

Rocking Chair Blues: Howlin' Wolf

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In this new Between the Grooves series, George de Stefano digs beneath the nondescript cover of Howlin' Wolf's "Rocking Chair" album -- an urtext for many rock and R&B artists who have been inspired by it or covered its songs -- to examine some of the greatest blues ever recorded.

An acoustic guitar and a rocking chair, set against a green background. You could hardly ask for a more nondescript album cover. But that image has become iconic because of the extraordinary music inside the unremarkable packaging. In fact, the album has come to be known by its cover art. Chess Records titled the disk "Howlin' Wolf" when the Chicago-based company released it in 1962. But everyone, or at least every serious blues aficionado, knows this collection of 12 tracks by Chester "Howlin' Wolf" Burnett simply as "the rocking chair album."

Rocking Chair, as I will call it from here on, comprises tracks recorded from 1957 to 1961, most of which were released as singles. But it has the stylistic unity and focus of a recording conceived as a whole. It is one of the greatest blues records ever made, as well as an ur-text for many rock and R&B artists -- The Doors, Cream, the Who, Sam Cooke, Etta James, Robert Plant and Jimmy Page, the Grateful Dead, the Pointer Sisters, Koko Taylor, the White Stripes, Lucinda Williams, and especially the Rolling Stones, who covered three of its tracks, "Little Red Rooster", "Down in the Bottom", and "Little Baby."

I first heard the album some 40 years ago, as kid in his early teens who had acquired, thanks mainly to the Stones, a passion for the blues. My musical heroes from London couldn't stop raving about artists like Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and Howlin' Wolf. So I dutifully bought albums by all of them: Mick, Keith, Brian, Bill, and Charlie couldn't be wrong. They were especially right about Howlin' Wolf. As much as I loved Berry's and Diddley's fantastic rock 'n roll, and as enthralled as I was by Muddy's Mississippi Delta-by-way-of-Chicago hoodoo blues, it was the Wolf who stunned me. That voice! Who on earth sang like that! It was a huge voice, raw and raspy and conveying every imaginable human emotion with astonishing intensity and conviction. I was floored, and hooked.

Sam Phillips, the legendary producer who discovered Elvis Presley, actually considered Wolf, whom he first recorded in 1950, to be his greatest discovery. Wolf's genius drew from an awestruck Phillips this wonderful, oft-quoted burst of poetry: "When I heard him, I said, 'This is for me. This is where the soul of man never dies.'"

"I mean," Phillips added, "he was singing to exactly the thing that we all want to make contact with, and that is the ears of the world. Maybe that's one person. Maybe it is everybody on the globe. But Wolf had nothing in mind but just to make sure that he conveyed everything that was in his mind, and in his heart, and in his soul when he opened his mouth to sing....He was, boy, pouring out his soul!"

Wolf's soulfulness and his immense communicative power register on every track of *Rocking Chair*, making the best songs unforgettable and elevating the lesser ones to greatness. All but three were written by Willie Dixon, who also plays bass on most tracks. Two are by Wolf and another, "Goin' Down Slow", by St. Louis Jimmy Oden, an obscure bluesman who wrote hits for several leading blues artists. Besides Dixon, the stellar musicians include guitarists Hubert Sumlin, Wolf's closest creative partner, and Willie Johnson, who was using distortion and slashing power chords before rock 'n rollers picked up on those techniques; drummer Sam Lay, who later played in Bob Dylan's first electric band; and pianists Henry Gray, Lafayette Leake, and Otis Spann, a gifted musician and singer better known as a Muddy Waters sideman. Wolf plays slide guitar and country-style harmonica.

Although I've listened to *Rocking Chair* countless times since I first picked it up for \$2.50 at E.J. Korvette's, a now-defunct, New York-based department store chain, I've never tired of it. It's one of those essential records that I keep returning to, and it sounds as fresh, exciting, and deep as ever. In fact, as I've aged and gained experience – of love, sex, and mortality – I think I understand and appreciate it more than ever.

The blues, after all, is adult music, about grown-up concerns, and hearing Wolf at 14, I couldn't really grasp it all. The sexual allusions, steeped in the argot of the African American rural South, particularly were beyond me, an Italian American kid from the urban Northeast. But I understood from my first listening that this was great

music, with its hard-rocking rhythms and unadulterated funk, and, above all, Wolf's voice, which thrilled and amazed, and, to be honest, even scared me a little. It still does.

But what went into that sound, what combination of personal attributes and experience, and social environment? Chester Burnett was born in 1910 – just 45 years after the end of slavery -- in White Station, a hamlet in the Mississippi hill country. In the account of Wolf's biographers, James Segrest and Mark Hoffman, African Americans in this "bleak, unforgiving country" suffered under a "repressive racial caste system" marked by deep poverty, political disenfranchisement, and racist violence. His father Dock was a sharecropper, his mother Gertrude, a cook and a housemaid. Wolf's teenage parents split up when he was a year old and he was left in the care of Gertrude, an abusive, mentally unstable religious fanatic who rejected her son and forced him to fend for himself.

The young Chester Burnett briefly lived with an uncle, who also abused him. At 13, he ran away and found his father, finally enjoying a stable home life with Dock and his family. After he became successful, he returned to Mississippi to visit his mother, who scorned him and rejected the money he offered her, saying he'd earned it playing "the Devil's music."

As a youth in the 1920s, Burnett learned the blues from Charley Patton; a decade later he traveled and performed with two other legendary bluesmen, Robert Johnson and Rice Miller, the latter better known as Sonny Boy Williamson. Wolf's style originally was traditional country blues, which he played on acoustic guitar and a rack-mounted harmonica. By all accounts, he was a compelling singer from the beginning, with a raw and startlingly powerful voice. (Segrest and Hoffman claim that the serrated edge to his booming baritone was the result of several bouts of tonsillitis when he was a child.) He also boasted a commanding physical presence -- over six feet tall, he carried nearly 300 pounds on his big frame – which he exploited to maximum effect in his uninhibited performances.

