

Smokey Smothers interview.

In a car, North Halsted Street, Chicago.

12 September, 1982. Midnight.

I was here three years ago, and I remember seeing you around quite a lot, although you weren't playing then. Why are you playing now? What's happened?

I had retired, I stopped from playing, and I just started back. Three years I was trying to get back, see I just had started, I had quit. Yep, I had quit, guitar playing. Yeah, I worked at a job. Different jobs, part-time jobs, you know. Just didn't play music.

You recorded with Freddie King, and you also did your own LP on Federal, in Cincinnati.

Yeah, before I quit, yeah.

Was that your last recording before the Rooster stuff?

Last I did for Federal. I recorded for Gamma, a year later, I got My Eyes on You, I recorded for Gamma label, '66 when I recorded it. I had stopped recording for Federal. Federal went out of business in 1960, I think. King records. I started recording for, I recorded I Got My Eyes On You for this Gamma label. And that was it.

When did Rooster decide to record you?

That was a year ago. Last year we recorded that thing, and they came out just in May this year.

Are you pleased to be back recording?

Well. I'm glad I'm back playing. Playing music, you know. Jobs is scarce again, though, getting scarce. When I cut before, jobs was kind of bad, you know. During the sixties they had rock'n'roll. The big blues artists, they only could survive, I could not just... Last of the sixties, I was trying to play, but I wasn't doing nothing, so...

Are you finding it better now?

Well, one thing, I feel more like playing, you know, than I did then, I know. Seem like to me, the people, you know, the style of music, the blues, it's like they coming back to 'em, but during that time they had rock'n'roll. Rock'n'roll was going big, and the blues was, even the big artists wasn't doing nothing. I could have changed my style and kept on playing, maybe. Instead, I just quit. When I started back, I started back playing my style where I left off. The blues. And the reason I started back, I think you probably know, it's different now than it was fifteen or seventeen, a few years ago, back then when the rock'n'roll, before it died out. And the blues now, it seem like it catch on a little bit, you know. And my style of blues more so now. The audience is larger than it was during the time I quit, because the blues was big in the fifties and part of the sixties, there always was a large... it was during the time of all the artists like Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, and Wolf, John Lee Hooker, and all the guys was going big, and selling big, and the blues audience was very, you know - big. Then rock'n'roll

come along, Chuck Berry and those guys, Elvis Presley. And the blues market kind of just fell, and a lot of artists quit, and didn't come back, period. A lot of artists, a lot of blues players, I don't know whether they're all artists, but a lot of blues entertainers.

What's the difference?

It didn't matter what you was then, the blues market just went slow. Unless you were real big. And we got good entertainers, ain't never been heard, and they quit. Some of them quit during the time I quit, some quit after, and some of them quit and a few came back and a few didn't come back. They quit and couldn't get back in there. Awful hard for me to get back in. If I had a album out, and people heard me... People ask about me. I had fans, some of my fans were kids then, and they wrote me some letters, and they liked me. In the sixties, when I got fan mail. I guess they were teenagers, just before the blues market started dying out. So I imagine some of the same audience that was youngsters then, they grew up, they still remember me. People asked about me, you know, kept asking about me, but I just quit. But I went back... let's see, Jim O'Neal came round the house. That magazine came out in '78. But before he started talking to me, another guy, George Parlour was talking to me, from Barrelhouse records. But I never could get off, started, I couldn't get going then, I still considered retired, 'cos I wasn't doing too much. Nothing ever happened.

What was that cassette we just listened to?

This is a thing we picked up on tape over there in Decalb. Just something for a trial, you know, see how it sounds. I got to listen to the thing myself, maybe somebody here gonna release it, I don't know. Got to have somebody wants to take a chance. I haven't heard it myself yet. I'm still trying to get something together.

Do you still hold a day job?

No. That's the trouble, I ain't got no day job right now. It all depend on music, and music's something that's sometimes alright, and sometimes... like, I've got cancelled twice this month.

