

Lonnie Brooks Interview.

At his house, 6810 S. Union, Chicago.

13 September 1982, afternoon.

You're an important bluesman in my opinion, because you write your own songs.

Well, that's most of my thing, you know. I like to create things, and it makes me feel good to do my own tune, and be able to write my own tune. It's great. I'm my biggest fan.

I was talking to Bruce Iglauer, and he says that you're always phoning him up with ideas.

Oh, yeah. [A lot of time, what I do, I let him hear it, and if he like it, I keep on doing it, or if not I'll finish it and put it aside, because I know he don't like that.] So I only work on the stuff for him that he feels is a good song. And if I feel the one that he refuse, whatever, I keep on writing but I put aside, I don't let him hear that. Just keep it and save it, you know. Maybe somebody else might like it. One of these days maybe I might give a song out there, and maybe somebody'll come and make it a tune. There's a lot of times, certain tunes that maybe he don't like, maybe somebody else will like.

You mean another musician?

Yeah, anybody who want to cut it. I'll let 'em hear it, if they want to cut it, I'll let 'em cut it. So that's what I do. I take the ones he don't like and keep 'em. I've got about three or four. I bank 'em.

So his opinion is important to you?

Oh, yes. [Well, he know more or less what he wants on his records - what he think he can sell. You know. I'm not just a blues writer, I can write country, I can write soul music, rock'n'roll, I can write blues.]

Yes, you can hear a lot of influences on your records. There's country, and then there's that Zydeco.

Oh, yeah. That's where I been raised around. See, where I was raised up at, we didn't get a chance to hear any blues until on a Saturday night. You would hear country and western, and zydeco music. And on a Saturday night, you could hear blues on WLAC, Nashville, at twelve o'clock. And that's where I got a chance to hear Muddy Waters for the first time, and John Lee Hooker, and Lightning Hopkins.

What was your reaction?

Oh, I love it, man. They used to, like these guys with ice cream trucks, they used to play music, and they would play Lightning Hopkins, or John Lee Hooker, or Muddy Waters, and that's how I got attached to it when I was a little kid, running out to meet the ice cream truck.

Where I come from, the ice cream trucks play really lousy music.

Well, the people out here, they keep playing the thing that attract the people to come out and buy the ice cream. That's the way we heard our blues back then.

There wasn't no big blues show till I was about eighteen, nineteen years old. And I grew up on that other music first, so I guess that's why you can pick out the country in me.

Blues was a part of the culture then - just one part.

Yes. People get a chance to tell their troubles to the blues. And happiness too.

How do you go about writing a song?

Well, if I hear a word that attract my attention, then I build a song from it. And sometimes it just come from the experience of my life.

A lot of your songs are quite funny.

Yes, well, you could say I've had a little fun in my life!

What about the music?

Oh, that's just natural, you know. I just get to banging on the guitar and get something that'll fit it. A lot of times I'll write a song, and I'll change it two or three times with the music, you know, one that'll make it sound better, make it tell the story better.

Interesting about Bruce. Stuff he doesn't like, you don't do...

Oh, no, no. All depend. One song I had, he wasn't too fond of it, but I kind of pushed the issue a little bit, you know. And he'll agree, as long as he know he got something on there that satisfy him. So half of the song on the Bayou Lighting LP was one that he didn't really was fond of, You Know What My Body Needs, and that was one of the biggest records in Chicago.

And he didn't like that one?

He didn't say he didn't like it, but he wasn't as fond of it as he was of the others. Because I'm pretty sure that if he didn't like it at all, he wouldn't put it on the record. (Telephone. Chicago Tribune reporter, arranging an interview).

You're a big star, Lonnie.

That's every musician's dream, but I don't even worry about it. If it come, I appreciate it, as long as I can make a living at it, you know, that's OK. If I do well enough to make a living, that's no being a big star; but if it come, I'll be thankful for it.

I've been looking you up, and you've recorded a lot before Alligator.

Oh yes. I go back to Gold Band records, my first recording was with Gold Band. My first recording with them was in '56, kind of a Louisiana rock'n'roll sound. And I did about two or three of them went real good.