Howlin' Wolf – he adopted his stage name when he was 18 – left Mississippi for West Memphis, Arkansas in 1948. He became a fulltime musician that year, at age 38, dropping the acoustic guitar for an electric one, and forming his first band. Around the same time, Muddy Waters was in Chicago assembling an urban electric blues band featuring the harmonica virtuoso Little Walter Jacobs. Wolf's band was, as the critic Robert Palmer observed, "both more primitive and more modern" than the Muddy Waters group, its sound a mix of traditional Delta blues and guitarist Willie Johnson's proto-rock 'n roll style and the jazz-influenced piano playing by a sideman known to posterity as "Destruction."

Wolf arrived in Chicago in late 1952, after several years of performing in the south, hosting a popular radio show in West Memphis, and recording for Sam Phillips in his Memphis, Tennessee studios. (He also cut some sides with a young, up and coming musician and producer named Ike Turner.) Unlike other blues artists who came to

Chicago by train, Wolf drove from the south to the Windy City in his own car, making quite an impression on an envious Muddy Waters, an encounter depicted in the 2007 film *Cadillac Records*.

During the 1950s and '60s, Howlin' Wolf and Waters, Chess Records' two greatest blues artists, were rivals. *Cadillac Records*, exaggerating somewhat, portrayed their rivalry as intense and bitter. In one scene, Wolf threatens to kill Muddy after the latter briefly poaches Wolf's guitarist Hubert Sumlin. Their personas and performing styles made manifest the contrasts between the two blues titans. Waters was the Hoochie Koochie Man, a slick superstud. Wolf, though he worked, and sometimes over-worked, the lupine persona, demonstrated greater emotional range. There was sorrow, pain, and vulnerability, but also playfulness and lubricious joy, in his music. Wolf, moreover, was a much more extroverted performer. Waters could be compelling onstage, but, as Robert Palmer observed, "He simply would not go to the lengths Wolf *habitually* went to."

Wild man image aside, musicians who played with both Muddy and Wolf say the latter was a more professional band leader who paid his sidemen on time and withheld unemployment insurance and Social Security. He also reportedly was far less deferential to his label's owners, Leonard and Phil Chess, than Waters. In later years, he bitterly complained about being ripped off by Chess Records. White rock stars he influenced made millions, but financial problems kept him on the road even when he was aging and in poor health. Wolf, who suffered from kidney and heart disease, died from a brain tumor in 1976, at the age of sixty-six.

"Shake For Me"

On the *Rocking Chair* album, we hear Howlin' Wolf at the height of his formidable powers. The first track is "Shake For Me", by Willie Dixon. It's the blues, all right, but it's rock 'n roll, too, up-tempo and tight as a drumhead. The instrumentation is spare, and everything fits together perfectly, with no superfluous business. Hubert Sumlin's the lead guitarist, and he takes charge from the get-go, kicking off the number in his trademark, angular style.

As guitarist and former Muddy Waters sideman Bob Margolin said, Sumlin "brings out expressive harmonics and percussive accents, yelping slides up and kamikaze slides down." His taut solo midway through the song bears out Margolin's assessment. Drummer Sam Lay, beating out a rhythm on cowbell, drives the band, giving the track its momentum.

After Sumlin's intro, Wolf leaps in, telling a former lover that although she looks fine, "it don't mean a thing to me." She went away, "got back a little too late", and now he's got "a hip-shaking woman" who "shake like jello on a plate." Wolf's vocal is lusty and good-humored, yet there's something else, maybe a hint of desperation, that makes the brief number (two minutes, 16 seconds) more than just a sexy little rocker. Wolf pleads with this loose-hipped mama to "shake it for me" as if his life depended on it.

But the song conjures up other associations for me. I was lucky enough to have seen Wolf perform, in a Boston club just a few years before his death, and he was still one hip-shakin' daddy who loved to waggle his big bottom while he roared into the mic. So when I hear "Shake for Me", that's the picture that pops into my mind's eye: Wolf on stage, pouring out his soul, and shaking it for the world.

"The Red Rooster"

If "Shake it for Me" is a rocking blues that, when released in the early '60s, filled the dance floors of rough 'n ready Southside Chicago clubs, "The Red Rooster" takes the listener back to the origins of Wolf's music, the Mississippi Delta. "I got a little red rooster, too lazy to crow for day", Wolf announces, accompanying himself on slide guitar. Wolf repeats the line, and then informs us that the titular fowl "keeps everything in the barnyard upset in every way".

"The Red Rooster" -- also known as "Little Red Rooster" -- has attained classic status in the blues repertoire. The song is credited to Willie Dixon, but the rooster -- a symbol of male sexual potency -- strutted his stuff in blues songs long before Dixon and Wolf recorded it, in 1961. Charley Patton, Howlin' Wolf's mentor and running buddy in the 1920s, released his "Banty Rooster Blues" in 1929. Memphis Minnie's 1936 "If You See My Rooster" also seems a likely model for Dixon, her lyric, "If you see my rooster, please run him on back home" nearly identical to Dixon's "If you see my little red rooster, please drive him home".

And why does the rooster need to get back home? Well, "there ain't no peace in the barnyard" since he's been gone. Puzzling, no? How can this rooster, who's too lazy to crow, keep the barnyard upset and be its peacekeeper, too? "Watch out strange kin people", Wolf warns, "the little red rooster's on the prowl". Who are these strange kinfolk, and why should they watch out for this prowling yard bird? Good question. All I can say is that the elusive (and allusive) quality of the lyrics is a big part of the song's allure.

