

The Contenders – Bio

The Contenders were formed in 1976, and remained together for a period of two years during which time they cut and released a self-titled album for Chapel Hill, N.C. based Moonlight Records. The band line-up was Tommy Goldsmith [b. circa 1950 in Raleigh, N.C.], Steve Runkle [b. December 2nd 1951 in Raleigh, N.C., d. August 9th 2001 in Nashville, Tennessee], Walter Hyatt [b. October 25th 1949 in Spartanburg, South Carolina, d. May 11th 1996 in Florida], DesChamps Hood [b. August 16th 1952 in Spartanburg, South Carolina, d. November 3rd 2001 in Austin, Texas] and Jimbeau Tabard Walsh [b. circa 1953 in Chicago, Illinois].

The story of The Contenders, and how they became a band *possibly* begins in a Chapel Hill, North Carolina bar circa the early seventies. It was there that Goldsmith and Runkle, boyhood pals raised in nearby Raleigh, first met and befriended a pair of guitar playing visitors from Spartanburg, South Carolina – Walter Hyatt and Champ Hood. It was a fleeting meeting, but one which left a lasting impression on each of the participants. In the ensuing years, Goldsmith enrolled in College and when Runkle graduated from high school, the pair headed for Nashville where they formed the Pritchard Avenue Band. Messrs. Hood and Hyatt, together with David Ball, went on to form Uncle Walt's Band and they cut their first album in Spartanburg in September 1974. On the promise of free recording time, Willis Alan Ramsey enticed the trio to Austin, Texas where they helped him build his studio, Hound Dog Sound. Goldsmith headed south to Austin soon afterwards, and went on to work with Marcia Ball and Alvin Crow. When Uncle Walt's Band split up in 1976, Hood, Hyatt and Goldsmith decided to head north again. The threesome joined Runkle in Nashville, and enlisting the help of drummer Jimbeau Walsh, The Contenders were born.

Where acoustic music had been their forte in the past, the players now plugged in electric instruments. That said, there was a tuneful subtlety about the music they made. Once heard, their harmonies are not easily forgotten. As I said at the outset, The Contenders lasted two years, and in that time they toured the eastern seaboard of the States from New York to Texas. Towards the end of their time together, a self-titled album was released. Hyatt was the first to depart and the band attempted to record a second album with Don Dixon, but then went their separate ways. Three tracks from their sophomore album are featured on Gadfly's 2002 reissue CD.

Back in Austin Hyatt, Hood and Ball reformed Uncle Walt's Band, and went on to release three more albums. Prior to his 1996 death in a plane crash, Hyatt worked as a solo act and had recorded a pair of fine albums. Hood remained in Austin until his passing. He became an essential part of the city's diverse musical community and worked at various times with Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Lyle Lovett and Toni Price. He was featured on both Threadgill's Supper Session recordings issued by Watermelon Records in the nineties. A man of refined Southern manners and gentle grace, his debut solo album **"Bon Haven"** was posthumously issued last year. Runkle remained in Nashville and became a hit songwriter. His **"Love Song"** was a Country # 1 single for the Oakridge Boys in 1983. Like Hood he passed on in 2001, a victim of cancer. Tommy Goldsmith continued playing music professionally for another decade and worked with David Onley. These days he is Assistant Managing Editor of a Nashville newspaper, The Tennessean, but that doesn't prevent him from occasionally picking up and strumming an instrument. An acquaintance of the other band members, prior to joining The Contenders, Walsh had played in a Wisconsin band called Sky Farmer. Post The Contenders, Los Gringos, was a Nashville band that featured Walsh and a young Steve Earle. These days Jimbeau lives in Hawaii, composes music and works for the local telephone company. Ordained a minister in 1989 he also performs beach weddings near his home

Reunions by The Contenders were held in 1992 and 2000. The latter gathering celebrated the release of **"Light From Carolina, Vol. 1"** by the Orchard imprint. A *live* recording it featured nineteen songs recorded between 1976-78. Five of them, penned by the late Walter Hyatt, had previously never been available on record.

Note.

If you want to read more about Spartanburg's wonderful musical heritage, I would thoroughly recommend Peter Cooper's book **"Hub City Music Makers"** subtitled **"One Southern Town's Popular Music Legacy"** [ISBN 0-9638731-9-9]. Originally published in 1997 it is still available from **Amazon.com**

Discography : **"The Contenders"** [1978/2002] ; **"Light From Carolina, Vol. 1"** [2000] :

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