You had a pretty good career down there.

Yes, in the rock'n'roll. But all my feeling was I wanted to be a blues player. But I dealt with what come first, what I felt first at the moment. And I got a chance to move to Chicago, I got a chance to listen to, be around the old blues musicians. And it took a long time for me to get it, but it happened, so now I Feel it, and I can play it.

So even from Louisiana, Chicago was seen as a blues centre? The reason I came to Chicago, I was on the road with Sam Cooke, LC Cooke, and my

last engagement was in Atlanta, Georgia, and that's where I met up with them, and I got to talking with him about Chicago, and he said why don't you come to Chicago and cut some records? He say, I'll try to help all I can. But, you know, I came to Chicago, and it didn't happen like I dreamed it would happen. I had to just hang here for a while, and keep hanging. I thought since I had made records it would be easy for me, but after changing into a different type of music, it took a while to get a foothold. But I'd say after about five or six years things began to start happening.

To white audiences, you're really only known from your Alligator stuff, and a thing for Black and Blue.

Well see, what happened, when I came to Chicago, I changed the name, because I was going under the name of Guitar Junior, and when I got to Chicago, I found out they had another Guitar Junior, so it was kind of messin' up, you know. I was playing on the South Side most of the time, and he was playing on the West Side, and a lot of people didn't know which one of the Guitar Juniors to go see. So I said, well I'll go and change my name, and start all over.

There was still a lot of blues and R&B down south, wasn't there? Guitar Slim...

Yes, that's one of my favourites. Guitar Slim, BB King. At the time I moved from Louisiana to Port Arthur, Texas, and I got a chance to see BB King, Gatemouth Brown, T Bone Walker. 'Cos they used to have a club, something like a hall, down on, I think it was 7th Street, and they used to have something going on every Friday and Saturday. And one week they'd have BB King, maybe next week they'd have Guitar Slim, maybe next week they'd have T Bone Walker, or either Little Walter, who was real popular in that area. Oh, a lot blues acts come to that area, and I went to see 'em all.

Had your records come to Chicago?

They had a radio station that was playing them, but I didn't know who to contact when I got here. If I'd of made the right contacts, if they'd 've known I was in town they at least would have put me in places where people knew about my records. But I was just hanging in all the blues clubs, I wasn't hanging in no rock'n'roll clubs. Because that was the direction I had picked out to go.

Could you see at that time how much higher rock'n'roll was going in terms of money?

Yeah. It wasn't the money. I like to play my feelings. I like to do what I like to do, and I think that I can do a better job if I do what I like to do. And if I can do something that I like to do, and make other people like it, then I think I can go much further. 'Cos I feel it.

You were never trying to be Chuck Berry, then.

No, no, no. I like his music, and I can play it, you know. But Chuck Berry, that's what made him, because he's Chuck Berry. I'm trying to identify myself, you know. See, you can't be a Chuck Berry, You can't be a BB King. You can't be any of those stars. I mean, you can probably play like 'em, and sing like 'em, but people know

that they've come out with their style. If you really want to make it, you have to lean more to what you can do best. And that's yourself.)

I've got you down as part of a European Festival tour in 1975. Yes, [that's what really influenced me again. I got a chance to go in front of a lot of people who really liked the blues, when I made that trip in '75, left me more deeper involved with what I want to do, after I seen there was a market for it, you know.]

Were you in any doubt?

[Well, it was kind of hard for a young blues player to get a break. And after I went there, they started writing about me, the people started knowing I can play the blues. Because (most of the people that interviewed me, they knew about my backtrack, you know, and I guess a lot of blues recording companies were kind of scared, saying well, he plays too much rock'n'roll. I know he's going to come in with a rock'n'roll tune. So it was a little bit kind of rough on account of my back record, you know. But after I proved it, you know, after I went to Europe and they started writing about me and proved that I can play the blues all night, then a few companies got interested.)

And you did an album for Black and Blue. I've heard bad things about them, but I don't know any thing about them.

