

51. Howlin' Wolf I'm leavin' you (For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

Background Information

Biography

- Howlin' Wolf (real name Chester Burnett) 1910-1976 – Black American Singer, Guitarist and Harmonica player.
- Renowned as a powerful singer in the Chicago electric blues style (later termed Rhythm and Blues) of the 1950s.
- Born in West Point, Howlin' Wolf made his first recordings in Sun studios, Memphis, but the majority of his career was spent in and around Chicago, where he recorded for the Chess label.
- 'I'm leavin' you' appeared on the compilation album 'Moanin' in the Moonlight', released by the famous Chess label in 1959.
- There is a lot of interesting footage of Howlin' Wolf on YouTube.

Performing Forces and their handling

- Howlin' Wolf's voice has an earthy, raw quality to it, in keeping with the blues roots of the piece.
- The version in the Anthology is a transcription based on the recording.
- The vocal part lies mostly within a middle range, spanning for the most part a major sixth (F-D). There is, however, a low D in Bars 39 and 41, and a top F natural in the coda, making an overall range of a minor 10th.
- It is sung in a mostly straightforward syllabic style, with occasionally two notes to a syllable.
- There are frequent slides/bends and half-spoken inflections, again typical of the Blues style.
- Wordless 'Whoop' vocalises accompany the first part of the Guitar solo.
- During the Guitar solo a Harmonica ('Blues harp') punctuates the texture with characteristic chords.

- The Rhythm guitar plays a shuffle rhythm Riff for the greater part of the song, consisting of a repeated lower note with a stepwise up and down motion above. (This type of pattern much later found a home in the riffs of Status Quo).
- The Lead Guitar opens the song with a typical Blues introductory figure.
- It then works in dialogue with the voice with a combination of monophonic 'licks' based on the Blues scale, and double-stopped thirds, high in its register.
- Slides and bends are used quite frequently in the Lead guitar part.
- The Piano 'comps' chords throughout, improvising around the basic sequence, with extensions including 7ths and 9ths.
- The Bass Guitar plays mostly the roots of the chords, usually in 'swung' quavers.
- The Drums play a 'shuffle' rhythm, with accents on beats 2 and 4 (the backbeats).

Texture

- Mostly homophonic in the verses, with a strong chordal accompaniment acting as a backing for the vocals.
- There is a dialogue between Voice and Lead Guitar - typical of both Rhythm and Blues and earlier Blues styles.
- 'Stop' time textures feature in the first three bars of Verses 2, 3, 5 and 6. Punctuating chords on the first beat of these bars, and a triplet fill in the fourth, lead to the subdominant chord in the fifth bar of the sequence.

Structure

Six choruses of a standard 12 bar blues, to which is added a short introduction and a 'repeat and fade' Coda.

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|---|-----------------------|--|
| 1-2 | Introduction | Guitar break |
| 3-14 | Verse 1 | Vocals+Rhythm Guitar Riff+Lead guitar with piano improvisation |
| 14 ³ -26 | Verse 2 | 'Stop' time at opening |
| 26 ³ -38 | Verse 3 | 'Stop' time at opening |
| 39-50 | Guitar Solo (Verse 4) | Guitar+ wordless vocals/ Harmonica |
| (50 ³ -62)14 ³ - 26 | Verse 5 | 'Stop' time at opening |
| (62 ³ -74) 26 ³ - 36 | Verse 6 | 'Stop' time at opening |
| 51-end | Coda (Fade) | Improvised vocal lines over repeated guitar riff |

Tonality

- G major throughout
- Some modal inflections in the 'Blue' notes in the vocal and instrumental parts
- No modulations

Harmony

- A 'standard' twelve bar Blues sequence in G:
 - Bars 1-4 G7 (I)
 - Bars 5-6 C9 (IV)
 - Bars 7-8 G7 (I)
 - Bar 9 D7 (V)
 - Bar 10 C9 (IV)
 - Bar 11 G7
 - Bar 12 Db-D9 (chromatic approach to V)
- The last bar (dominant) prepares the ear for the return to the tonic in the next repetition of the sequence.

- The chords are decorated by improvised 7th and 9th extensions, especially in the Piano part.
- 7th chords here do not have a cadential function, as in 'traditional' harmony.

Melody

- The vocal melody consist of a series of 1 bar phrases, most of which begin on a D and work downwards, sometimes to the tonic (Bar 3), sometimes to the subdominant (Bar 4).
- The frequent 'blue' notes (Bb and F natural) clash with the underlying diatonic harmonies.
- Pentatonic shapes predominate, mainly based on the notes F, G, Bb, C, and D.
- Guitar lines are more complex, with use of the Blues scale, including the flattened fifth (D flat), as well as the third and seventh (Bb and F natural).
- Much dialogue between the Vocal and Lead guitar parts.
- Frequent slides and pitch bends in both guitar and Vocal parts.

Rhythm and metre

- Driving 4/4 time, but with a 'shuffle' rhythm (swung rhythm).
- Triplets.
- Semiquaver grouping ending with Scotch snap (Bar 21).
- Snare drum 'backbeats' on beats 2 and 4.
- Syncopation in all parts at times.