Still I enjoyed the gig last Thursday at the B.L.U.E.S.

Oh, I did too, I really enjoyed that.

You gave up drinking, didn't you? You don't drink any more.

I was drinking for a spell, pretty heavy, then I just quit drinking. Alcohol, it was interrupting my business, my career, you know, you can't do nothing. Some people can drink, and some can't. I just give it up if I can't control it. I'm my worst enemy, it's wasn't me bothering nobody else, I done hurt myself when I'm drinking, that's it.

A lot of musicians do that. Especially blues musicians.

Yeah, blues musicians. Most blues musicians drinks, and in other fields they get high off other things. Everybody have a habit, I guess. But as regards the other person, it's me, myself, that's who I was concerned about me drinking, I leave it alone, 'cos some people can drink and go on with the job, but me, I can't do it, so I leave it alone. But it took good will power for me to just... people give me credit for that will-power. No doctor, nothing told me to stop drinking. I stopped

myself. You sit back and think, 'where's the profit? You ain't profiting nothing, you're losing.' I lose more than I gain. And drinking not only takes spending money, you drinking, you can't perform your job. Drink too much, you can't think. I get up there and play, drunk, I think I'm playing good, and then I taped myself, and I heard it the next day when I was sober, I say, 'Gee, that sound terrible.' I heard it sober, I play it back, gee... Now, I'm playing bad, I know I'm playing bad. I can tell. And even when I don't play good, don't sound too good to myself, other folks: 'You sound good.' To me it didn't sound at my best, 'cos I'm listening, knowing. But I have been high, drunk, playing, it sounded like I'm playing good. And folks don't, people be: 'Hello...!' And now I play, have one of my bad sets, to me, and I come down and folks say, 'You sound good.' I say, well I'm not at my best, but the audience like it. It's better to be sober.

I think maybe a lot of musicians get started because a drink gives them courage to go up. How did you start? Do you remember? I don't remember. Well, when you're around the folks drinking, you drink with them. Take one drink after another, you know. 'Oh, you have a drink,' you know. Some entertainers go out, they drink when they play, but they don't drink all through the day, see. And I'd get up in the morning, and people that know me, friends, they give me a drink. I'd take a drink early in the morning. Now see, you drink early in the morning, all through the day, and don't eat... you going to get drunk! I just had a little short spell of that drinking, and I was quitting anyway, playing music, you know. All the years I was drinking, I was drinking socially, up to a certain point. I had other problems, and I started drinking heavy. I didn't think I was drinking that much, really. But I started thinking about my career, different things, my kids, family. See, you got a family, that look bad on my kids, drunk. My music got bad for me. My style of music. That's worse than the drinking.

I saw Good Rockin' Charles here the other week. He's in a bad way these days.

I don't want to talk about nobody else but me. I don't want to talk about other folks. I know it's better for me to quit drinking. I have time to think. Time I'm taking going out to look for a drink, I'm thinking of ideas, what to put whenever I get a chance to record, put a album out or something, I already got the ideas, still studying 'em, you know. I don't just has to walk in the studio and I ain't got nothing together. 'Cos now, I have a idea, I write it down, fix the guitar up, get me a sound, and keep that.

Do you write songs?

I writes too, yeah. I want to get my Christmas song out, but I guess...

Is there any recording lined up, that you know about?

No. Nobody wants to take a chance right now, I guess. Times hard, see. This record here's been out four months. I'm glad to get it out, because I hadn't had a 45 or an album out in quite a while. Quite some time. One 45. I cut some things in Europe, you know, I cut some things over there in Paris with the group I was with,

live audience, you know. I don't know the label.

Probably Black and Blue.

Yeah, black and Blue, I'm pretty sure it is. My audience is just as good, blues is good now, but see, times is hard now. Peoples just don't have much money. That's the problem now. People liking my music, I can see that, because I'm sober. If I was drinking, you know... But I'm sober, and I know that peoples do like my music. I can see that. But as times is now, times is bad, moneywise. Yeah.