



**Brain Drain**  
**Gorilla Mask (Clean Feed)**  
 by Kyle Oleksiuk

What is jazz-rock? Rock with jazz influences, or vice versa? Is it the same as rock-jazz? Answers depend on who you ask and what mood they're in. What is rock-jazz today might be jazz-rock tomorrow and what is both today is neither on Sundays. A label that was supposed to help an album find its audience becomes a useless pointer to an unclear in-between zone. All that is solid melts into air. You'll just have to listen to figure out whether it's your kind of thing and that's the very special quality of multi-genre music—it thwarts our collective Spotify-enabled mania for taxonomizing music. Even if they're not any good, multi-genre albums always provide a jolt of un-classified unrecognizability.

Not that *Brain Drain* by Gorilla Mask is no good. It's quality jazz-rock, or as the liner notes more minutely describe it, "a mishmash of punk, metal, jazz, free improvisation and written avant garde music." The main dynamic is the effects-distorted alto and baritone saxophones of Peter Van Huffel (who turns 42 this month), which sound like Albert Ayler scoring *The Twilight Zone*, against Roland Fidezus' electric bass and Rudi Fischerlehner's drums, forming a rhythm section reminiscent of a '90s video game boss battle soundtrack (or, for older readers, Black Sabbath).

Like all albums within riffing distance of heavy metal, the track titles are pure poetry: "Forgive me, Mother", "AVALANCHE!!!", "Caught in a Helicopter Blade". What could it mean? How can you get inside a helicopter blade? Who cares! It's fun. And that's the best thing about *Brain Drain*—the combination not just of the technical aspects of metal and jazz but also of their attitudes. This is "jazz" with the silliness and spookiness of heavy metal. The shock of this particular way of combining styles, rather than the combination itself, is what makes the album enjoyable. So don't you dare try to label *Brain Drain* and lump it together with all the other jazz-rock albums, or you will be forever haunted by the telltale moan of the jazz-rock saxophone.

For more information, visit [cleanfeed-records.com](http://cleanfeed-records.com)



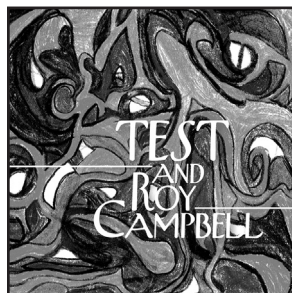
**In Common 2**  
**Walter Smith III/Matthew Stevens (Whirlwind)**  
 by Marco Cangiano

This is the second recording of a quintet co-led by tenor saxophonist Walter Smith III (who turns 40 this month) and guitarist Matt Stevens. The other members have changed since the previous release (hilariously photoshopped into the original cover) but, regardless, there is continuity and natural evolution. Concision and simplicity pervades the ten tunes—all originals except for the late Roy Hargrove's "Roy Allen". Most rely on simple and insistent rhythmic patterns, as in the case of Stevens' "Cowboy", which, while giving structure, also provide for great freedom. The

appealing, albeit not always memorable, melodies thus constitute what Smith defines as "one-page songs", allowing the soloists to take them in various directions. Thus this installment has a *cantabile* quality perhaps less prominent in its predecessor, also due to Micah Thomas' piano in lieu of Joel Ross' vibraphone, which adds depth. Stevens and Smith share most of the solo duties and the former deserves wider recognition, an uncanny ability of blending his approach while staying original. His acoustic instrument, featured for instance in "Roy Allen" and "Opera", nicely complements and expands on Smith's palette. Bassist Linda May Han Oh and drummer Nate Smith team up to provide support, with the former often anchoring the underlying patterns and the latter circling around.

Things start off with Smith and Stevens (on acoustic) in duo on the heartfelt tribute to Hargrove. Collective "Lotto" begins with a three-note pattern leading to a simple melody and tight dialogue between Smith and Stevens. Smith's "Clem" is the perfect example of the group's approach: a two-note pedal by piano is picked up by bass and tenor while the piano swivels around it. The bittersweet melody follows but the pedal is never abandoned and Thomas builds his solo around it. Oh then takes it away with a very brief musical solo before Smith solos then reverts to the main theme and the two-note pedal. Throughout Smith's brushwork is simply superb. And all this in just over five minutes. Smith's "Van Der Linden", inspired by video games, has more of a hard hedge and a dramatic progression thanks to Stevens, but it has fundamentally a similar structure. Smith's "Little Lamplight" is a brief interlude showcasing Thomas and, to close, Stevens' "Opera" builds on a tight pattern carried by the rhythm section while a gentle melody is developed by the leaders. A very successful second recording that bodes well for a third.

