



WALTER PARKS

NEWS • AUTOBIOGRAPHY

“Walter Parks is an extraordinary singer whose songs are lyrical, political, personal, transcendent as well as down to earth. Walter is a musical treasure – an artist of the highest caliber. I adore him.”
Judy Collins

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ABOUT

In August 2020 writer, guitarist and vocalist Walter Parks was invited by The Library of Congress to archive his research on and perform his arrangements of music made by southeast Georgia’s Okefinokee Swamp homesteaders – hollers, hymns and reels. For 10 years Parks, a Florida native, served as the sideman guitarist to Woodstock Festival legend Richie Havens. Now based out of St. Louis, Walter has recently co-written with Stan Lynch, former Tom Petty drummer and has performed at various venues with R&B drum legend Bernard Purdie and at Lincoln Center with Judy Collins. Walter tours with his own trio *Swamp Cabbage*, with his solo show *Swamp By Chandelier* and with an Americana spirituals project called *The Unlawful Assembly* co-founded by drummer Steven Williams. Walter was a member of *The Nudes*, a popular folk duo, with cellist Stephanie Winters.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

“I was born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida at a time when classical music was offered in public schools. I learned to play the viola in the sixth grade but peer pressure to emulate the Woodstock sound of the day encouraged a switch to guitar. Boy Scout camping trips at that time to islands in the nearby Okefinokee Swamp would eventually spark curiosity as to whether music was made there. A garage band was named *The Parental Tears Band* in response to the dread that my band mates’ parents had regarding the possibilities of their children pursuing careers in music.

Succumbing to advice that I lay the foundation for a stable future, I attended business school at the *University of Georgia* in Athens. Fascinated by concert production I served on the Student Union committee that booked and promoted big shows. We curated with an allegiance to quality, our budget was plentiful and most shows made money. I learned that great reward could follow extra effort when I stayed after every show to help the roadies load-out. Following a *Dixie Dregs* show I was given the opportunity to play *Duane Allman’s* 1959 Gibson Les Paul “Burst”, which at the time was in possession of *The Dregs’* road manager *Twiggs Lyndon*. I’m still inspired by the unusual lightness, ease of playability and magic of that significant instrument.

I felt conflicted with the business school perspective of prioritizing profitability in decision making for I believed that art, my priority, could not be made from this point of view. I believed that potential customers could sense inauthenticity and that the best ideas would find a way to live and ultimately reward regardless of market analysis or advertising. I believed that certain “right things” had to be done, regardless of cost. A hypothetical accounting scenario, that weighed a factory polluting a stream and paying the ensuing fines against installing environmental protection equipment, was my tipping point.

I left college one year short of graduation to explore silk-screen printing and to open a small retail clothing store in Neptune Beach, Florida. I purchased bulk fabric from domestic suppliers and found a factory of Jacksonville police uniform seamstresses to turn my patterns into pants. During slow moments in the store, I practised guitar and booked gigs by the old-school method of cold-call hustling. My society music band *The Wing Tips* and my fusion jazz band called *Sneakers* had me gigging almost every night for ten solid years. Although my first wife and I were able to afford a nice house at the beach my long-time goal of pursuing original music beckoned.

The move to New York in 1990 was costly on financial and personal fronts. Both my first marriage and my first original music project—the rock n’ roll group *Dear John*, folded. I wanted to continue making music but needed to do so as simply as possible. I formed an acoustic duo called *The Nudes* in New York City with cellist *Stephanie Winters*. *The Nudes* recorded three albums and enjoyed successful tours of U.S. colleges and folk festivals, and also served for a short while as *Richie Havens*’ support act. When *The Nudes* threw in the towel in 1998 I was exhausted and had no motivation to play live and no interest in promoting myself having done both incessantly for the previous 10 years.

In retrospect I’ve never done well walking the commonly trodded path which I tried in moving to Nashville to co-write in the country music market. By one measure Nashville was a low point in my life. To support myself I worked in business settings – accounting departments, shipping departments, front-desks etc. For the first time in my life I realized what normal people— my family, my audiences did with their lives 9 to 5. Most importantly I understood why people need what I create. I began to see my work as a reset for folks who were stuck in cubicles and under florescent lights.

I spent a summer at *Plum Village, Tich Nat Han’s* Buddhist monastery, near Bordeaux France. I told no one there that I was a musician in order to find out what was left of me, without the guitar as my identity. Because of the successful run that I had with *The Nudes*, I was lured back to New York and hired to help set up an independent record label. After a few years in that position as a “suit” behind the scenes my urge to start writing music and performing cautiously returned but conversely ability to my focus in the business setting became compromised.

At a perfect time I learned that Richie Havens was looking for a “lead guitarist”. After I got the gig my wife and I bought a run-down former statue factory building in Jersey City near where Richie Havens was living at the time. From 2001 through 2011, hearing Richie’s trademark robust and raspy voice from a chair at his side as I accompanied him on stages all over the world was the honor of a lifetime. The most prestigious shows were at Madison Square Garden, Carnegie Hall, The Cannes Film Festival in France and The WOMAD Festival in Australia but nothing compared to the frenzy Richie incited at The Jazz Cafe in London. I endeavored to provide Richie with the support that I would have needed would that my name were on the marquee but one aspect of the gig began to make me restless over the years. Whereas I accepted from the beginning the nature of the sideman role, Richie was so unique that I served his music best when I played as unstylized as possible.

Using any down time between Richie Havens gigs, I tried to realign with the reason I came to New York in the first place. I recalled advice from *Daniel Lanois* after *The Nudes* opened his show in Burlington, Vermont. His words “Don’t try just be“ guided me to revisit my swampy North Florida playing feel that I had taken for granted yet about which many people seemed to remark and enjoy.

With other southern musicians who like myself had relocated to New York City, I formed *Swamp Cabbage* and recorded three original music discs – *Honk*, *Squeal* and *Jive*. My lyrics explored the archetypical southern man that I could have been had I stayed on Jacksonville’s Westside. Having witnessed the power of Richie Havens’ unique interpretations of songs by other artists, *Swamp Cabbage* also recorded a CD of covers called *Drum Roll Please*.

When Richie Havens retired and subsequently passed I focused on *The Vault Allure*—a concert series that my wife and I co-presented on an old decommissioned Belgian block street under a bridge in Jersey City. When the Covid 19 pandemic began to take hold, my wife and I relocated to St Louis to assist her aging parents. When concert opportunities evaporated I began hosting Sunday Morning live-stream broadcasts on social media.

My new solo show *Swamp By Chandelier* has evolved to encapsulate my long journey thus far and to showcase my research for The Library of Congress. Songs are segued by stories of runaway slaves from the Georgia coastal colonial rice plantations braving the swamp to attain freedom by crossing the nearby St. Marys River into Florida when it was part of Spain. There are stories of Native Americans eventually being displaced by settlers of European decent—poor white homesteaders who did not participate in the plantation economy but who hunted and farmed to survive, battling the panther and bear who preyed on their livestock. There are stories of Civil War deserters who gambled that they might fare better contending with gators, water moccasins and rattlers. There are stories of The Industrial Revolution that created a milling frenzy that shaved the swamp nearly bare of massive 700 year old cypress trees which were transported upon railroad tracks laid by black convicts all in order to build warehouses up north.

In much the same way that The Okefenokee Swamp still is the eastern United States’ final frontier, it has also served the same for my career, for by it I have found uncharted territory and that’s hard to do in the music business.”