"The Red Rooster"/"Little Red Rooster" has been covered by such disparate artists as Sam Cooke, the Grateful Dead, the Jesus and Mary Chain, and Bryan Adams. The best-known cover, though, is the Rolling Stones' 1964 version, recorded at Chess Records in Chicago, in homage to Wolf and Dixon. The Stones closely follow Wolf's original, with Brian Jones on slide guitar, Bill Wyman playing bass lines modeled on Willie Dixon's, and Mick Jagger turning in a nuanced vocal with an undertone of sexual menace. (Not bad for a 21-year-old English boy.) If they can't equal Wolf, theirs nonetheless is a credible interpretation.

Sam Cooke, no blues purist, took the song in a different direction -- urban rhythm and blues. His smooth vocal timbre and jazzy phrasing, the faster tempo and swinging rhythm, and Billy Preston's organ accompaniment, take the little red

rooster out of the barnyard and plop him down in the big city. You can decide whether he survived the journey intact.

But Howlin' Wolf -- backed by Dixon, Hubert Sumlin on guitar, Johnny Jones on piano and Sam Lay on drums -- indisputably owns the song. His vocal infuses the terse narrative with drama and mystery, and his understated slide guitar heightens the mood. You might think this a straightforward, simple piece. But when Wolf and a roster of top British rock stars recorded "Little Red Rooster" for "Howlin' Wolf: The London Sessions" in 1970, Eric Clapton couldn't master Wolf's guitar part. The album's engineers captured the studio chatter of the American blues giant and his English acolytes, and it's a kick to hear the man dubbed "God" by his fans entirely at sea, admitting "I doubt if I can do it" without Wolf showing him how.

"You'll Be Mine"

The languid, suggestive "Red Rooster" fades to the sound of Howlin' Wolf's slide guitar, and what comes next is a mood-changer: the ebullient "You'll Be Mine". This Willie Dixon-penned rocker is two minutes and twenty-five seconds of joy, as Wolf pledges lifelong fidelity to his lover. The song's structure is basic, verse-chorus with a middle eight break, and the lyrics are simplicity itself: "You so sweet/you so fine/how I wish you were mine/Honey, I'll be your love/you'll be mine". Wolf's so captivated by his darling that, as long as she's his, it doesn't matter what she does or doesn't do: it's love as total, unquestioning devotion.

Critic Robert Palmer wrote that the hair on the back of his neck "crackled with electricity" when he heard Wolf perform at a 1965 show. Wolf's one of a kind voice triggers physical sensations in the listener -- thrills and chills -- when he's conveying deep and dark emotion, whether anguish, rage, or terror. But when he's feeling good, he's just as affecting, as "You'll Be Mine" proves. Wolf's emotional effects, however, are never one-dimensional, and there's more than simple, unalloyed joy in his performance. He's also staking claim to this woman, and when he sings, "you'll be mine", chopping the possessive pronoun into three syllables, he gives it an edge of control-freak mania.

"You'll Be Mine" was recorded at Chess Records in December 1961, during a session that produced another track that would end up on *Rocking Chair*, "Goin' Down Slow". Wolf is backed by Henry Gray on piano, Sam Lay on drums, Willie Dixon on bass, and Hubert Sumlin, who turns in a concise, perfectly structured single-string guitar solo. By the early 60s, after a period of apprenticeship and playing second guitar to the more flamboyant Willie Johnson, Sumlin had come into his own as Wolf's lead player. Wolf, a combination father figure and teacher to Sumlin, groomed the much younger musician to assume that role in his band. Their relationship was close, but contentious, and it occasionally erupted into violence when Wolf felt Sumlin was fucking up. But on "You'll Be Mine", and throughout *Rocking Chair*, he fully justifies Wolf's faith in him.

“Who’s Been Talkin’”

Pat Benatar told us back in the 1980s that love is a battlefield. But blues singers were sending that message long before the spandex-loving rocker from Long Island. Blues songs often are brutally candid about the power struggles in heterosexual relations. Violent imagery is hardly uncommon, with razors, knives, pistols, “Gatling guns” (see: Robert Johnson) and fists making recurring appearances (the minor subgenre of gay-themed blues, however, tended to be more ribald and good-humored). Bluesmen—the genre is of course male-dominated—often express mistrust of women, and sometimes misogyny as harsh as anything in rap.

Although it’s usually the man who’s the aggressor, sometimes the roles are reversed. Howlin’ Wolf recorded two of the starkest, scariest songs in the blues about “mean mistreater” women. The title of one says it all: “I Asked Her for Water (And She Brought Me Gasoline)”. In “Commit a Crime”, he tells us his woman “mixed my drinks with a can of Red Devil lye / Then you sit down watch me hopin’ that I might die”.

But in “Who’s Been Talkin’”, the Wolf is sorrowful, even regretful, over the behavior that caused his lover to leave him. She “caught the train, left me all alone”, he laments. He complains that “she’s doin’ me wrong”, and he wants to know who put the word out about his tomcatting (“Who’s been talkin’ / Everything that I do”). But he fesses up to his part in the drama: “I’m the causin’ of it all”.

One of only two songs on *Rocking Chair* written by Howlin’ Wolf, “Who’s Been Talkin’” also is one of the album’s oldest tracks, recorded in 1957. It is basically a superior re-make of “Going Back Home”, a tune he recorded the previous year. Wolf is backed by Hosea Lee Kennard on piano; Otis Smothers and Willie Johnson, guitars; Alfred Elkins, bass; Earl Phillips, drums, and saxophonist Adolph Duncan, who threads a sweet and sour melodic line through the song and around Wolf’s pained vocal and harmonica blasts.

