

*Big Walter Smith
& the Groove Merchants*



Big Walter Smith is Minnesota's undisputed heavyweight champion of the blues; it is a title that he has been defending for over four decades. Walter and his hard-hitting cornermen, The Groove Merchants, bring their combination punch of big city blues, R&B, and funk back to the Bayfront Blues Festival for an unprecedented 15th round.

**Leinenkugel Stage
Saturday 12:20 p.m.**

When it comes to Minnesota blues, Big Walter is known as “The Chairman of the Board,” but his career began long before he made his way to “The Land of 10,000 Lakes.” A native of Tulsa, Oklahoma, Big Walter actually got his start in show business acting as an M.C. for an Oklahoma City-based vaudeville show that showcased female impersonators. From there, he relocated to Kansas City to play with Albert Collins; their friendship lasted a lifetime. He has shared the stage with Albert King, Bobby “Blue” Bland, and B.B. King. The Groove Merchants were established in the mid-’80s, and in the course of 18 years, they have been bestowed with many prestigious recognitions including the first band ever to be inducted into the Minnesota Blues Society Hall of Fame, four-time Best Male Vocalist and two-time recipient of Best Horn Band, both by the Minnesota Black Music Society. Duluth Mayor Gary Doty proclaimed August 8, 1997 to be “Big Walter Smith Day” in the city. Big Walter appears at The Reef on Friday and Saturday night.