlook the true uniqueness of his character, which is, after all, responsible for his iconic status, *nor* go completely head-over-heels in trying to ultra-mythologize his already ultra-mythologized 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.





HOWLIN' WOLF

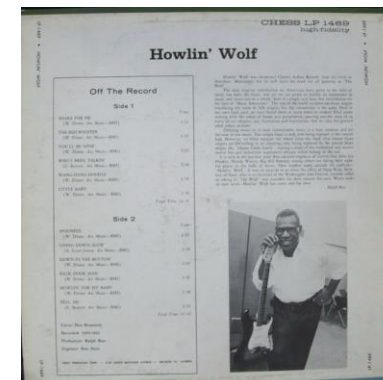
Compilation released:

Jan. 11, 1962

V A L U E

3 5 5 4 5

More info:



Tracks: 1) Shake For Me; 2) The Red Rooster; 3) You'll Be Mine; 4) Who's Been Talkin'; 5) Wang-Dang Doodle; 6) Little Baby; 7) **Spoonful**; 8) Going Down Slow; 9) Down In The Bottom; 10) Back Door Man; 11) Howlin' For My Baby; 12) Tell Me; 13*) **I Ain't Superstitious**.

REVIEW

Howlin' Wolf's second LP on Chess, officially self-titled but commonly referred to as «The Rocking Chair Album» because of the front sleeve (though who could ever *really* imagine a guy like Howlin' Wolf snuggling down in an old rocking chair?), is universally recognized as his finest (half-)hour — not just because of the generally high level of individual songs, but also because it is his only album from the classic Chess period to feature a certain chronological coherence. Namely, although the track running order is as chaotic as always, it is a collection of 6 singles, A- and B-sides included, that the man released for the label between 1960 and early 1962 — pretty much his entire output of two years, featuring the same core band of the Wolf himself on vocals, Hubert Sumlin on guitar, Otis Spann (mostly) on piano, and Willie Dixon — who also wrote or co-wrote most of the material — on bass. (Drummers and second guitarists were a bit more of a revolving door thing in this period and are not always easily identifiable).



If the best songs on **Moanin' In The Moonlight** laid out the basic skeleton of the Wolf legend, then the material on the «Rocking Chair» album is the juicy, devilishly intoxicating flesh, meticulously grown upon those bones by what was arguably Chicago's finest and most dangerously-sounding blues team of the earliest Sixties. As incredible as it seems, not a single one of these songs ever hit any kind of charts — but so many of them impressed themselves deeply and unforgettably in the minds of adventurous white teenagers across both sides of the Atlantic that the infamous Eno quote about the Velvet Underground (the one about «everybody who bought one of those 30,000 copies started a band») would apply with far more accuracy to those Howlin' Wolf singles. Many of us — in fact, many of our parents even — have heard 'Red Rooster', 'Spoonful', 'Back Door Man', 'Going Down Slow' performed by completely different, much more commercially successful artists; much fewer of us were persistent enough to work our way backward to the originals.

As usual, rearranging the songs in chronological order and paying attention to the songwriting credits helps clear some things up. Wolf's very first single for 1960, released in February that year, was actually taken from a three-year old session in the summer of 1957, and both 'Who's Been Talkin' and 'Tell Me' are credited to Burnett himself, who had a much harder time adapting old melodies to newer standards than Dixon. The A-side, with its slightly Latinized syncopated groove, sounds uncannily close to Slim Harpo's 'Got Love If You Want It', recorded several months earlier, but the difference is that Wolf and his band transpose it to a minor key, and essentially the same melody that, for Harpo, was a cocky show of self-confidence, for Wolf becomes a dark tragedy. The song is memorable not so much for its stuttering rhythm or for Wolf's harmonica solos, but rather for the looping fadeout of "*I'm the causin' of it all, I'm the causin' of it all...*" as the protagonist finally accepts the blame for his cheating behavior. This is one area, by the way, in which Howlin' Wolf completely beats Muddy Waters — for all his imposing burliness and evil image, Wolf is completely convincing when he puts on the cloak of a Dostoyevsky-like tragic hero; Muddy never did properly reach out to the same psychological depths. On the other hand, the B-side 'Tell Me' is just another iteration on the rigid 12-bar form of 'How Many More Years' — listenable as always, but bringing no new insights to the table.