“Who’s Been Talkin’” has been covered by Robert Cray, the Steve Miller Band, Tom Waits (in concert), and the Allman Brothers, who have been playing it in their recent shows, including this year’s engagement at New York’s Beacon Theatre. Warren Haynes capably handles the vocals, but the concentrated emotional force of Wolf’s indelible original is lost as the band takes off on one of their typical extended jams. With Wolf, the song’s the thing.

“Wang Dang Doodle”

It sounds like the wildest party ever, with a rogue’s gallery of guests. It’s a “Wang Dang Doodle”, and Howlin’ Wolf’s spreading the word:

Tell Automatic Slim, tell Razor Totin' Jim
Tell Butcher Knife Totin' Annie, tell Fast Talking Fanny
We gonna pitch a ball, down to that union hall

We gonna romp and tromp till midnight
We gonna fuss and fight till daylight
We gonna pitch a wang dang doodle all night long

Besides those four characters, the invitees include “Kudu-Crawlin’ Red”, “Abyssinian Ned”, “Pistol Pete”, “Fats and Washboard Sam”, “Shaky”, “Boxcar Joe”, “Peg” (just Peg?) and “Caroline Dye”.

“Wang Dang Doodle”, one of the hardest-rocking tracks on *Rocking Chair*, celebrates extreme, even violent pleasure. This party sounds more like a riot: “Tonight we need no rest, we really gonna throw a mess”. The revelers, Wolf promises (threatens?), will “break out all the windows” and “kick down all the doors”. Wolf certainly sounds like he can’t wait to “romp and tromp” with this rowdy crowd: he delivers the song with his typical gusto. But he actually didn’t like “Wang Dang Doodle” at all, according to his biography, *Moanin’ at Midnight*. Co-authors James Segrest and Mark Hoffman quote the song’s writer, Willie Dixon, on Wolf’s reluctance to record it: “He hated that ‘Tell Automatic Slim and Razor-toting Jim.’ He’d say, ‘Man, that’s too old-timey, sounds like some old levee camp number”.

“A wang-dang meant having a ball and a lot of dancing, they called it a rocking style, so that’s what it meant to wang dang doodle”, Dixon commented. “Wang Dang Doodle” is, like “The Red Rooster”, another instance of Dixon re-working older material. It is based on a lesbian blues number, “Bull Dagger’s Ball”, about a sapphic bacchanal. Dixon’s re-write sanitizes the original, turning its “Fast Fuckin’ Fannie” into a fast-talker. He also relocates the party to a Saturday night fish-fry down South: “When the fish scent fill the air, there’ll be snuff juice everywhere”.

Howlin’ Wolf recorded “Wang Dang Doodle” in June 1960, with Otis Spann on piano, Hubert Sumlin and Freddie Robinson, guitars; Willie Dixon, bass, and Fred Below, drums. The ace band lays down an intense yet relaxed groove, with Hubert Sumlin’s stinging, single-string lead guitar dominant in the mix. Wolf may have hated the “old-timey” number, but another blues singer, KoKo Taylor, built her career on it. Six years after Wolf cut the tune, Taylor, a Chicagoan with Southern roots, scored a million-selling hit with it, a feat she never repeated with her subsequent releases. She recorded several different versions and it was a fixture of her shows.

“Wang Dang Doodle” is one of the most covered tracks from *Rocking Chair*, recorded by the Pointer Sisters, the Grateful Dead, P.J. Harvey, Ted Nugent, and other blues and rock artists. The covers vary in quality; some are worth hearing (Taylor’s above all), others dismal. But the only version you really need is by Wolf. The guy who hated it, yet made it a classic.

“Little Baby”

“Wang Dang Doodle” fades to the sound of Hubert Sumlin’s guitar and Howlin’ Wolf’s promise that the wild party will go “all night long, all night long”. With “Little Baby”, the mood shifts from riotous to playful and affectionate, as Wolf pledges total

devotion to his love, in good times and bad. “You go and I’ll come with you little baby/You go and I’ll come with you/you bet your life that I won’t quit you”, he declares. He’ll stick by Little Baby even if she runs afoul of the law and gets locked up: “You go to court/ And I’ll come along/ You’ll go to jail/ And I’ll go your bond/ You got time, tell you what I’ll do/ Stay outside and wait for you”. But this love affair, and Wolf’s devotion, rests, at least partly, on the cash nexus: “You get paid/I’ll hold the money”/ “You bet the horses/ And I’ll pick up the dough”.

“Little Baby” is yet another Willie Dixon number, a well-crafted pop song with clever lyrics and a terrific hook. Howlin’ Wolf sounds like he’s having a great time with it; unlike other Dixon tunes whose words he sometimes messed up, here he gives the wryly comic lyrics their full due. You’d never guess that the partnership between singer and songwriter was so fraught with anger and resentment.

Wolf chafed at Chess Records’ insistence that he cut so many songs by the company’s chief writer because he preferred to record his own material. He felt that Chess imposed Dixon’s tunes on him because the label’s execs, the tight-fisted Leonard and Phil Chess, didn’t want to pay him royalties on his songs, which he published under his real name, Chester Burnett. On the other hand, the frères Chess were savvy businessmen, and Dixon’s commercial blues made them a lot of money. Maybe with a confection like “Little Baby”, released as a single in 1961, they were hoping to repeat a previous success, “My Babe”, a Dixon-penned number that, in 1955, was a number one Billboard hit for blues harp virtuoso Little Walter. “My Babe” is the obvious prototype for “Little Baby”, but Dixon based that song on an even older number, Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s gospel tune “This Train”, from 1930. The man was a crafty recycler, or, if you prefer, a master of the “folk process”.

