Written by Jeff Ignatius
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“I’m not working as much as I’ve been,” said 78-year-old Lonnie Brooks in a recent phone interview. “I had in mind to try to retire, but my boys keep tellin’ me, ‘Let’s go out there.’”

I asked him when he decided he wanted to retire. Without missing a beat or belying the joke, the Louisiana-bred Chicagoan deadpanned: “I was thinking about this about 16 years ago. But I needed money, so I kept on.”

Brooks’ “retirement” decision coincided with his last studio release of new recordings, 1996’s *Ro adhouse Rules*
– which in retrospect seems to have ended a two-decade solo run on the Alligator label, including 1979’s classic
Bayou Lightning
. The
All Music Guide
called him “a Chicago blues giant” with a “unique Louisiana/Chicago blues synthesis unlike anyone else’s on the competitive Windy City scene.”

Since *Roadhouse Rules*, he collaborated with Long John Hunter and Phillip Walker on 1999's *L one Star Shootout*
(also on Alligator), and his touring schedule has wound down from roughly 250 dates a year to about 50. "I just work when I need it," he said.

Most of his shows these days – including his closing bandshell performance at this year's Mississippi Valley Blues Festival – are billed as the Brooks Family Blues Dynasty, featuring father Lonnie and sons Ronnie Baker Brooks and Wayne Baker Brooks. All three men are guitarists and bandleaders, and the show's appeal, Lonnie said, is that "I know that people love to see families together."

There are practical advantages to this arrangement – Lonnie doesn't need to keep a band together, instead using his sons' backing musicians – but Brooks had long envisioned a family band, with Ronnie on bass and Wayne on drums. It just took a lot longer to come together than he anticipated, and it didn't take the form he had planned. "That's what I had in mind to do, to have my boys playing with me," he said – but he was referring to a period when his sons were kids; Ronnie is now 45, and Wayne is 42.

Ronnie had music in him early. Brooks recalled that when his older son was six, "I caught him messing with my guitar. Other kids, what they do, they grab a string and pull on it. ... [With Ronnie,] I heard somebody playing the guitar. ... He had the feel for it at six.

"When I woke up, when I let him know that I was awake, he hurried and put the guitar down. I said, 'No.'" Thus began Ronnie's education at the hands of his father. He first played on stage with Lonnie at age nine and spent a dozen years in Brooks' band before starting a solo career.

Even when Ronnie was young, Brooks said, "we would write together. He would come up with ideas that I never heard before. I was using some of his ideas. ... He had certain licks that he would hit that felt good to me, so I would use it. I'd make it much stronger."

Wayne's path to a music career was different. "He was into computers" as a kid, his father said. "He wasn't thinking about no music. Then he wanted to play when he saw the kids coming up to

the bandstand when Ronnie would start playing. He wanted to get in.”

But he declined Dad’s offers of instruction: “He didn’t say, ‘I want you to teach me’; he said, ‘I want to go to school for it.’ ... I guess he’s like his mother. He wants to do everything himself.”

Brooks said that he can see his influence in his sons’ styles. “I hear it, but I notice that I’m seeing it disappearing a little bit,” he said. “Both of them sound good to me.”

The patriarch understands, though, that he’s still the main attraction. Audiences, he said, “want to hear the old man.”

And he’s not done yet. He recorded a new album two years ago, he said, and is waiting for the right situation and label to release it. “I’m thinking it’s the best one I ever did in my life,” he said. “All musicians think that, but I’m just saying it’s a good record. It took me 15 years to write all this stuff. ... I don’t want to mess with it unless I think it’s a hit.”

And don’t think that Brooks is coasting on his reputation, either. The day we talked, he said he’d gone to bed at 6 a.m., practicing guitar for hours after playing pool until nearly midnight: “I’ve got to keep myself in shape.”