As we enter 1960 *properly*, though, the issue of filler gets handily resolved by letting Mr. Willie Dixon step in as the principal songwriter (and probably arranger as well) for Mr. Chester Burnett. Not only is the overall sound beginning to approach our modern, conventional ideas of production (clean, sharp, deep, with all the instruments properly separated and curated), but the overall value of the songs increases drastically with the merger of two major talents. Dixon, with his notoriously philosophical approach to the world of blues music, might have been an even more perfect partner for Howlin' Wolf than he was for Muddy Waters — Muddy's transformation of the blues would usually proceed from a more

lightweight, almost vaudevillian angle, but Dixon's songwriting leanings tended to outline the bleak and sinister elements of the genre, and that was undeniably the preferred domain of the Wolf. They weren't *always* at their best together, but when they were at their best, nobody on the Chicago scene could touch them, and nobody across the Atlantic, not even in ten years' time — not the Who, not the Stones, not Zeppelin — could outdo them in terms of sheer soulful depth.

And for what it's worth, they were never better at their best than on the first of the brand new A-sides of 1960, recorded and released in early summer: 'Spoonful'. I can hardly think of a single Howlin' Wolf song to which Sam Phillips' legendary description of his voice as "*this is where the soul of man never dies*" could apply with more clarity. The only thing is that 'Spoonful' is not just about the voice — it is about the melody, the arrangement, the lyrics, the entire devilish charm of it which, frankly speaking, gets diluted and trivialized with every new round of the endless discussion on whether the song is about drugs or male ejaculation. Willie Dixon actually summarized it best himself when he wrote in his autobiography: "*People who think 'Spoonful' was about heroin are mostly people with heroin ideas*".

As you can easily read in Wikipedia, the «spoonful» motif in blues can be traced way back in time, all the way back to Charley Patton's '[Spoonful Blues](#)' (which apparently *was* about cocaine) and even further down to Papa Charlie Jackson's '[All I Want Is A Spoonful](#)' from 1925 (which *may* have been about male ejaculation), and I am absolutely sure that neither of the Charlies came up with the metaphor by themselves (a little more research and you'll probably dig up something from the 19th century, if not earlier). Melodically, though, these songs have little to do with Dixon's composition, and their moods are light and playful; the classic 'Spoonful', by contrast, is a master-class exercise in stark, uncompromising musical brutality — epitomized, of course, by the monumental-in-its-simplicity bassline that emerges out of the groove on the twelfth second and keeps haunting the song, with Wolf himself occasionally echoing it on vocals ("*that SPOON, that SPOON, that SPOONful...*"). Of all the innumerable artists to cover the song in subsequent years, Cream — that is, Jack Bruce — understood best the stunning impact of that bassline, and tried to make it even more resplendent in its cruelty by slowing and fuzzing it down. But I'd still say it hits harder in this simple, original, fast-paced version.

In between the lyrics — which purportedly jump between different types of imagery, from sexual to gun-slinging — and the whiplash punch of Willie's bass, 'Spoonful', the way I feel it, is not particularly about heroin, or semen, or tea or coffee or gold or silver, but it is about the slightest things in life that drive people to madness and violence: "*Everything's a fight about a spoonful*" — the motif may have been traditional, but that particular line is a very distinct representation of Willie Dixon's vision of the world around him, and Howlin' Wolf is just the man to deliver that line in his finest Mephistophelian

style. (That he used to accompany his live performances of the song by slapping a large spoon against his crotch is more of a titillating gimmick than a «hint» at its true meaning). Nor was he ever more terrifying than when garrotting his voice on the "*men LIES about that, some of them CRIES about that, some of them DIES about that...*" part of the chorus, each line punctuated by the last and most brutal notes of the bass riff. Along with tunes like John Lee Hooker's 'Tupelo Blues', 'Spoonful' is one of the most vividly «artsy» takes on the classic blues idiom in the pre-classic-blues-rock period, and one of the creepiest musical allegories on the true nature of humanity (certainly the creepiest one-chord musical allegory on the true nature of humanity — E minor, was it?).

As for the B-side, 'Howlin' For My Darling' (mistitled 'Howlin' For My Baby' by some rhyme-deaf executive on the original LP, though not on the original single), its only problem is that it found itself next to 'Spoonful' — it is a much more shallow vamp-groove, building upon Burnett's well-established werewolf imagery. The band sets a nice, if fairly monotonous, pattern, but it does build up an image of the lead singer as a ravenous, impatient carnivore pacing to and fro, back and forth around his eight-bar padded cell, anticipating the eventual arrival of his playmate — "*if you hear me howlin', calling on my darlin', aroooooooooo....*". It hardly beats 'Moanin' At Midnight' in terms of atmosphere, but in terms of production it's been a long road from 1951 to 1960, and though the lead guitar and piano still sound a bit subdued in the background, the song packs a fresh, crispy punch, also giving Dixon the opportunity to show how he can handle a fast, busy-bee bassline next to the slow and sinister one of 'Spoonful'. (For the record, I think this is exactly the same melody you hear a decade later in the bridge section of the Doors' 'Wild Child' — in a slightly different key — and it's hardly a big surprise).

