

EXCERPT - *THE LANGUAGE OF THE BLUES: FROM ALCORUB TO ZUZU* by Debra Devi

KILLING FLOOR

To be down on the killing floor is to have hit rock bottom, according to guitar legend Hubert Sumlin, whose licks on Howlin' Wolf's "Killing Floor" are the building blocks of electric blues guitar. As composer/multi-instrumentalist Elliott Sharp noted, "Without Hubert there'd be no Eric Clapton, no Captain Beefheart. He gave every one of Howlin' Wolf's songs their own identity with the licks he played. He's a great originator of the blues."¹

When asked how he came up with the memorable guitar hook for "Killing Floor," Sumlin modestly replied, "I guess I found myself. I found my voice on account of Wolf fired me so many times, sometimes for two minutes, three minutes, five minutes, twenty minutes. But he hired me right back. Boy he didn't like it when nobody missed no notes. 'Go on find yourself' he would say, and I guess I did."²

Some scholars have asserted that in "Killing Floor," Howlin' Wolf was referring to the floors of the Chicago stockyards and slaughterhouses, where many southern blacks who had come North found employment during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. "No, not really," Sumlin responded. "What happened was... Wolf had seven wives. One was named Helen. She shot him with a double barrel shotgun with buckshot. Out the second floor window. This woman, oh man, he wrote that song about her! Reason I know it is every song he wrote, they was real."

"Down on the killing floor--that means a woman has you down," Sumlin continued. "She went out of her way to try to kill you. She at the peak of doing it, and you got away now." He paused, then added, "You know people have wished they was dead--you been treated so bad that sometimes you just say, 'Oh Lord have mercy.' You'd rather be six feet in the ground."

According to Sumlin, when Wolf arrived home in West Milford, Arkansas from a lengthy tour, Helen sent him to the corner store with a promise to cook him a welcome-home feast. While he was gone, though, she searched the tour bus for evidence that her husband had been fooling around on the road.

"She sent him to the store to get some food, about a half block up the road," Sumlin recalled. "Some potatoes, tomatoes, and all this stuff. Well, somebody left her underwear in this bus. Some woman. And she [Helen] went out and searched the bus before he gets back. One of the boys in his band messed up, you know. And she found these things in the bus and she thought it was Wolf."

“She did shoot him, too, full of buckshot. They picked shots out of him for a whole week. She got him from behind. He looked up in the window and she pulled the trigger. By the time he turned his back, oh boy, he was full of buckshot. Man if he’d been a little closer, she coulda killed him!”

According to Sumlin, it wasn’t only problems with women that could drag the mighty Howlin’ Wolf down. He was even more passionate about his music. “He did one album that he didn’t like, and he went home and got in the bed and stayed three days before he would come back and finish it,” Sumlin recalled. “They finally got him back down there to do his voice and finish it.”

Songs:

“Killing Floor”--Howlin’ Wolf (Chester Burnett)

“Hard Time Killing Floor”--Skip James (Nehemiah Curtis James)

¹ From the author’s interview with Elliott Sharp.

² From the author’s interview with Hubert Sumlin.