Well, I don't know anything about them either, all I know is I cut a record, and I did a tour, six weeks for 'em, and they treated me nice. They cut a record on me, they give what they said they was going to give me, So if anything bad about them, I don't know it.

Seems to be about the most professional blues record producer that there's been, Bruce Iglauer.

Yes, [he's very careful with what he put on his records. He careful about the music, and how it's played. He like for it to be played well, and he worried about the lyrics. Other words, I think he's the type of guy that can get the 'best out of a musician.] He can correct you, you know, and straighten things out, when you really didn't think that it could happen. He can.) And [I think that's why he's successful, because before he got into it he learned a lot about it, and he's still learning. You come up with something, he'll ask you: 'How did you play this?' He'll ask you questions about it. I think he's got a little computer in his head, because he remembers everything.]

He's got an important talent that way. He can listen, and... Oh yeah. There's few people can do that.

He was telling me about the recording of Voodoo Daddy, it sounded quite amazing.

Right. [Well, the group that I cut the record with, they work with me, and they're the type of musicians, the harder you work, the harder they work.] So [I just went on and worked like I work on the bandstand, and give it a little bit more enthusiasm.]

Can you do that, cold, in a studio?

Oh, [you work up to it, you don't just jump right up there and do it all at once. You get into it, and get the feeling, keep in hammering at it until you get the

feeling. It'll come, it don't matter, once you get a groove going. (You close your eyes, and you can see a thousand people - so it just like playing for three thousand people when I'm in the studio.) There's maybe a few songs don't hit me thataway for some time. Most of my fast tunes, I can just picture the people. (It's a beautiful feeling, man, when you get a groove in the studio.) That's very hard to do, because they got to fix the sound and everything so it don't be ringing back at you like you was on the bandstand. A song is good when you can do that. And it take a good song to do that, too.

He had about twelve minutes of tape for that, and he cut it down to about four.

Yeah, (he see that we had the feeling coming, so he just let the tape roll. I noticed that everybody was feeling good, so I stopped it, and started back over again. And that's when it happened.)

A lot of recording used to be done by people who would just get a band in a studio for a couple of hours, maybe after a gig, and say, 'Let's do an album.'

Well, (those people are more interested in money than in the artist or the music. Because it do cost a lot of money here in the United States to put out a record. And if you go in there thinking about how much you're going to spend, you ain't gonna come out with nothing.) What you do is go in, and don't worry about the money, worry about getting a good record. Don't care how long it take. And I think that's what makes a good record. But you go a-pinchin' the pennies, then you in trouble 'fore you get there.

Yeah, that's what makes Alligator.

I think he's about the best blues producer in Chicago.

These other labels you were on, what were they like?

I'd say they rushed it. (Except one of the companies, when I had all the time I wanted, when I did a record for Mercury.) (See, 'cos the guy that I used to cut with before, he was co-producer, or producer for it. So, you know, we went in there, didn't have no problems about the time or anything like that, plus we had an arranger, a musician who could read music. So that make it a little bit easier, when you get a studio band, guys that work in the studio, that can read. But most of the others was kind of a rushed deal. 'OK, we got about an hour left.' Once you tell that to a musician, that throws him clean off, 'cos that make him push harder, and he's not going to get it.) (So you just take the best thing you can do, take the best and put it out, you know. But I think you lose it when you go on thinking about the money.

You hit Chicago, and started playing blues in 1959.

Yes. Well, at the time, (I was sitting in with a lot of guys, and I got to learning blues tunes. But I was mixing it up. I was doing a little soul, rock, and blues.)

(And at that time your audiences were mostly black.

Mostly. Up to about '67, '68, '69. Then that record was out, Let it all Hang Out, was kind of a soul thing, and I met a booking agent down on State Street named



Jack Harler (?). Well he introduced me to white clubs. He was a booking agent, and he had four or five groups he was booking, and it happened he seen me in a club one night, and I rehearsed with one of his bands, and he started booking me. So I'd say for about two years, I played a lot of rock'n'roll clubs, you know. I was doing more or less my own thing working these rock'n'roll clubs. But I had enough rock'n'roll for them to be interested enough to come and see me, and all the other time I was serving a little blues on 'em.

