

Howlin' Wolf – The Howlin' Wolf Album (1969)

Written by bluesever

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A1 Spoonful 3:48 A2 Tail Dragger 4:20 A3 Smokestack Lightning 5:54 A4 Moanin' At Midnight 3:13 A5 Built For Comfort 5:07 B1 The Red Rooster 3:48 B2 Evil 4:06 B3 Down In The Bottom 2:43 B4 Three Hundred Pounds Of Joy 2:34 B5 Back Door Man 6:17
Drums – Morris Jennings Electric Bass – Louis Satterfield Electric Guitar – Hubert Sumlin, Phil Upchurch (tracks: B2, B4, B5), Roland Faulkner Electric Guitar, Guitar [Bowed] – Pete Cosey Flute – Donald Myrick (tracks: A3) Saxophone [Electric] – Gene Barge (tracks: A3) Vocals, Harmonica – Howlin' Wolf

By 1968, Chicago blues was a dying art form and the Chess imprint desperately needed a shot in the arm. Marshal Chess, son of label founder Leonard, tackled the problem by forcing his two biggest stars, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, to record psychedelic albums. The results were messy affairs that buried their creators' talents under layers of wah-wah and fuzz effects in the hope of sounding hip.

While Muddy's Electric Mud (almost) succeeded because his wide grooves were easily translated into psych riffs, Wolf's off-kilter stomp proved too eccentric for the session musicians, who replaced them with stale vamps and superfluous effects. There are a few occasions where singer and band synch up, such as the blistering remakes of Smokestack Lightning and Evil but, for the most part, he sounds uncomfortable.

Wolf hated the results, prompting Chess' bizarre decision to address the issue on the album's sleeve in bold text stating "This is Howlin' Wolf's new album. He doesn't like it. He didn't like his electric guitar at first either." Four decades later, the album remains awful, but retains a curious novelty factor. Listeners in search of a psyched-out Howlin' Wolf would be better off checking out early Captain Beefheart. ---Mat Croft, recordcollectormag.com

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Born in Aberdeen, Mississippi, Chester Burnett, better known by his stage name Howlin' Wolf, helped modernize the country blues with his powerful vocal style and harmonica work and his ability to connect with an audience no matter what stage he prowled. This album, though, originally released in 1969 on the Chess Records subsidiary Cadet Records, is hardly typical Wolf, and the bluesman himself hated it, which may in some way have contributed to the album's odd cult standing. The idea was as simple as it was probably misguided, an attempt to modernize Wolf's sound into psychedelic Jimi Hendrix land, and the results were, well, odd at best, and laughable and lamentable at worst, and through no fault of Wolf's, who obviously tried his best to make sense of all of it. Howlin' Wolf completists will want this for its novelty value, but it's far from an accurate portrait of this powerful bluesman's talent and appeal. ---Steve Leggett, AllMusic Review

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