It’s hard to argue with the quality of Dixon’s material on *Rocking Chair*, but Wolf’s songs were more personal and cut deeper. There’s little in the rotund bassist’s songbook as emotionally affecting as Wolf’s “Smokestack Lightnin’”. Wolf improved Dixon’s songs by imbuing them with his own powerful presence and authority, his distinctive vocal timbre and idiosyncratic phrasing. And maybe he should’ve shared writing credits on a number of them. According to Wolf’s biographers James Segrest and Mark Hoffman, Dixon would come up with the basic concept and lyrics of his songs but generally left the arrangements to others. Francis Clay, a drummer who worked with Muddy Waters and Wolf, even claimed, “Everybody wants to credit Willie Dixon as the composer, but he was the lyricist”.

The song’s provenance, and Wolf’s attitude toward its writer notwithstanding, “Little Baby” is a bright little gem: simple, straightforward and utterly endearing. The Rolling Stones covered it on their 1995 release *Stripped*, their stab at an “Unplugged” album, comprising live tracks and versions of some of their earlier hits re-arranged and recorded live in the studio, without overdubs. Their “Little Baby” sounds like they went back to school, i.e., studied Wolf’s version, before they cut it. It has the original’s jaunty spirit, as well as great dueling guitar work by Keith

Richards and Ron Wood, and one of Mick Jagger's least mannered vocal performances since the blues-crazed kid from London became a global superstar.

"Spoonful"

"Spoonful" is one of the best-known and most recorded songs in the history of the blues, and like many great blues numbers, there's a bit of mystery about it. "It could be a spoonful of coffee/It could be a spoonful of tea/But just a little spoon of your precious love/Is good enough for me". There's been a fair amount of speculation about the song's meaning in the 50 years since Howlin' Wolf recorded the Willie Dixon number. What exactly is in that spoonful? Is "love" really liquefied heroin? Or, as some have suggested, is "spoonful" a metaphor for spooge?

Willie Dixon tried to put the conflicting interpretations to rest in his autobiography, *I am the Blues*. "The idea of 'Spoonful' was that it doesn't take a large quantity of anything to be good", he observed. "If you have a little money when you need it, you're right there in the right spot, that'll buy you a whole lot. If a doctor give you less than a spoonful of some kind of medicine that can kill you, he can give you less than a spoonful of another that will make you well". Asked about heroin, he replied, "People who think 'Spoonful' was about heroin are mostly people with heroin ideas".

Howlin' Wolf favored a sexual metaphor, or rather, he literalized one when he played the song in his shows. He'd grab a big cooking spoon that drummer Sam Lay bought him at a flea market and brandish it at crotch-level, engaging in blatantly phallic monkeyshines. Wolf would work this raunchy shtick no matter the crowd. On two occasions – a benefit for a black Little League team, the other the International Jazz Festival in Washington, D.C., before an audience of gowned and tuxedoed dignitaries – many were not amused. At the benefit, someone closed the stage curtains on Wolf to spare the kiddies the sight of him getting busy with a kitchen utensil.

Howlin' Wolf recorded "Spoonful" in 1960, backed by a top-notch studio band comprising the guitarists Hubert Sumlin and Freddie Robinson, pianist Otis Spann, Fred Below on drums and Dixon on the double-bass. But its origins, like those of several other Dixon compositions on *Rocking Chair*, go back several decades further. It's adapted (loosely) from Charley Patton's 1929 "A Spoonful Blues", which derives from Papa Charlie Jackson's 1925 recording, "All I Want Is a Spoonful". The song's tailor-made for Wolf; like his own "Smokestack Lightnin'" and "I Asked Her for Water", it's the kind of modal chant with which he crafted his incomparable brand of gripping drama.

"Spoonful" fits Wolf stylistically like a glove, yet there's a dissonance between the singer and the song. It's hard to believe that Wolf, a man known for his big appetites (for food, booze, sex, and performing), would ever be satisfied with a spoonful of anything. But, consummate artist that he was, he makes you believe he's so desperate for his woman's "precious love" that he'd accept even a stingy dose of it.

“Spoonful”, like everything on *Rocking Chair*, is compact, clocking in at two minutes and forty-two seconds. (Like most of the tracks, it was released as a 45 rpm single, in an era when singles rarely exceeded three minutes, so the concision is due to commercial considerations as much as artistic ones.) Wolf and his band would stretch out during his shows, since he loved working a crowd and letting his gifted sidemen, and especially Sumlin, shine. But his studio recordings have a concentrated force that’s missing in the cover versions by more prolix artists. Take Cream, for example. Their 1968 double album *Wheels of Fire* features a 16 minute-plus live version of “Spoonful” recorded at San Francisco’s Winterland Ballroom. Bassist Jack Bruce sings it, painfully straining to sound soulful, and missing by a mile. And when he’s done, the trio takes off on a long, bombastic jam, led by Eric Clapton, whose playing here Robert Christgau nailed with an analog-era analogy: [blues guitarist] Freddie King at 78 rpm, with the needle stuck. Wolf may have mimed masturbation when he performed the song, but he wasn’t jerking off.

“Goin’ Down Slow”

“Goin’ Down Slow” was written and first recorded in 1941 by St. Louis Jimmy Oden, a bluesman who, despite his monicker, was from Nashville. But the song’s definitive version came 20 years later, when Howlin’ Wolf cut it for Chess Records. From its opening bars, with Hubert Sumlin’s astringent guitar and Henry Gray’s percussive piano, Wolf’s rendition is a dramatic tour de force in three minutes and 18 seconds and the most emotionally shattering performance on *Rocking Chair*.

