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Blues Fest ends in celebration, tribute to a local label

June 13, 2011 | By Kevin McKeough, Special to the Tribune

It was an evening of surprises, including a coronation, mayoral proclamations, and most remarkable of all, an all-star rendition of "Sweet Home Chicago" that was more celebratory than obligatory.

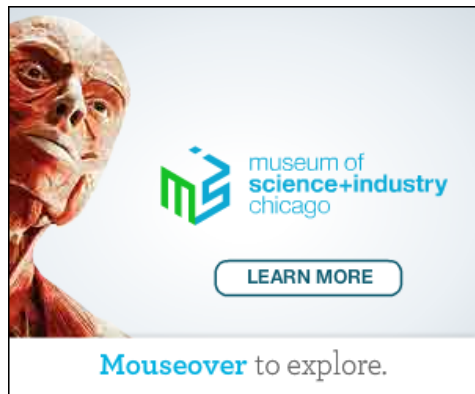
Altogether, Sunday proved a triumphal final night for the Chicago Blues Festival in Grant Park, restoring the high spirits that had been dampened, literally and figuratively, by rainy weather and some weak [performances](#) during the annual free festival's first two days.

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The evening's finale in the Petrillo Music Shell was a 40th anniversary tribute to [Alligator Records](#), the local label that has played a key role in nurturing the blues in Chicago and nationwide. A crew of Alligator artists headed by Lonnie Brooks took turns in the spotlight backed by Brooks' band, which included his son Wayne Baker Brooks on guitar.

Brooks' start was interrupted at its start for the reading of two proclamations from Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel designating Sunday as Lonnie Brooks Day and congratulating Alligator Records on its anniversary.

Brooks began his [career](#) in Texas, and although he's called Chicago home for roughly half a century, he still plays the blues with a Lone Star State accent. He energetically called his way through songs including "Watch Dog," and made his guitar bark, bite and spiral over his band's loping boogie rhythms.

Prior to Brooks taking the stage, Michael Burks made an impressive appearance that combined his strong, boyish voice and slashing guitar; Rick Estrin made his harmonica purr, wail and trill; and Eddy Clearwater gave a brief clinic in West Side blues as he sang with gravely fervor and played lean, piercing guitar solos.

Shemekia Copeland, young in blues years at 32, began her career on Alligator Records, making her an apt choice to precede the anniversary celebration. Copeland started out her career as a powerhouse blues shouter indebted to the late Koko Taylor, to whom she paid tribute on "Has

Chicago Blues Festival
Entertainment
Shemekia Copeland

Anybody Seen My Man?"

In a touching moment near the end of her set, Copeland was surprised by Cookie Taylor, Koko's daughter, who presented the singer with a tiara that once belonged to her mother and bestowed on Copeland her mother's honorific as Queen of the Blues. In addition to having all of Taylor's vocal power—which she demonstrated by being audible in the back seats while singing a portion of "Ghetto Child" without her microphone—Copeland has even greater stylistic range, which she displayed smoldering through the slinky groove of "Never Going Back to Memphis" and with her towering pleas on the jazzy soul ballad "Salt in My Wounds."

She still was wearing her tiara when she joined Brooks and the rest of the Alligator crew for the finale, and as they traded solos and verses, "Sweet Home Chicago" was transformed from an overused cliché to an affirmation of community and the music at the center of it.

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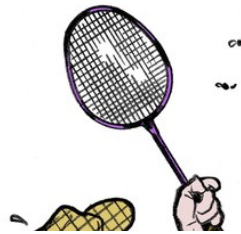
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