Now in Chicago the successful blues clubs are mostly white.

Was that then, were there white blues clubs?

No, I'd say it had a few of them. But most of the white people would come to the South Side to hear the blues. There wasn't that many white blues clubs. I think the first blues place I played, they didn't just say it was all blues, they had blues nights, it was on Lincoln Avenue. One of the clubs was Wise Fools, I think it was carrying more blues over there than anybody else, one of the first clubs, I think. And they had another club called Ratso, they'd have a blues night, I think Wednesday or Thursday night, or something like that, and then they'd have a jazz night, and they'd have a rock night, it was something like a restaurant. And then the blues started catching on, and the other places started moving the blues in, and now it's all over the North Side. A lot of blues clubs.

Which is good.

It's really supporting the blues players here in Chicago.

What's it like for you, to have started off playing black audiences, and now to be playing almost all white? Is it different?

No, not really. It didn't make any difference, who I play to, long as I can get the people to enjoy what I'm doing. (Telephone).

Sorry about all the interruptions, I really ought to take the phone off the hook.

Not at all. Do you get a lot of interviews? I suppose you do. Yes, especially when I'm out playing. Most of 'em live on radio stations.

Have you got anything lined up in Europe?

We just left Europe in May. Not that I know of now. We went to France, Holland, Switzerland, Spain, Belgium.

These tours never seem to go to England.

Do they like the blues over there?

Yes, but I suppose it's not as big a market.

I'll go anywhere, I wish I could be there now, I've heard so much about it. I thought that's where I wanted to go first, 'cos I've heard of those English groups coming over here, and I'd love to play there and get a chance to meet some of them.

I think you'd have a good time.

I do have a good time. I love to fly. Oh boy. I be so relaxed on the plane, I feel real good about it, you know. A lot of time, if I got five or six hundred miles to go, something like that, if I get a chance, I fly. I just love to fly. I did more flying than I ever did in my life when I went on this last trip. Seventeen days, nothing but planes. Last ten days, we caught the train, but the first

seventeen days was all plane travel, and it was very nice.

I saw you last night at On Broadway, in a sort of Alligator blues package, which seems a good idea. Is that Bruce's idea? That's the third time we did this in Chicago, this packaging thing. And it happens that we do pretty good.

Do you like the idea?

Yes! Oh man, do I like it? I get a chance to listen to some good blues, listen to somebody else, and then I can go up and can do some of my acts, you know. That's where the fun is. Now when you got to go to a club and play four or five sets - I mean, you enjoy it, but it's more exciting to have somebody else, and you know you got to go up behind them, or they come up behind you. That's the exciting thing.

From my point of view, it seems to be Alligator that's made you take off.

I tell you, I think I should have met him a long time ago. Because I guess he's steered me in the right direction, into what I wanted to do. See, this is one of the things that he can do, he can see things that you don't see in yourself, and get it out of you. And probably the things that needed to come out when I was cutting records before, I needed somebody like him to bring it out of me. Because you see, a artist, you can get so tied up in yourself that you don't really know the limit how far you can go. And the best part of you. You know, it takes somebody else sometimes to point that out. They can hear what you're doing, and get an get an idea where you really want to go, but you haven't found it, then they can bring it to your attention, and there it is. So I think Bruce is real responsible for me and where I'm at today. Because I've been trying for a long time with the blues. With rock'n'roll I guess it was a little bit different, in that it was a natural thing. But for the blues, I'd been trying, and playing, but I ~~guess~~ it took some of his ideas to bring out the realness in me.

No one else did that for you, before?

No. No more than when I was in the rock'n'roll, that was Eddie Schubert, he was kind of like that too. But I'm playing rock'n'roll, and I really want to play the blues, and there's kind of a mix-up in my brain. I always used to say, they're not going to cut me playing blues, so I'll wait till I get tired of playing rock'n'roll, or make a lot of money playing rock'n'roll, and I'll produce my own blues LP. But I got a chance to get to Chicago, and talk to a lot of producers here in Chicago, but like I say, they didn't find me, and I hadn't found myself in the blues field.

