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The Enduring Cry of Howlin’ Wolf

*“Robert Johnson may have possessed more lyrical insight, a Muddy Waters more dignity, and a B.B. King certainly more technical expertise, but no one could match him for the singular ability to rock the house down to the foundation while simultaneously scaring its patrons out of [their] wits.” -Cub Koda[[1]](#footnote-0)*

Chester Arthur Burnett, aka Howlin’ Wolf, has one of the hardest sounds in the blues. The broken-glass-covered-in-velvet quality of his voice, his aggressive playing style, and his tendency to contort his voice into the primal howl of his namesake when simple words wouldn’t do give his songs an almost disturbingly violent undertone generally absent (or only hinted at) in the songs of the other bluesmen of the age. By many standards of musical judgement, it should be difficult to listen to Howlin’ Wolf’s songs- they are not pretty, they are not particularly catchy, and they certainly can’t be described as ‘pleasing to the ear,’ yet many people, including myself (and, I might add, the producers of *The Wolf of Wall Street*), just can’t get enough. This paper will explore the question of why this is the case.

To understand the music, we must first understand the man behind it, and the best way to understand Howlin’ Wolf is probably through the words of the man himself, “My grandfather gimme that name [Wolf]...he us’t sit me down an’ tell tall stories about...the wolf...’cause I was a bad boy...an’ I was always in devilment, so...he tol’ me the story ‘bout how the wolf done the li’l red riding hood...then they finally kilt the wolf and drove him up to the house an’ showed me the wolf an I told him [it] was a dog, he said no, that’s a wolf. I said well what do a wolf do? Say he howl, he say [howls]...an’ so I got afraid of this wolf...an every time I’d kilt some of m’ mother’s chickens she say [howls] so then that’d scare me...and I gets mad about this so they jus’ kep’ on callin’ me Wolf, an I got to the place I di’nt care what they call me...but at firs’ I was afraid of the wolf...oh, I was three years ol’ then.”[[2]](#footnote-1) In a society dominated by the Christian religion such as that which young Chester Burnett grew up in, it is not a stretch to view the wolf as a signifier for a whole host of negative ideas and emotions; the bible warns, "[b]eware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves,"[[3]](#footnote-2) and "[f]or I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock."[[4]](#footnote-3) In both of these passages, the wolf is portrayed as an agent of Satan, sent to tempt the followers of Christ away from the true path. What is more, the wolf posed a very real danger to livestock such as chickens, which were a source of personal livelihood and a staple of home life for many residents of the Delta, and was also associated with the impending danger of hunger and sickness through the phrase “wolf at the door.” This relationship very clearly puts the wolf at odds with the idea of a whole and happy home in addition to its opposition to Christian values.

Given the fact that he grew up personally associated with these connotations, it is not surprising that Howlin’ Wolf grew up to be a bluesman- he didn’t need to *assume* the trickster persona as a means “to become the swaggering, badman folk villain who is incapable of remaining within traditional societal structures,”[[5]](#footnote-4) because the trickster persona *was* his true persona, shaped by his childhood development in the thematic shadow of the wolf, a development which included Howlin’ Wolf being thrown out of the house by his highly religious mother Gertrude and eventually running 95 miles away from his uncle’s home at the young age of 13 to go live with his father.[[6]](#footnote-5) Howlin’ Wolf ‘s story of how he obtained his first guitar, “I always did want to play a guitar...I asked my father to get me a guitar...he went and got me a guitar...then I went to playin’ from there...I played all over the cotton-belt countries,”[[7]](#footnote-6) also plays into the wolfish theme. Unlike so many other bluesmen’s fathers[[8]](#footnote-7), Howlin’ Wolf’s father not only did not oppose his having a guitar, he actually chose to provide one for his son- no small investment for a poor black family at the time. From this we can deduce that his father was not a believer in the stigma which the guitar carried in the predominantly Christian Delta. The actions and beliefs of Howlin’ Wolf’s father provide a strong counterpoint to the actions and beliefs of his mother, who, “[w]hen Howlin’ Wolf...met...by chance during a road tour in Mississippi...denounced him and threw the money he gave her on the ground, unwilling to benefit from the wages of sin.”[[9]](#footnote-8) Howlin’ Wolf was apparently much happier with his father than with his mother[[10]](#footnote-9), and since it is already clear that his father wasn’t overly religious whereas his mother was, it is not too far a stretch to say that unlike such conflicted bluesmen as Son House and Ishmon Bracey, Howlin’ Wolf was much happier outside the bosom of Abraham rather than within it.

