“Smokestack Lightning”--Howlin’ Wolf (1956)

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Essay by James Segrest and Mark Hoffman (guest post)*

Howlin’ Wolf

Original release label

“Smokestack Lightning” is the perfect distillation of what made Howlin’ Wolf such a powerfully unique artist. Built on a driving, hypnotic, one-chord vamp that subtly accelerates like a steam locomotive, Howlin’ Wolf sings an intense field holler vocal, interspersed with falsetto howls and blasts of raw country blues harmonica. The lyrics, a pastiche of traditional blues lines pared to the bone, are dark and cryptic conveying a mood of metaphysical agony. The musicians, accompanying Wolf with great skill on the recording, are Willie Johnson and Hubert Sumlin on guitar, Willie Dixon on bass, Earl Phillips on drums and Hosea Lee Kennard on piano. A small hit at the time, “Smokestack Lightning” has since become a classic of Chicago blues and an indelible part of the American canon of song.

Howlin’ Wolf was born Chester Arthur Burnett on June 10, 1910 in White Station, Mississippi, a tiny railroad stop near West Point in the northeastern part of the state. His parents Leon “Dock” Burnett and Gertrude Young separated when Chester was very young and he was raised by his abusive uncle, Will Young. At thirteen, Wolf fled his uncle’s home, hopping a train to the Mississippi Delta where he reunited with his father and had a loving home at last.

At the age of eighteen, Wolf learned to play guitar from Charley Patton the Delta’s first great blues star. A small man in stature and build, Patton was the best guitarist in the Delta, playing with a percussive aggressiveness that was astounding. Snapping and bending strings with his fingers or making them sob and moan with a slide, Patton would beat on his guitar like a drum and rock a juke house until it almost came off its foundation. He was also a consummate showman who played the guitar behind his head, between his legs or threw it up in the air spinning it around while never losing the propulsive beat that kept the dancers moving. Equally impressive was Patton’s ferocious singing. He roared out lyrics in a hoarse, nearly unintelligible voice, and carried on running conversations with himself through spoken asides in

different voices, often switching between his rough, affected singing voice and his natural speaking voice.

Blessed with a naturally gravelly voice that was capable of amazing subtlety and nuance, Howlin' Wolf absorbed what Patton taught him and made it part of his own distinctive blues persona. Wolf added to his blues arsenal by taking harmonica lessons from Sonny Boy Williamson II (Aleck Miller) and he learned from records by Blind Lemon Jefferson, Tommy Johnson, the Mississippi Sheiks, and blues-influenced country singer Jimmie Rodgers, among others. In particular, Johnson's bluesy falsetto moans and Rodgers blue yodels inspired Wolf to create his unforgettable falsetto howls.

A giant of a man who stood over six feet tall and weighed nearly three hundred pounds, Wolf was an amazingly physical performer who would prowl the stage like a caged beast, or crawl about on his hands and knees, or roll on his back like a man overcome with some paroxysm of emotion, all the while howling and moaning his blues as if his life depended on it. Howlin' Wolf did not just sing the blues; he embodied them. He was a howling wolf!

"Smokestack Lightning" was Wolf's single greatest recording in a career full of amazing recordings. It had been a part of Wolf's repertoire as far back as the early 1930s. Its lyrics were inspired, in part, by Charlie Patton's "Moon Going Down" and the Mississippi Sheik's "Stop and Listen Blues." Wolf had already recorded a version of it for RPM in 1951 as "Crying at Daybreak." Wolf said, with characteristic understatement, "Well, Smokestack Lightnin' means it's a train … that, uh, runs on the rails, you know." Saying "Smokestack Lightning" was a song about a train is like saying "Citizen Kane" was a movie about a sled. It was not so much a song as a mood: insubstantial as a smoke ring melodically and lyrically, yet gigantic as a gathering storm in rhythm and power.

Lyrically the song is a collection of short, clipped verses around the general themes of romantic betrayal and the need to catch a train and leave his mistreatment behind. Undoubtedly reminding him of his own mistreatment as a child and his flight to a better life, Wolf sings: "Well, stop your train; let a poor boy ride/Why don't you hear me crying. A woo-hoo." And concludes by singing, "Well, who been here, baby since uh, I been gone/Little bitty boy, derby on. A woo-hoo."

Over the years, "Smokestack Lightning" has been covered by numerous artists both in live performance and on recordings. Among these are artists as diverse as the Yardbirds, the Animals, George Thorogood, Etta James, Quicksilver Messenger Service, John Lee Hooker, Widespread Panic, Bob Dylan, Lester Butler, Gov't Mule, the Who, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Soundgarden, to name but a few.

"Smokestack Lightning" has also received numerous awards over the years. In 1985, the song was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Blues Hall of Fame in its "Classics of Blues Recordings—Singles or Album Tracks" category. It was further honored by the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999 as a recording of lasting musical importance. In 2004, it was ranked number 291 in "Rolling Stone's" list of "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time." And in 2009, "Smokestack Lightning" received the highest recognition any recording can receive from the United States government when it was selected by the Library of Congress for the National Recording Registry.

Finally, "Smokestack Lightning" was used as the background music for a national advertisement for an erectile dysfunction medication. One can only wonder what Howlin' Wolf would have thought of that honor.

James Segrest is the co-author with Mark Hoffman of "Moanin' at Midnight: The Life and Times of Howlin' Wolf" (2004). He has also written for various publications, liner notes for CDs and was a contributor to the "Encyclopedia of the Blues" (2006). His day job is with the Tallassee, Alabama, City School System.