At this time, the Dixon-Burnett partnership was totally on fire, with the Wolf's first single of 1961 showing no end to the show of awesomeness. 'Wang Dang Doodle' may not seem to have the most imposing title in the history of music, but it is a good candidate for the scariest havin'-a-good-time party anthem released in the history of music to that point. The opening ten seconds might feel like merely a sped up variation on 'Smokestack Lightning', but once the Wolf enters with his vocal lines, there is a subtle increase in tempo and the song seamlessly becomes more of a variation on Bo Diddley's 'Who Do You Love', echoing that song's atmosphere of cocky, death-defying violence. Dixon's lyrics are essentially about going to a party to have a good time, but who is going to the party? "*Tell Automatic Slim, tell Razor-Totin' Jim, tell Butcher Knife Totin' Annie, tell Fast-Talking Fanny...*" — these aren't exactly party-going teenagers you'd encounter in a Bill Haley or an Elvis Presley party-going anthem. "*I'm gonna rip it up, I'm gonna ball it up*" sounds pathetically wussy next to "*we gon' break out all the windows, we gon' kick down all the doors, we gon' pitch a wang dang doodle all night long*". Heck, when you pair those lyrics with the Wolf's acid sandpaper torture tool delivering them, the Wu-Tang Clan themselves would sound

pathetically wussy next to what we hear on this track — and this was January 1961, mind you, the month of Elvis Presley's 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?' and Bert Kaempfert's 'Wonderland By Night'. Go on, play 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?' first and then follow it up with 'Wang Dang Doodle'. No better way to recapture the state of mind of the typical musically curious young person at the time, soon to grow into a Mick Jagger or an Eric Burdon or a Jim Morrison.

Interestingly enough, Dixon's [original version](#), recorded by himself back in 1954 but not released until after the reinvention of the song with Howlin' Wolf, was far more jokey in tone, sounding more like a classic jump-blues number from the late Forties — again, hearing it is quite instructive if one wants to see to what extent of ballsiness this kind of music had advanced by the start of the new decade, even if only a tiny handful of people were adventurous enough to appreciate that ballsiness in 1961. For that matter, even the British admirers of the Wolf hesitated to cover the tune on record — I think the first proper cover version was by Dave Edmunds' Love Sculpture around 1968 — and yet you still hear its influence all over the place. Quite possible that the Stones were thinking about it when making their own breakneck-tempo party song ('Rip This Joint') in 1972 — and absolutely impossible that its fiery guitar breaks were *not* a major influence upon young Mike Bloomfield, whose maniacal blues-punk leads on Dylan's 'Maggie's Farm' (from Newport) and 'Tombstone Blues' (from **Highway 61 Revisited**) have exactly the same vibe to them as Hubert Sumlin's frantically messy soloing in between the Wolf's verses. (I assume that's Hubert, although some sources also credit an uncredited Freddie King as second guitarist and I would certainly not be surprised if that were the case). But influence or no influence, the song itself has not really aged a day since the original release, and as inventive as Love Sculpture's or, much later on, PJ Harvey's covers of it might be, absolutely nothing beats the original in terms of sheer primal violence. Do not try this at home, kids.

The B-side of the single is a little slower and less flat-out ferocious, but it is arguably more recognizable for the general music fan, because most of us probably become acquainted with 'Back Door Man' through the Doors cover on their debut album. Now certainly Jim Morrison and his film school buddies were the first to properly appreciate and, to the best of their abilities, to amplify the doom-laden, apocalyptic vibes of dark blues heroes such as Wolf or John Lee Hooker, and their transformation of the wife-seducing sexual predator of a protagonist in 'Back Door Man' into an allegorical avatar of the Grim Reaper still leaves my mind blown every time I hear it. But on the other hand, they also push it too far: Howlin' Wolf had a talent for standing (*stomping*, rather) on the borderline separating Sex from Death, whereas for Morrison, Death always came far more naturally than Sex (at least, as far as basic priorities go).

