

**Drink Small**  
**By Ajay Kalra**  
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Drink Small is an eclectic musician from central South Carolina, who switches effortlessly between different genres and styles of black traditional and popular music as easily as he does between the guitar and the keyboard. Although Small is not strictly from within Appalachia, his musical repertoire and eclecticism is representative of the assimilative musical practices of African Americans in the Southeastern United States including much of the Appalachian Piedmont, a region that extends to well within a few miles of Small's stomping grounds.

Small was born in 1933 in the small rural town of Bishopville on the Lynches River in the South Carolina sandhills. His first instrument, at the age of 11, was the church organ. He soon was enamored of the guitar and, starting on self-made single- and four-string instruments, went on to master a wide variety of guitar styles.

In the late 1950s, he played with the popular gospel group the Spiritualaires and was a highly regarded gospel guitarist in a style reminiscent of Pops Staples. On his Celebration of Traditional Music 1980 interpretation of the spiritual "[Glory Glory Hallelujah](#)," a staple of the Staples Singers repertoire, Small demonstrates this style. As a member of the Spritualaires, Small was featured with the group on some recordings on the Veejay label. The group also toured with the Staples Singers and Sam Cooke and appeared at major African American music venues including the Apollo (Small).

In the late 1950s, Small started playing secular music and learned from the recordings of blues guitar masters from various stylistic schools, including the Piedmont and ragtime styles of his own region. In any given performance, often on the same song, Small can offer a crash course in a broad range of blues guitar styles. On his 1980 Berea recordings, Small stays with a fair degree of amplifier overdrive on his electric guitar's output. Among other styles, Small interprets ragtime-influenced alternating-thumb Piedmont fingerpicking on "[Rag Mama](#)," Blind Willie Johnson- and Elmore James-influenced slide guitar playing on the self-composed "[Berea Kentucky Blues](#)," Sam Lightnin' Hopkins- and John Lee Hooker-style boogie guitar on "[Lightnin' Boogie](#)," and Blind Boy Fuller's two-finger delta-blues-influenced "Piedmont" guitar on "[Screamin' and Cryin' Blues](#)."

On some tunes, Small, in the span of one solo, jumps between the styles of a number of distinctive African American stylists on the guitar—for instance, on "[Ugly Woman Blues](#)," Small starts his instrumental interlude with Wes Montgomery-style octaves, switching next to single-note incisive upper register licks typical of such urban blues masters as Otis Rush and Albert King, and finally segueing into T-Bone Walker's West Coast style sliding sixths as the next verse begins. His cover of B.B. King's "[Three O'Clock in the Morning Blues](#)" is similarly a veritable tapestry of distinct blues guitar styles.

All these styles, learned from recordings of great blues guitarists, are doubtless colored by Small's own personality and to an extent by his having spent the major part of his life in the Southeast where genre and color boundaries seem to have been traversed more easily than, for instance, the Mississippi delta. Small's country influences come to the fore on an electric guitar interpretation of the Carter Family's "Wildwood Flower"; true to his own unbridled eclecticism, however, Small spices up the old-time major scale melody with choppy chugging seventh chords and raucous bluesy riffs. On the Holiness

gospel style rendition of "[If I Could Find a Million Dollar Bill](#)," Small whips the whole audience into a spiritual frenzy having them all tapping and clapping as he again takes a familiar old-timey country melody and with his congregation interprets it in a decidedly African American church style on a lyric with an unambiguously material focus.

Small also accompanies himself on piano on three songs, starting with the Andy Razaf/William Weldon slow blues standard "[I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town](#)." Next he sings the spiritual "[Go Down, Moses](#)," on which, with his self-described "Mississippi cotton field moan" in his big baritone voice, Small invokes the spirit of the famous early-twentieth-century African American concert singer Paul Robeson and leads it back to its earthy plantation roots.

Small's choice of this particular spiritual is interesting in a number of ways. In December 1861, in a version titled "Let My People Go: A Song of the 'Contrabands,'" this song became the first spiritual to be transcribed and printed. Reverend Lewis C. Lockwood was responsible for that transcription which appeared in a Northern abolitionist newspaper. The first sheet music arrangement of the song was by Thomas Baker, but his 6/8 parlor music style arrangement for voice and piano of the "Song of the Contrabands" also did not find a wide audience as it apparently failed to capture on paper the fervent vitality of African American oral spiritual performance practice.

It was Thomas Seward's 1872 choral arrangement, now titled "Go Down Moses" after the song's main refrain, that partly captured the fervor of the African American folk spiritual by restoring emphasis to the responsorial character of the native practice (Crawford: 413-415). In 1925, however, James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, in keeping with the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance movement which aimed at proving blacks' equality through mastery of the elite European arts, rearranged the tune for piano and solo concert vocalist trained in art song (Crawford: 661). It was this style that Paul Robeson personified and his more operatic renditions make for an interesting contrast with those of a later "traditional" self-taught musician such as Drink Small whose voice is every bit as powerful even if not classically trained.

Small wraps up the piano section of the performance with a 12-bar boogie-woogie tune "Berea Kentucky Blues." With regard to that tune, a connection needs to be made with the regional legacy of major boogie-woogie piano greats who have hailed from the southern parts of Appalachia, including such 1920s' pioneers as Charles "Cow Cow" Davenport and Clarence "Pinetop" Smith, both from Alabama.

While Drink Small only recorded two commercial sides as a solo performer in his early career, the single "I love you Alberta" b/w "Cold, Cold Rain" released on the Sharp subsidiary of Savoy, and a now out-of-print album in 1976, he has recorded and performed much more prolifically in the last two decades (Small). The recordings at Berea predate any of Small's four in-print albums and are thus an interesting document of a middle period in the development of this southeastern African American musician's encyclopedic range of musical styles.

Drink Small has since received some much deserved acclaim, although only a limited popular following. The South Carolina General Assembly presented him the South Carolina Folk Heritage Award in 1990, and in 1999, Small was inducted into the South Carolina Music & Entertainment Hall of Fame. Among other venues, Drink Small has performed at the Chicago Blues Fest, the King Biscuit Festival, twice at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, and at two World Fairs.  
([www.wordofmouthproductions.org](http://www.wordofmouthproductions.org); [cdbaby.com](http://cdbaby.com))

## **Berea College Special Collection and Archives holdings:**

### *Celebration of Traditional Music recordings:*

- CTM 1980: 14 (aforementioned) songs contained of 5 Open Reels (AC-OR-005-155, 162, 163, 172 and 173); all have a reference copy on audio cassette.

### *Commercial Discography:*

- *I Know My Blues are Different* (Southland, 1976)
- *The Blues Doctor* (Ichiban, 1990)
- *Round Two* (Ichiban, 1991)
- *Electric Blues Doctor Live* (Mapleshade, 1994)
- *Does it All* (Bishopville, 20002)

## **References:**

Crawford, Richard. 2001. *America's Musical Life*. New York: Norton.

O'Neal, Jim. "Drink Small: Biography." <http://www.allmusic.com>. Accessed on July 17, 2006.

Small, Drink. "Drink Small." <http://www.musicmaker.org/artistroster/drinksmaill.htm>. Accessed on July 17, 2006.

"Drink Small: Cameo Appearance with Elliott and the Untouchables." <http://www.wordofmouthproductions.org/Small.htm>. Accessed on July 17, 2006.

"Review: Drink Small/Does it All." <http://cdbaby.com/cd/drinksmaill>. Accessed on July 18, 2006.