The song is a dialogue between two sides of a dying man’s divided self, as he contemplates his impending demise: one part philosophical, reflecting with fondness and humor on the good times he’s enjoyed, the other part anguished, venting fear and desperation in the face of death. Bassist Willie Dixon, as the ruminative ex-playa, comes in first, speaking the lines, “Man, you know I enjoyed things kings and queens will never have, and in fact kings and queens can’t never get, and in fact, they don’t even know about”! Then, at 1:09, Wolf enters, crying out in his uncanny voice, “I have had my fun/If I never get well no more/Oh my health is fading/Oh yes, I’m going down slow”.

In the second verse, Dixon jokes that although he was not a rich man, he spent like one in the pursuit of pleasure: “Now looky here/ I did not say I was a millionaire/But I said I have spent more money than a millionaire/’Cause if I had kept all of the money I’ve already spent/I’d would have been a millionaire a long time ago/And women? Great googly moogly”!

Then Wolf, his mind fixed on the grave, pleads, “Please write my mama/Tell her the shape I’m in/Tell her to pray for me/Forgive me for my sins”. (The “sins” are the very pleasures celebrated in the spoken verses.) For those listeners familiar with Wolf’s biography, those lines are particularly poignant: Wolf’s mother, a hard-hearted religious zealot, drove her young son from her home and rejected him as an

adult because he played “the devil’s music”. The song fades on Sumlin’s guitar and Gray’s piano, as they lead the dying man to the song’s end, and his.

Although “Goin’ Down Slow” is credited to Jimmy Oden, Howlin’ Wolf and Willie Dixon radically revised his original, both stylistically and lyrically. Oden performed the song in a rhythm and blues style, and at a faster tempo. Wolf and Dixon slowed it down, heightening the stark drama. They also cut several of Oden’s verses and added two of their own – those spoken by Dixon. Their re-workings produced a perfect marriage of sense and sound, and a blues masterpiece.

Wolf recorded “Goin’ Down Slow” in 1961; it was released as the “B” side to the lesser “You’ll Be Mine.” Besides Sumlin, Gray, and Dixon, the band includes the guitarist and Muddy Waters sideman Jimmy Rogers and Sam Lay on drums. Record buyers loved the song, and Wolf made it a staple of his shows. But when he performed it with his band, he handled Dixon’s recited verses. Lacking the startling contrast between Dixon’s fatalistic good humor and Wolf’s anguish, the live version, which can be heard on several releases (*Rockin’ the Blues -- Live In Germany, 1964; Live in Cambridge*) was nowhere as effective as the studio recording.

“Goin’ Down Slow” was a favorite of some of the greatest blues and R&B artists of the 60s and 70s, as well as a number of blues-influenced rock bands. Aretha Franklin covered it on her Atlantic Records debut, *Aretha Arrives*. Elmore James, Little Walter, B.B. King and Bobby “Blue” Bland, Jimmy Witherspoon, Memphis Slim, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Ray Charles, and Muddy Waters all recorded it, as did The Animals, Canned Heat, Mike Bloomfield, and Free. Led Zeppelin quoted it in their live versions of “Whole Lotta Love”, Phish played it in their ‘90s shows, and way down the food chain, Huey Lewis and the News included it on *Four Chords & Several Years Ago*, their 1994 album of blues and R&B covers. In 1967, Chess Records got Wolf, Muddy Waters, and Bo Diddley in the studio to record as the Super Super Blues Band. The re-makes of their classic hits included “Goin’ Down Slow”.

"Down in the Bottom"

A dude making time with another’s woman has to cut out before he gets caught by his rival: it’s one of the oldest and most commonplace themes in the blues. But sexual poaching and its consequences becomes a life and death drama in Howlin’ Wolf’s “Down in the Bottom”. He invests the song with such fearful intensity you’d think it was one of Robert Johnson’s demonic hellhounds on his trail, not some pissed-off boyfriend.

“Down in the Bottom”, like so many tracks on *Rocking Chair*, is a Willie Dixon song with a lineage that goes back several decades prior to its composition. In 1936, a blues singer with the wonderful monicker Bumble Bee Slim cut a side for Decca called “Meet Me in the Bottom”, which was a reworked version of one of his earlier tunes, “Hey Lawdy Mama”. “Meet me in the bottom, bring my boots and shoes”, he sang. “Oh lawdy mama, great God almighty/ Meet me in the bottom, bring my boots and shoes/I’ve got to leave this town I, got no time to lose”.

Dixon changed the lyrics, dropping the “Oh lawdy mama, great God almighty” line and revised the tune, but his “Down in the Bottom” is a transformation of Bumblebee Slim’s song as much as “Wang Dang Doodle” is a re-written “Bull Dagger’s Ball”. Note the similarity to “Meet Me in the Bottom” in the opening lines of Dixon’s version: “Well now meet me in the bottom/ Bring me my running shoes/ Well I’ll come out the window/ I won’t have time to lose”. “Down in the Bottom” is also strongly reminiscent of “Rollin’ and Tumblin’”, a traditional that’s one of the most recorded numbers in blues history.

“Down in the Bottom” is a classic 12-bar blues straight from the Mississippi Delta. Wolf sings the hell out of it, and he accompanies his vocal with slide guitar, alternating slippery melodic lines with choppy rhythmic chords, giving the song its propulsive force. Hubert Sumlin recalled that when Wolf couldn’t find his slide in the studio, he broke off the neck of a bottle and used it instead, which is what the early Delta bluesmen did and why the style was originally called “bottleneck”.