If you listen attentively to the one-chord vamp of the original 'Back Door Man', you might catch up on its essential similarity

with the 'Hoochie Coochie Man' / 'I'm A Man' / 'Mannish Boy' dialog between Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley — hardly surprising, given that both 'Hoochie Coochie Man' and 'Back Door Man' are credited to the one and only Willie Dixon, but also quite telling in that the «epic» vibe of the grand tales of Muddy's and Bo's superhuman sexual exploits is twisted into a much darker, mischievous, even murderous vibe when the Wolf takes the stand. For all their awesomeness, Muddy and Bo are «front door men», carrying out their conquests quite openly, in broad daylight; Wolf delivers the mantra of "*I am... back door man!*" in a voice that clearly suggests he's been sent on this Earth to disrupt order, not establish it, and his *modus operandi* is decidedly different from that of his peers — "*when everybody's trying to sleep, I'm somewhere making my midnight creep*". If you need more than that one line to explain why the Wolf's singles did not sell so well in 1961... well, no, I believe you do not, not really. Let Muddy and Bo eat their pork and beans. *Real* men know the value of chicken.

With two phenomenal singles in a row, it was probably time to take a little break, so the next couple of songs was not nearly as adventurous, even if both still sounded fine. 'Little Baby' was an updated take on Little Walter's 'My Babe' from 1955 (itself a reworking of the old-timey spiritual 'This Train') — however, Dixon did write a new set of lyrics for Wolf, turning the song from a regular love serenade into a creepy stalker anthem: "*You go to court and I'll come along / You go to jail and I'll throw your bond...*". Note how everybody in the world covered 'My Babe' at one point or another, but absolutely nobody *ever* covered 'Little Baby' (I think the Stones were the first band of any note to attempt their own take — and they only did it as late as 1995, on their **Stripped** album). The B-side, 'Down In The Bottom', was likewise a rewrite of the old 'Meet Me In The Bottom', set essentially to a rougher-hewn, choppy, punkier variation of 'Rollin' And Tumblin'. A stellar performance by the standards of any regular blues artist in 1961, but only a minor effort by the standards of the Dixon-Burnett tandem at the peak of their powers.

The power gets fully restored by the end of 1961, though. The fast-paced 'Shake For Me' feels like an early precursor to the much better known 'Killing Floor', which ended up reusing the same rhythm and riff, but with better production, tougher bass, and somewhat more meaningful lyrics. 'Shake For Me' does have a comparatively more melodic, smoothly flowing, proto-Page-like lead guitar break with some cool bends and vibratoes (either Hubert Sumlin again or relative newcomer Jimmy Rogers on the instrument, I cannot be sure). But the one that will be more familiar to everybody is 'Red Rooster' — this time, through the Stones cover, which, if you remember, hit No. 1 on the UK charts in late 1964, allegedly the only straightforward 12-bar blues song to ever hold that honor. Not a lot of original songwriting from Willie here, as the melody is traditional and the lyrics largely recycle old Walter Rhodes and Charley Patton bits, but that's hardly a problem.

Compared to everything that came before, 'Red Rooster' is very low-key for Wolf: minimal, barely audible percussion — light and sparse taps on the bass — distant and subtle piano rolls from Johnny Jones — and three quietly interlocking guitar parts, the most memorable of which, the mysterious and suggestive slide rolls, is apparently played by the Wolf himself. (In the Stones' version, it would be taken over by Brian Jones, who was probably very happy about being able to measure up to the Dark God Of The Blues at least in *one* respect). It does have a bit of a leisurely, «barnyard» vibe to it, which may have been Dixon's intention (amusingly enough, Willie always denied the overt sexual connotations of the song, insisting that he *really* wrote it about an actual rooster in the barnyard — such a modest guy!), and this only helps Wolf's personality to shine through even more distinctively than on the loud, heavily amplified electric recordings.

It is interesting that of all the innumerable cover versions of '(Little) Red Rooster' out there on the market (starting off with Sam Cooke's rendition on **Night Beat**, which he also somehow managed to turn into a solid American hit), only two — the original and the Stones cover — successfully pull off the slowly-paced, subtly-practiced slide guitar magic. Everybody else either speeds up the song, or replaces its hooks with something less effective (like the rooster-imitating organ riff on Sam's version, which sounds too theatrical in comparison), in any case, it usually becomes just a standard old 12-bar blues. Wolf, on the other hand, plays much the same way he sings — in bold, rough brushstrokes, punishing the strings rather than caressing them *à la* Muddy Waters. (Brian Jones also would have a gentler approach, but he would achieve individuality through tone and pitch rather than pure power). This constant *pushing* action certainly belies Dixon's claims of the tune's relative innocence, if you know what I mean. Then again, whoever said that «barnyard» would be synonymous with «innocence» in the first place? There are tales we could tell, you know...