How did Bruce find you?

Well, I was playing in a lot of clubs in Chicago. Bruce been knowing me for a pretty good while, ever since he came to Chicago. Because when he came to Chicago, he started working in Delmark, I think, and a lot of people say from Europe, they come over and want to hear the blues, so Bruce Iglauer, or Bob Koester, would take 'em out, and they'd come where I'm playing at. But it's a funny thing: when Bruce got his label together and start recording, every time he would come where I was playing, he'd catch me playing soul music, or rock'n'roll - so he never knew that

I could play the blues. And then it happened that I talked to him about it, about cutting records, you know, I tell him, I can play the blues. But in the back of his mind, you know: 'I don't know how well he can play the blues.' So he didn't worry about recording me. And this happened after I went to Europe, and did that blues LP for Black and Blue, and I guess he kind of listened to me a little bit more, then: 'Well, he can play the blues, even if I didn't hear it at first.' So he came in one night, I was playing at the Wise Fools Pub on the North Side, and he asked me if I had any tunes, he had an opening for about six tunes on a record; he was putting this series together. I told him yeah, and what I did, I went home and picked out some tunes, and brought them to him, and let him listen, about ten or twelve tunes, and he picked the four. So I went in and rehearsed it and recorded. At the time I was working a day gig, working at a die-casting plant. But I could play on weekends, and sometimes I could talk my boss into letting me go out of town.

Did your boss know what you did?

Yes, he knew I was a musician before I went to work. This was funny. This guy walked into the club, it happened I played a tune that reminded him of when he was in college, so he walked up and asked me, say, 'You look like you're pretty fond of playing your music, you look like you're happy when you playing.' I said I am, you know. So he say how good is it for making a living? I say I can make a living, but I ain't getting where I want to get with it, you know. Sometimes it make you disgusted, you know, you try so hard. And I said, if I could get a job paying me three hundred dollars a week, I'd put this down in a minute. So he said, you wanna job? I got a plant, come on out, I'll give you a job. So, you know, I had to think about it for a couple of weeks, I said well, maybe I'll try work for a while. So I went up and he gave me a job, and after everybody in the company got to know that I was a musician, so they gave me a few breaks. Like I could go out of town, if it would take me a day to get there, I could take off a day or two days, and go out of town and play. Long as I'd be back there Monday.

When did you give it up?

After I cut this record, Bayou Lightning.

Oh. Quite late.

Yeah. Bayou Lightning was the next record. I did the first one, the series, Living Chicago Blues, they had three artists on there. They was playing it, but it wasn't enough to where I could put the job down. And then when Bayou Lightning came out then I started getting gigs, going out of town, and it started getting better for me, so I just cut the job.

And before that, had you been just a pro musician?

All the time. I hadn't worked in 20-some years, about 23 years.

Not many musicians can say that. You were pro for a long time.

Oh yeah. I didn't really have to go to work. I was making a living playing music. But my ideal was to, after it was kind of hard to get me a record, I said well, I'll get a job, and try to get some money, and try to produce my own record, or



make some demos and start sending them out. So I needed money for that, and at the moment I wasn't making enough money for that, just making enough money to pay my car note, and buy food, and bills. But to put some money up to do a session, it was kind of hard, so I said well, I'll work a couple of years, and then happened I found out I didn't have to spend no money.]

Must've been a drag doing a day job after all that time.

[Well, I didn't really have to, but when you want to do something, you do it, whatever it take, and that was my idea, to produce a record on myself, and at the moment, I know I had to do something else to get the money together. But thank God, I didn't have to spend it. Here Bruce come along, and he spent the money.

Would you say that was the best thing that's happened to you? I guess when you want to do something, you have to really try, and it come much easier when you try, than just waiting, hoping. [Probably if I hadn't went to work, with this on my mind, maybe he wouldn't have said nothing to me. [So that's how things work. When you try something, and go that direction, there's all kinds of little avenues start falling in then, you know, when you got your direction you want to go, and know what you have to do. I don't give up at anything. Might take me a little longer than the others, but I'm going to keep on fighting till I do what I want to do.]