In 1966, archivist Alan Lomax brought together a number of veteran blues artists, including Howlin’ Wolf, who were appearing at that year’s Newport Folk Festival and had them filmed as they performed on a set modeled on a southern juke joint. In one extraordinary segment, Wolf explains the blues and the meaning of “Down in the Bottom”, while the singer and guitarist Son House drunkenly mouths off in the audience. Wolf responds to the older man, at first mildly, then angrily, rebuking him for his alcoholism. (Wolf’s biographers Mark Hoffman and James Segrest, in their account of the incident, say that Son House at the time suffered from “wet brain” -- alcoholic dementia.) When he begins “Down in the Bottom”, he’s clearly still disturbed by the confrontation, and both he and the band sound tentative, off their game. But Wolf gets it together, turning in a fierce vocal and showing off his formidable slide guitar skills, which often were underrated.

Chess Records released Wolf’s “Down in the Bottom” in 1961, as the “B” side of the playful “Little Baby”. Just three years later, five of his most devoted acolytes – the Rolling Stones – cut it when they came to Chicago to record at Chess. (Not included on any of their albums, it’s available on the 1978 bootleg *The Black Box*, and as a YouTube clip.) In 1995, they dusted it off for several dates on their European tour. The 1964 version is fun (dig Brian Jones’ harp solo), but they sound like enthusiastic kids and apt pupils. Thirty-one years later, they sound like they know what the song’s about. It’s a confident, mature version, and Wolf, who with his wife Lillie was the Stones’ guest at their Chicago concerts, surely would have approved.

“Back Door Man”

The *Rocking Chair* album is basically a collection of sex songs, and “Back Door Man”, written for Wolf by Willie Dixon, is the most outrageous of them all. On other tracks Wolf praises a woman who “shakes like jelly on a plate” and pleads for just a “spoonful” of his woman’s “precious love”. “Down in the Bottom” finds him climbing out the window of a woman’s bedroom and hauling ass to escape her angry

boyfriend. With “Back Door Man”, Wolf’s up to the same tricks, but with a different manner of egress, as the stud who services other men’s wives and slips out the back exit before they come home: “When everybody trying to sleep/ I’m somewhere making my midnight creep / Every morning the rooster crow/something tell me I got to go / I am a back door man”. He revels in his sexual buccaneering, and his ability to get away with it, crowing, “The men don’t know/but the little girls understand”.

With “Back Door Man”, Willie Dixon once again re-worked older material; the title figure is something of a southern archetype who appeared in songs by country blues singers like Charley Patton, Lightnin’ Hopkins, and Blind Willie McTell. Sarah Martin, a popular recording artist of the 1920s, declared that “every sensible woman got a back door man” in her “Strange Loving Blues”.

Sexuality is central to the blues, whether the singer is a man or woman. Early in the history of the genre, virtually all blues singers were men, and according to Giles Oakley in his *The Devil’s Music: A History of the Blues*, their principal theme was “the sexual relationship”. Other themes, such as catching a train and leaving town, money woes and general dissatisfaction with life, says Oakley, “sooner or later revert to the central concern.”

Angela Davis, in her *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, connects the emergence of the blues to the aftermath of slavery and the limited freedom then available to formerly enslaved black people. “With a lineage consisting largely of spirituals and work songs, the blues was the first musical genre to reflect black people’s experience of ‘freedom’ in the U.S.”, Davis observes. Emancipation allowed blacks, formerly confined to the plantations where they worked, to move from place to place, and for the first time they also could determine their sexual relationships. “Consequently, themes of travel and sexuality permeate the blues”, Davis notes.

Sexual candor and provocative sexual imagery are to the blues what piety and spiritual fervor are to gospel music. You might say that the blues is as fervent about sex as gospel is about the divine. This unabashed and unapologetic carnality delighted black audiences, and also white folks turned off by bland, sexless mainstream pop music. When, as in the 50s and early 60s, white American pop was clotted with moon-June-spoon banalities, the blues, and its offspring R&B and rock ‘n roll, could be counted on to supply the body heat, as well as bluntly unsentimental attitudes toward sexual relationships. “Back Door Man” reminds us that despite the mythology of romantic love and “till death do us part”, men and women do step out on their partners, and that the frisson of transgression often makes the fucking hotter.

In 1967, four blues- and Wolf-loving white boys in LA covered “Back Door Man” on their debut album. The Doors liked to call themselves “erotic politicians”, and Dixon’s song served them well as a manifesto for their breaking-through-boundaries

stance. Drummer John Densmore recalled that when the band played the “deeply sexual” number in their shows, it “got everyone moving”.

Howlin’ Wolf cut “Back Door Man” in 1960 (Chess Records released it as the “B” side of “Wang Dang Doodle”), backed by the supergroup that gives him such superb support on many of the *Rocking Chair* tracks: the indispensable Hubert Sumlin on lead guitar, Freddie Robinson on second guitar, Otis Spann on piano, Willie Dixon, on upright double bass, and, behind the drum kit, Fred Below. Wolf fully inhabits the back door man persona. There’s no sweet-talk or gentle seduction in that raw, commanding voice, but what he offers is much more alluring: the promise of illicit midnight pleasure.

“Howlin’ for My Baby”

After the midnight creeping of “Back Door Man”, with Howlin’ Wolf as the sexual adventurer who thrills other men’s women and slips away before the break of dawn, Wolf, as if he’s forsaken his wicked ways, celebrates the joys of what we’d today call a “committed relationship.” The restless Wolf has found himself a “pretty baby”, and now he’s howling just for her.

“Howlin’ for my Baby”, also known as “Howlin’ for My Darlin’”, is the most joyful number on *Rocking Chair*. Its exuberance and humor are irresistible; the darkness that was often at the heart of Wolf’s lupine persona is nowhere to be heard. Wolf’s howl raises shivers on his “Smokestack Lightnin’”; “Howlin’ for My Baby” makes you laugh with delight. His baby just knocks him out, and he’s gotta tell everybody: “Every time she kiss me/she makes the lights go out/early in the morning/she makes me jump and shout/this mad love she got/makes me laugh and cry/makes me really know/I’m too young to die/If you hear me howlin’/callin’ on my darlin’/ooh ooh ooowee!”

