



The Contenders **"The Contenders"** Gadfly Records

For those older readers out there, maybe you recall that when Rounder Records issued David Olney's first album **"Contender" [#]** [1981] he was backed by a quartet named The X-Rays. Tommy Goldsmith was an X-Ray and one of his earlier bands – circa 1976 to 1978 - was The Contenders. Apart from Goldsmith, The Contenders were Jimbeau Tabard Walsh, Steve Runkle, Walter Hyatt and DesChamps Hood. Walsh hailed from Illinois, while the other members had been raised in the Carolinas. Prior to the formation of The Contenders, Hood, Hyatt and David Ball had worked the Austin clubs as Uncle Walt's Band, and the former pair would return there and reform the trio following the demise of The Contenders.

The fourteen tracks on this release include The Contenders only official, self-titled album that surfaced in 1978, with the addition of three cuts from their unreleased second recording. These recordings may be a quarter of century of old, and in the ensuing decade *new country* came and went to be replaced by *alt. country*, yet the contents of **"The Contenders"** sound so fresh and vital that the disc could easily have been recorded *yesterday*. Whatever we care to call this marriage of rhythms and sounds constructed upon a folk/country foundation, on the evidence presented here, this band was a treasure that deserved wider exposure and appreciation.

Runkle, Goldsmith and Hood each penned three songs for the album, while, strange to relate, Hyatt [who, post the second coming of Uncle Walt's Band, recorded a pair of solo albums chock full of his own songs] only supplied one original tune plus a co-write with Runkle. The Contenders policy, in the main, appears to have been *"if you wrote it, you sing lead on it."* In "Lean On Your Mind," the opening cut, Hyatt cautions the listener to stop and think instead of firing straight from the hip. Uncle Walt's Band cut the latter song and Hood's "Walking Angel" - a paean to lost love that also appears here. Runkle's singing voice leans toward that of a treble and his "The Lack of Love" is a fairly self-explanatory slow number, while the rhythmically upbeat "Silver Cup" is a recollection of his days as a Nashville guitar picker.

Another of this quartet's great strengths is their intelligently considered use of multi-part harmonies. On the aforementioned "Walking Angel" their voices intertwine around Hood's light pitched lead, in the process further enhancing the appeal of the track. "Smokey Night Life" and "Light From Carolina" also benefit from some truly fine harmony work. Goldsmith's "Hollywood Girls" meanwhile, is firmly set in waltz time and explores the dream-like world of those countless girls who journey *to the west* in search of stardom. Hood's plaintive fiddle playing on the latter cut further emphasises the *"unfulfilled dreams"* Goldsmith's lyric touches upon in a later verse. Further proving his versatility Hood's soulful "Chain of Emotion" finds him playing piano. Neither least, nor last, the wide range of musical tempos employed on this disc is one of its many refreshing aspects.

The previously unreleased tracks amount to the Hood/Hyatt collaboration "The Last Of Me" and Hood's "Volcano," both blues inspired numbers. Goldsmith, meantime, praises the object of his affections in "Lelah." Sadly Runkle and Hood passed on during 2001 – both succumbing to cancer, while Hyatt was lost in the ValuJet plane disaster of May 1996. Thankfully, the appearance of this collection can only assist in finally exposing their truly fine musical legacy. Frankly, it's a legacy that should be more widely heard and appreciated. Now, seems like as good a time as any.....

Note.

[#] The album also featured an Olney composition titled "Contender."

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikles 01/03