For more information, visit [whirlwindrecordings.com](http://whirlwindrecordings.com)



**And Roy Campbell**  
**TEST (577 Records)**  
 by Pierre Crépon

One of Daniel Carter's earliest jazz memories is an "alien" note in a Sonny Stitt solo, heard as a glimpse into the possibilities of the avant garde. TEST provided a similar experience for New Yorkers who encountered fragments of its free playing on subway platforms and along streets in the '90s-00s. Carter and Sabir Mateen on alto, tenor, flute, clarinet and trumpet, late Tom Bruno on drums and Matthew Heyner on bass left a mark as one of the important groups of what has come to be seen as a period of revival for New York free jazz, but its discography remains small. After an Eremite double-CD in 2016, this second archival release brings it to six titles.

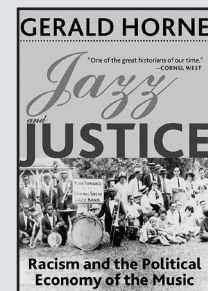
That total improvisation would be a defining characteristic is one of the most common misconceptions about avant garde jazz. Historically, this has surely been the exception, not the rule. But the discarding of any compositional framework in favor of extended spontaneous playing was TEST's *modus operandi*, a radical choice given its working band situation. It could deliver on set-long stretches such as this 1999 live session at a Harlem loft. At a glance, the recording differs significantly from previous releases through the addition of Roy Campbell (who would have turned 68 this month; he died in 2014), but the trumpeter integrates seamlessly. The musicians launch into collective improvisation straightaway, Bruno and Heyner

providing a continuously sustained, oscillating free pulse over which sections of intense simultaneous horn playing alternate with individual contributions. The textural diversity brought by Mateen and Carter's wide array of instruments is in evidence in the next segment, where the music slowly relents into a nearly ballad feel.

Probably recorded with a single microphone, the tape is certainly not hi-fi, dominated by amplified bass and with drums pushed to the background, but this is not a problem. TEST's music was designed to cut through a tough environment, not for the world of high-end audiophile setups, and it still does.

For more information, visit [577records.com](http://577records.com)

## IN PRINT



**Jazz and Justice:**  
**Racism and the Political Economy of the Music**  
**Gerald Horne (Monthly Review Press)**  
 by Kurt Gottschalk

The "justice" in the title of Gerald Horne's book is best taken broadly. The subtitle, "Racism and the Political Economy of the Music" gets closer to the point, but what Horne has really compiled is a survey of obstacles faced by jazz musicians through the 20th Century. The social factors influencing the development of jazz under review also consider violence, gambling, prostitution, organized crime, drug and alcohol use and unscrupulous club owners and bandleaders, as well as selective enforcement allowing for the proliferation of such issues in select circles.

Percy Heath is one of the many musicians who testifies about past inequities. "All of those clubs at the time were run by the so-called mob [...] otherwise they wouldn't be in business," Heath says, pointing out the double standard of musicians with criminal records being denied the cabaret cards required to play in clubs owned by outlaws. That quote comes from an interview in the archives of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, demonstrating the extent of Horne's research. It also points to a shortcoming in his storytelling. There's so much information that the book often reads like a litany, a series of quotes, stories and anecdotes on select ills. It's important history, but it can be exhausting to read, distressing and tiresome. There's no larger context, nothing about social conditions and racial injustices outside the jazz world and precious little about sexism within the industry. Specifics are often sidestepped. A mention of Mal Waldron's shock therapy passes by with no further consideration than that it was "probably unnecessary". One gets the impression that rather than writing his book, Horne is trying to get out of its way.

There are, in the final pages, some dips into relatively current times, if through the eyes of such elders as Quincy Jones and Branford Marsalis, with a quick nod to Kamasi Washington to demonstrate that jazz is not dead. Certainly, the issues that have plagued artists since well before the Jazz Age are a continued concern, but corporate control of distribution channels might be a bigger injustice facing musicians today. Such issues are well considered elsewhere, of course, but aren't part of the jazz justice under Horne's purview.

For more information, visit [monthlyreview.org/press](http://monthlyreview.org/press)