

I'M LEAVIN' YOU

As recorded by Howlin' Wolf 1959

Chester Burnett (Howlin' Wolf) 1910-1976

Howlin' Wolf was born in Mississippi and started out as a farm worker at the age of thirteen, however he was greatly influenced by the blues men in the area. Sonny Boy Williamson married his stepsister, and taught him to play harmonica and Charlie Patton who taught him guitar, and from whom he absorbed some singing style. Burnett had a strong raw and raspy voice, and was tall and heavy, and his size gave him his stage presence. He took his stage name from a 1930's novelty song, and started playing all over Mississippi, but still continued as a farm worker. After a spell in the army during W.W.II he returned home, but his stage career began to improve and he formed his first band in Memphis, and began to appear regularly on the local radio.

Wolf had his first real hit "How many more years" in 1951, and was offered a chance to go to Chicago; there he teamed up with Willie Dixon, and was influenced by the much more driving and thicker rhythmic style of the area. He worked in the Chicago Clubs and started to turn out regular R & B records. His first hit in this mode was "No Place To Go" in 1954, and featured Wolf howling and moaning with an eerie hypnotic effect.

This recording of I'm Leavin' You is typical of the development of R&B at that time which embraces the spirit and general feeling normally connected with blues. It was the precursor of Rock' n'Roll, which was influenced greatly by his style. It is in standard 12 Bar Blues form, and is a simple strophic song: -

2 bar Introduction.

Verses 1,2 and 3, repeats of the 12 bar blues.

12 bars solo / improvisation.

Repeat of verses 2-3.

Coda of 8 bars.

The song is in the Key of G, and involves relatively uncomplicated harmonies based on G Minor Pentatonic scale. It also makes extensive use of the Blues Scale. There is a steady moderately fast ostinato bass line, which is in a syncopated / swung, shuffle rhythm throughout, also played on the guitar, and drums. The piano vamps a continuous triplet backing throughout the first two verses on the pedal points, using inversions of the 7th or 9th chord. The main emphasis in verse 1 is the vocal sung by Wolf, introducing the blues style melody. The lead guitar has short syncopated riffs, particularly in the vocal breaks, and use slides up in bars 9-10.

Verse 2 introduces a second vocalist singing in parallel an octave lower. The bass and drum accompaniment is thinner; the verse is marked as a "stop chorus", where the rhythm section marks only the start of each bar, and remains silent between the stop chords. The lead and rhythm guitars are more significant, in bars 19-22 the lead playing a triplet pattern up an octave above the double quaver, shuffle pattern of the rhythm guitar.

Verse 3, also a "stop chorus," is varied by a different pattern played on the piano, when only the first beat is emphasised for the first three bars, with the triplet pattern returning in bar 30, and in 31-32 a parallel octave descent down a chromatic scale.

The solo /improvisational fourth verse features the lead guitar which has a number of portamento slides up and down, and with Wolf vocalising and add libbing tremolo harmonica chords, producing a typical Wha Wha effect. The drums, bass and rhythm guitars maintain a quiet and steady shuffle rhythm pattern.

Verses 2/3 are repeated and are followed by a final 8 bar coda, introduced by a descending blues scale played by the lead guitar, and followed by a repeated sequence which has a shake (upper mordent) on G natural /sharp, and with the triplet pattern re-emerging in the piano and rhythm guitar. Wolf sings 3 variations of "I'm leavin'" before fading away.

The recording would have been made on a twin-track recorder in stereo, and cut to a 7" vinyl 45 rpm record. Acoustic effects and reverb were only possible by recording in studios with hard reflective surfaces.