Perhaps this origin story, coupled with the fact that the time he spent in the Army in WWII left him in a worse psychological condition than the abuses he endured as a child, helps explain what it is about Howlin’ Wolf that really sets his sound apart from the other Delta bluesmen: while other musicians like Robert Johnson and Peetie Whitestraw seem to push the ‘swaggering badman’ image through their lyrics and self-identification with the name and the mythos surrounding the Devil, Howlin’ Wolf somehow manages to express the image entirely through his sound and mannerisms, without ever referring explicitly to the Devil. He simply doesn’t need to- it’s almost as if the Devil shaped Howlin’ Wolf without his permission, rather than waiting on him to go to the crossroads and ask for the favor. There’s something about his antics onstage (which included, at at least one concert in 1970, Howlin’ Wolf crawling in on all fours, singing a little bit, and then sitting in a chair in near-silence, half-glaring, half-smiling at the audience for a full minute and a half[[11]](#footnote-10), and which also included a variety of much more risque acts over the course of his career) which is as unsettling as it is endearing. Much like Goethe’s vision of Mephisto, Howlin’ Wolf manages to be lovable, scary, and a touch insane all at the same time. This quality is present in his music as well, exemplified by the hypnotic moaning and harmonica playing of “Moanin’ at Midnight,” the out-of-place playfulness of the guitar in “Killing Floor,” and the dizzying tracking chord which plunges after Howlin’ Wolf’s howl in “Smokestack Lightning,” sweeping down the length of the listener’s spine almost like the sweeping of a demon’s claw across a harp- discordant, unappealing, yet somehow *right*. Nowhere else does the blues find such otherworldly expression. When critics speak of seeking authenticity in the blues, one can’t help but feel they’re looking for the wild eldritch spirit which lurks behind every bump and growl of Howlin’ Wolf’s music.

This unique characteristic is, in my opinion, the reason why Howlin’ Wolf has endured in popularity to the present day- so much so as to be featured prominently in the recent film *The Wolf of Wall Street*. The ease with which his songs lend themselves to the antics of the film’s protagonist as he careens down the slippery slope of madness, first endearingly, then ultimately in spite of himself, mirrors the ease with which Howlin’ Wolf’s music has been adapted by artists with ‘hard’ musical styles, like Jimi Hendrix[[12]](#footnote-11), the stoner-rock band Monster Magnet[[13]](#footnote-12), and the thrash-metal band Megadeth[[14]](#footnote-13). Whereas some blues covers by ‘harder’ modern artists fall short of the emotional depth of the originals[[15]](#footnote-14), Howlin’ Wolf’s words sound right at home behind a wall of overdriven guitar, the clamor of a full drumkit, and rolling bass line. They retain much of their original power, despite the shift in technology and presentation, which suggests that they are drawing from some well of authenticity which other blues artists didn’t have full access to. The fact that Howlin’ Wolf lived the life of the badman from a very young age touched his mind and his music in a way that remained largely unaltered by his fame and commercial success; he played his blues, his way, regardless. It is that aspect, that the Wolf said it like he knew it to be whether or not you wanted to hear it at first, that accounts for his music’s appeal to the audiences of his time and of our own.

1. Koda, Cub. "AllMusic." *AllMusic*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/howlin-wolf-mn0000276085/biography>. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Howlin' Wolf. "Howlin' Wolf Talks #2." *The Chess Box*. Chess, n.d. Vinyl recording. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Matthew 7:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Acts 20:29 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Smith, Ayana. "Blues, Criticism, And The Signifying Trickster." *Popular Music* 24.02 (2005): 186. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. "Howlin Wolf Biography - Blues Legend Bio." *Blues biographies*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Feb. 2014. <http://www.mojohand.com/howlinwolfbio.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Howlin' Wolf. "Howlin' Wolf Talks #1." *The Chess Box*. Chess, n.d. Vinyl recording. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. See Gioia, 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Supra. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. “Howlin Wolf Biography” *op. cit.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. "Howlin.Wolf.In.Concert.1970.1 (www.theblues-thatjazz.com)." *Dailymotion*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Feb. 2014. <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xq07h1\_howlin-wolf-in-concert-1970-1-www-theblues-thatjazz-com\_music>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. See ‘Killing Floor,’ Live at Stockholm 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. See ‘Evil,’ *Superjudge*, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. See ‘I Ain’t Superstitious,’ *Peace Sells... But Who's Buying?*, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. The Rolling Stones’ cover of Rev. Wilkins’ ‘Prodigal Son’ seems to fall squarely into this category, for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)