

## Casually Introducing Walter Smith III

Fresh Sound New Talent Reissue Liner Notes

With his 2006 debut *Casually Introducing*, as casual as it might have been, Houston-born tenor saxophonist Walter Smith III proved himself a force to contend with: a musician on a clear path, with strong enough skills and presence to join bands led by Terence Blanchard, Roy Haynes, Christian McBride, Terri Lyne Carrington, Eric Harland, Ambrose Akinmusire, Bill Stewart, Ralph Peterson and a host of others. As a leader he followed up with the incendiary *Live in Paris* and then the fine studio dates *III*, *Still Casual* and *Twio*, plus the Fresh Sound date *Bronze* (co-led with Mark Small) and later offerings by the shapeshifting collective known as *In Common*. Along the way he relocated from New York to Boston to take up his position as Chair of Woodwinds at Berklee.

The great Benny Golson once remarked on being “immediately impressed at the sounds [Smith] was sending forth, striking the medium of the air and all ears.” Tenor players from Coleman Hawkins onward have found their own way of “striking the medium of the air,” and Smith, with his warm tone and agile delivery, cut a distinctive figure on Fresh Sound New Talent, at a time in the mid-aughts when the label was recording his tenor peers Chris Cheek, John Ellis and Jerome Sabbagh, not to mention altoists Jaleel Shaw, Loren Stillman and Aaron Irwin.

In a wry gesture, Smith chose here to emulate the cover of Sam Rivers’ classic 1965 Blue Note album *Fuschia Swing Song*. Like Rivers he holds his horn proudly outward, but with the neck angled in the opposite direction. While Rivers stood near nondescript apartment blocks and barren trees, Smith stands in front of a fountain and sculpture, in a blazer and jeans, ready to deliver a vibrant mix of music with the main lineup of Aaron Parks on piano, Reuben Rogers on bass and Eric Harland on drums. They even begin with a Sam Rivers composition, “Cyclic Episode” (which Smith revisited to scorching effect on *Live in Paris*). Rivers’ song is something of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century standard, almost akin to a Coltrane tune in its harmonic specificity and melodic potential for improvisers. The hard-swinging rapport and focus it elicits from the band is electrifying.

Parks, a fellow Terence Blanchard alum, has amassed a rich catalog of his own, including a solo piano date for ECM and an array of projects both acoustic and electric. Rogers and Harland have become a rhythm section fixture with Aaron Goldberg, Charles Lloyd and others, elevating every band they’re in. Harland went on to play on Smith’s *III* and *Twio*; his acclaimed Voyager group features Smith as a primary melodic voice. The connections run deep, as one is reminded looking at the *Casually Introducing* back cover, with text also laid out in the vintage Blue Note style.

There are guests on that back panel as well, no fewer than four of them now esteemed Blue Note artists. Trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, on three tracks, went on to appear on nearly all of Smith’s albums; Smith reciprocated on several of Akinmusire’s visionary Blue Note outings. Guitarist Lionel Loueke appears on two tracks, including his own “Benny’s,” a.k.a. “Benny’s Tune,” which has also become a standard of sorts (recordings by Blanchard, Roxy Coss, Philip Dizack and Loueke himself are worth seeking out). Loueke is perhaps an

inspiration as well for Smith's "Tail of Benin," featuring the leader on soprano and guest guitarist Lage Lund sounding rather Loueke-esque, with effects he wouldn't explore again on record until *Terrible Animals* in 2019.

"Tail of Benin" and two other tracks showcase an alternate rhythm section with bassist Vicente Archer and drummer Kendrick Scott. Now a Blue Note artist and a Blanchard alum as well, Scott returned to play on Smith's *Still Casual* and has featured Smith in his group Oracle. And Robert Glasper, at the time a new Blue Note signee who'd go on to win a 2013 Grammy for his *Black Radio* project, lends a beautiful texture on Fender Rhodes beside Parks' acoustic piano on Smith's lyrical "Kate Song" (also featuring Loueke with fellow vocalist Gretchen Parlato and percussion guest Matt Kilmer).

Scott and Archer reappear on Smith's ethereal soprano feature "P.O.S." (with its subtle traces of Coltrane's "Naima") and Charles Mingus' celestial ballad "Duke Ellington's Sound of Love." The latter gives Smith ample space to shine in a trio format with no piano (a harbinger of *Twio*). Also in the chordless space are the closing uptempo trio "Blues" and the quartet reading of Ornette Coleman's "Peace" with Akinmusire, both rousing homages to ancestors in their respective ways. (Smith ingeniously quotes "Peace" during his initial fiery choruses on "Blues.")

The core quartet, in fact, appears only on one track, Smith's lyrical, eloquent "Wooden Box (Spatula in Three)," though there's nothing wooden about the elastic feel of Rogers and Harland, which sets up brilliant statements from Smith, Parks and Rogers himself. The clarity of execution is extraordinary, the imagination and musicality sterling throughout. When this "casual" introduction to Walter Smith III reaches its end, it's easy to see how Smith, "always swinging, always soulful" in the words of drum great Ralph Peterson, was already being held up as "one of the most thoughtful, deliberate and brilliant tenor players to come along in his generation." — *David R. Adler*