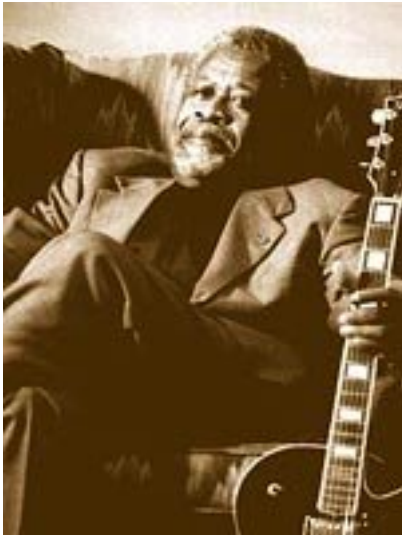


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Wednesday, 27 June 2007 02:59

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"You got a minute?" Drink Small asked me during our phone interview.

"Yeah," I said.

"All right," he said. The bluesman left the phone. A television was audible in the background.

After a few seconds, the man who for 35 years has called himself the "Blues Doctor" returned with his guitar and played a song about the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival - how he wants to meet the mayor of Davenport, how he played the event 10 or 12

Blues Fest 2007: Full of It - Drink Small: Sunday, 1:30 p.m., Tent Stage

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years ago. "I can do the same thing," sang Small, who returns to the festival this weekend, "but I can do it better at the age of 74."

The impromptu song is brief - you can hear it at (<http://www.qcspan.com>) - but it illustrates a point Small makes a little bit later: "I talk a lot of trash, but I back it up."

The South Carolina native initially gained recognition on the gospel circuit in 1955 with the Spiritulaires, but he gave up church music for the blues in the late 1950s.

Just don't accuse him of switching from one to the other.

"I came up doin' both at the same time," said the singer and guitarist. "The gospel, that was the one that got me out of my little hometown.

"There wasn't no switchin'. When one slowed down, I went to the other. The gospel took me further than the blues did at that time. ... The blues took me to another direction."

Small also stressed that a performer can't simply adopt a form of music if it's not already inside. "It got to be in you to start with, so when you decide to go to the other, all you got to do is switch the words," he said. He compared himself to Sam Cooke, who moved from gospel to soul. "When people said he switched, he had the same sound already. All he did was change the lyrics."

Drink Small has a *lot* of music in him. He's well-versed in all manner of blues - "I can play all the sounds," he said - and on his CD *Blues Doctor: Live & Outrageous!*

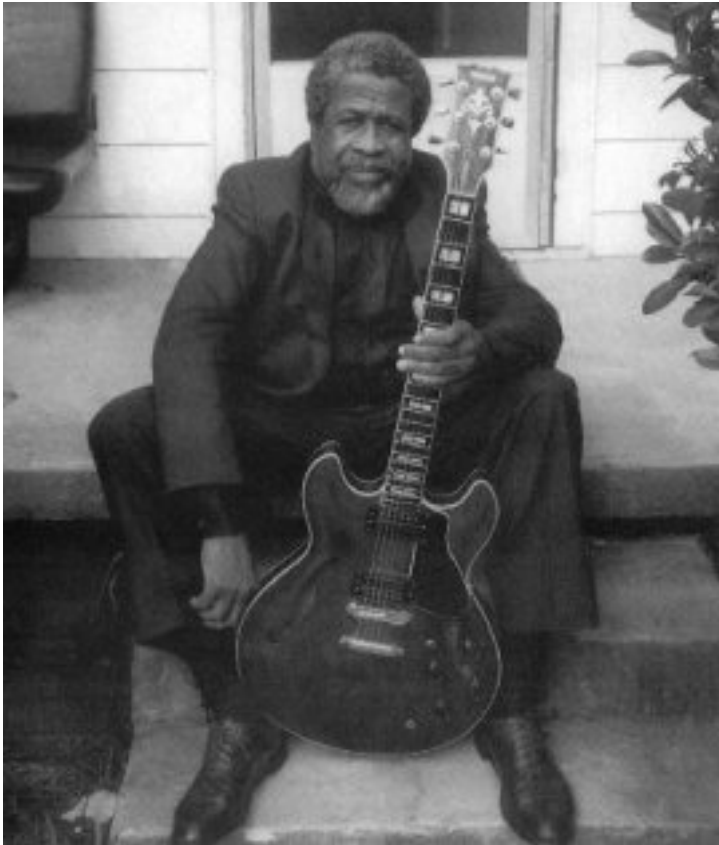
(recorded in 1986 and '88) Small even tackles country: "If you cut out the lights, you think I'm white," he tell his audience. "If you hear me in the dark, you think I'm Roy Clark." (Small is fond of rhyming couplets, even when they don't quite rhyme.)

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And then he proceeds to do convincing country on "I Really Don't Want to Know," which he punctuates with a "Yee haw!" He also tackles James Brown's "I Feel Good," and on Willie Dixon's "Little Red Rooster," he briefly adopts the vocal mannerisms of a drunk Louis Armstrong.



The All Music Guide notes: "The breadth of Drink Small's repertoire is fascinating in itself, but what's even more impressive is his depth as a performer in any of his chosen genres. ... He can be gruff and rough, clean and modern, or light and bouncy, altering his voice and guitar to suit the mood."

And *Living Blues* wrote about *Live & Outrageous*: "When he sheds the shuck-and-jive and gets down to serious musical business, Small can still be brilliant. 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' culminates in a torrid street-gospel guitar break that annihilates his trademark irony and plunges us directly into a realm of brimstone-choked terror. His unaccompanied version of 'The Twist' is explosive and primal"

"I can play the hell out of this guitar," Small said. "Guitar in my genes. ... When God give it to you, man can't do nothing about it."

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He said he came from a farming family, but "my fingers, they weren't designed to pick no cotton. ... One day I got on my knees behind the barn and I said, 'Lord, I can't pick no cotton.' You know what cotton is, don't you? I said, 'I can't pick no cotton. Lord, let me pick something.' ... So the Lord made me a guitar picker."

Although he's a master of many blues styles, Small hasn't found the fame of other blues artists. "I gotta little rhyme I put together," he said "I did a lot of recording trying to get an invitation, but it look like I'm goin' to be an old man livin' on a pension."

And that situation he puts on a lack of promotion. "All he [a musician] can do is promote the music," Small said. "Publicity is one thing, and talent is different. ... A lot of people that've never been released are as good as people who've been released.

"I'm well known, but I don't have the real proper setup. ... I'm working on it."