Closing things off is Wolf's and Willie's first single of 1962, released around the same time as the album itself. 'You'll Be Mine' is another ass-shakin' blues-rocker in the vein of 'Shake For Me', memorable mainly for its somewhat strange guitar break, mixing classic blues licks with occasional Chuck Berryisms, and, of course, Wolf's delivery of the hookline: despite the generally gallant nature of the lyrics, he chants "*you'll be mine, you'll be mine*" in an evil, cartoonish chuckle that would rather make one think of Richard the Third than Romeo or Tristan. The B-side was much more impressive: despite not being an original composition, 'Going Down Slow' (originally recorded with an urban blues vibe by St. Louis Jimmy Oden and Roosevelt Sykes on piano in 1941) was absolutely owned by the Wolf and it is probably this particular version which made this particular blues into such a textbook classic.

It is almost frustrating that they did not think of closing the LP with this number, which would give it a strong thematic

coherence. Not only is it suitably stately-epic, with the slow tempo and the doom-laden chords, but it is also reinvented as a dialog between the LP's principal masterminds: Wolf sings the original verses, while Dixon throws in some ad-libbed spoken observations that reinforce his status as court philosopher of the blues ("*I did not say I was a millionaire, but I said I have spent more money than a millionaire!*"). As they trade the spoken and sung lines between themselves, the song acquires a double lining — the Wolf represents the outer body, blurting out its testament to the surrounding next of kin ("*I have had my fun if I never get well no more...*"), while Dixon is like the hidden, contrastively calm and collected rational conscience summarizing the results of the protagonist's life. Somewhere in between the two rests Hubert Sumlin's guitar, laying down series of scorching arpeggiated electric licks that have been imitated many times over, but hardly ever surpassed. In short, another textbook lesson on how to take a stereotypically generic 12-bar blues and work it into a tragedy of Shakesperian proportions.

Looking back on this incredible run of singles, it is hard to find a suitable equivalent for the Dixon-Burnett line of collaboration — perhaps something like Townshend-Daltrey might spring to mind across the Atlantic, though in that case the balance would be shifted too far in Pete's favor (after all, Roger never wrote or played much, while the Wolf had a much greater role in these recordings than just singing). The unquestionable truth is that both needed each other: without Willie by his side, the Wolf lacked the means for properly modernizing the blues, whereas Willie, despite being a decent singer in his own right, could never inject as much tension and electricity in his own recordings as when working with Mr. Burnett. Together, they were unstoppable in breathing new life into the (at least) forty-year old blues genre, and ensuring, along the way, that approximately 70-80% of what we call «classic blues-rock» pretty much grew out of «The Rocking Chair Album». And not just classic blues-rock, either: the blues-rock heroes embraced the musical backbone of the record, eventually reducing it to tropes and clichés — but somebody like Captain Beefheart, for instance, embraced its «ugly», trance-like, shamanistic vibe while deconstructing and mutating the music. There was something here for both the heroes and the villains of rock music, the conformists and the rebels, the sane ones and the nutters. Still is, actually.

It should be noted that the Wolf's run of classics was far from over — there would be classics like 'I Ain't Superstitious', 'Three Hundred Pounds Of Joy', 'Killing Floor', etc. in the next couple of years — but (a) these will be covered in subsequent reviews, as this one has already overstayed its welcome as is, and (b) no subsequent Howlin' Wolf LP would boast such a heavy concentration of genius across a mere 12 tracks. The presence of 'Spoonful', 'Back Door Man', and 'Red Rooster' alone would deserve a monumental appraisal from every single fan of Sixties' music, but pretty much every single song here has its own story to tell and its own fresh new twist on traditional blues values to present to the listener. Only one thing is

unfortunate about the ol' rocking chair: after you have listened to it too much — like I have done while preparing this review — most of the «blues» albums recorded by black and white bluesmen alike in the decades that followed will feel limp and perfunctory by comparison. *Creative* reworking of the blues idiom into something new, as carried out by Cream or The Doors or Led Zeppelin, would be okay because it steers your mind into a different direction; but if we talk about regular covers of the 12-bar stuff by even the most versatile and sensitive artists, well... prepare to memorize a phrase like «yeah, well, not too shabby, but sure as hell ain't no Howlin' Wolf and Willie Dixon circa 1961».