Wolf co-wrote “Howlin’ for My Baby” with Willie Dixon, but according to Wolf’s biography, *Moanin’ at Midnight*, Leonard Chess had a lot to do with the way it turned out. Chess directed Wolf and the band in the studio, giving drummer S.P. Leary the “da-da-da-da-duh-da” accents that the musicians turned into “one of the most heavily syncopated dance grooves in blues history”.

When Wolf cut the track in July 1959, he’d recently hooked up with Lillie Handley, who came from an Alabama farming family. Unlike Wolf, she was raised in a loving, middle class home, and was educated. In 1945 she married a local farmer, Nate Jones, had a daughter with him, and then they separated. Jones died in 1952, and Lillie, an attractive young widow then living in Chicago, took up with the blues harp player and singer James Cotton. Wolf fell for her one night when he was playing a gig, and before long Cotton was out of the picture.

Howlin’ Wolf married Lillie in 1964, and they remained together until his death 12 years later. In *Moanin’ at Midnight*, Evelyn Sumlin, the wife of Wolf’s lead guitarist Hubert, observes, “The years that Lillie and he was together, he got a chance to

really enjoy his life and know what life was about.” And that’s what you hear in “Howlin’ for My Baby” – a man who’d experienced poverty, parental abuse, and racism, in the Deep South and elsewhere, had finally found his joy.

“Tell Me”

“Each man sang a different blues,” observed Leroi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) in his classic 1963 study, *Blues People*. (Jones does acknowledge women singers in the book, but the generic blues artist is always male.) The blues, though connected to “the general movement of the mass of black Americans into the central culture of the country”, found its “impetus and emotional meaning” in the individual and “his completely personal life and death.” Jones doesn’t mention Howlin’ Wolf in his book (inexplicable omission!), but his observation about the blues being foremost a music of individual expression certainly applies to Chester Burnett, an extraordinary artist whose blues, though influenced by such Delta originators as Charley Patton, Son House, and Robert Johnson, are entirely his own. Howlin’ Wolf’s music is so compelling because it seems such a direct, unmediated expression of his singular personality.

In *Blues People*, Jones distinguishes between the early country blues, which he calls “folklore”, and the classic blues of the 1920s and 1930s, which he calls “entertainment”. Wolf, however, bridges both forms. He started out as a country blues singer steeped in the folklore of the Mississippi Delta but became a successful entertainer working in the recording industry and the commercial performance scene, in the United States and abroad. (Muddy Waters’ career followed the same trajectory.) One of his first studio efforts was a cover of Charley Patton’s “Saddle My Pony”, the title an obvious give-away of the song’s rural origins. But as his Memphis recordings from the mid-50s make evident, Wolf was crafting modern, electric blues around the same time that rock ‘n roll was emerging, a guitar-driven and danceable style that, its southern roots notwithstanding, was unmistakably city music.

The 12 tracks that comprise the *Rocking Chair* album are electric Chicago blues songs that harken back to the rural south, most notably “The Red Rooster”, the record’s most down-home number. The album, as I noted in the first installment of this *Between the Tracks* series, has the stylistic unity and focus of a recording conceived as a whole, despite having been assembled from singles recorded from 1957 to 1961. The songs are about love and sex, the key concerns of the blues. As sequenced by Chess Records – most likely by producer Ralph Bass-- the album “reads” like Wolf’s erotic diary, recording the excitement of a new love affair, the transgressive thrills of cheating, the joys of monogamy and, in the album’s darkest number, fear and anguish as impending death forecloses a life spent in the pursuit of pleasure.

“Tell Me”, the album’s last track, is a return to darkness after the unalloyed joy of the preceding “Howlin’ for My Baby”. The song expresses an archetypal blues theme: that of nameless “trouble” threatening the singer, driving him to pack up and hit the road: “Tell me, what in the world can be wrong/Woke up this morning/Trouble

knocking on my door/I wonder what the trouble/Big trouble at my door". Wolf never says who or what is knocking at his door. He complains that his lover "don't want me anymore", but that's the only specific woe in what otherwise sounds like an unnamable existential dread: "There ain't nothing but my troubles".

One of only two of Wolf's own compositions on *Rocking Chair*, "Tell Me" is also one of the album's oldest tracks, recorded in 1957 (before Chess made him record Willie Dixon's material) and released as a single with "Who's Been Talkin'". Wolf's country-style harmonica, at the song's beginning and middle, is simple and direct, serving as a second voice like B.B. King's guitar "Lucille" echoes his vocal lines. The innovative proto-rocker Willie Johnson plays lead guitar and Earl Phillips is the drummer; the session that produced "Tell Me" was their final one with Wolf, with whom they had a tempestuous relationship. (Johnson's heavy drinking often incurred Wolf's wrath, and both men bristled at their demanding boss' rules of proper comportment, on and off stage.) Otis Smothers is on second guitar, Hosea Lee Kennard's the pianist, and Adolph "Billy" Duncan riffs on tenor sax.

Wolf's burly vocal throbs with worry and the urgent need to escape the trouble that won't let him be. "Trouble is knocking", he sings, repeating the line four times, as the song fades. The last thing we hear, as "Tell Me" and *Rocking Chair* come to an end, is Earl Phillips' drum accents mimicking the sound of someone, or something, rapping at Wolf's door. It's the trouble, which Howlin' Wolf both evokes and transcends through his sublime and "completely personal" artistry.