

WIIT New Music Review: 'Geist' by Gang Signs

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I have a creeping feeling that the term "chillwave" will lose all specific meaning within the next five years. As acts like Small Black and Toro Y Moi continue to gain in stature and blend the line between low-key electronica and synthpop, critics will continue to misappropriate labels that have been lovingly crafted by individual communities to suit their sound. The chillwave genre label has already been used by the music press to describe groups as disparate as Sylvan & Esso and Tame Impala, both of which take a more maximalist approach to music creation than the artists who shaped the scene. For now, though, chillwave mostly maintains its integrity as a subgenre, a word characterizing tunes put out by electronic-leaning artists who prefer to keep their hooks subtle and rely on taut, understated vocals for melody.

Enter Vancouver-based Peter Ricq, who makes up one half of the experimental electropop duo HUMANS and has recently gone solo under the new moniker Gang Signs. The accomplished producer and his original group are a hot commodity in Vancouver right now, and Gang Signs' first full-length album, "Geist," is ready to stake out a name for Ricq as an individual. That's not to say that he's going it alone, though, with Matea Sarenac providing much-needed female vocal harmonies and Adam Fink bringing his drumming skills to the LP, which drops on October 9th on Vancouver's own File Under: Music record label. While it may not be quite as accessible or upbeat as the tunes put out over the years by HUMANS, the tracks on this LP form a cohesive work that reflect's Ricq's capacity to expertly layer beats and harmonic elements while straddling the line between club songs and café music.

In general, Gang Signs' signature

sound could be said to have the dark, atmospheric compositional tone of The xx, the danceable, surf-influenced rhythmic foundation of !!!, and the vocal stylings of early Twin Shadow or The National's Matt Berninger. On songs like "Antidote" and "LA on Monday" (a

easily memorable or catchy. In context, that's a net positive for the album, since adding a few major keys and giving in to the urge to break out into a chorus could potentially ruin the intelligent, measured production style that Gang Signs showcases at this point in their career. The

and production skills are unquestionably well developed, that's not to say that "Geist" is without its flaws. At times it seems that the sonic palette being drawn from is rather small, with certain basslines and verse structures seemingly resurfacing throughout. Mid-album tracks "Back Up" and "So Long" are rather forgettable, and when taken as a whole, the album seems like it could benefit from some expansion of ideas to avoid tracks blending too heavily. Additionally, while Sarenac's guest vocals lend a wonderful element to Gang Signs as a whole, Ricq's own baritone is at times uninspiring, and some of the most memorable songs of the release, such as "Tonight," give Sarenac the lead part for good reason. One might wonder how this project will progress if she is not intended as a permanent member of the group, since the removal of the female vocal part would only lend further monotony to each song. Perhaps an acknowledgement of this possibility comes in the release's penultimate song, "Heist," during which Ricq raises his voice an octave above its usual comfortable tones, adding some excitement to a track that might otherwise be unmemorable.

Finally, though "Geist" is a great indicator of the current state of the chillwave genre, it doesn't do anything particularly novel or exiting with its premise. While comparisons to other artists are all perfectly acceptable for the sake of introducing an act, it shouldn't be so easy to describe Gang Signs as a specific combination of three different groups. "Geist" itself has nothing inherently wrong with it, but if no boundaries are pushed on Gang Signs' next release, they may fade from relevance as quicker innovators ready their own take on the expanding realm of "electro-"prefixed independent music. 6.4/10



Image courtesy of gangxsigns.bandcamp.com

album works best as passive listening, letting the sweeping ebbs and flows of Ricq's craft wash over you. That's what makes it chillwave, resisting the temptation to use atmosphere as a blunt instrument.

While Peter Ricq's compositional

reworked version of a track from the project's 2012 debut EP), Ricq's preference for restraint comes into play, with synth lines drum patterns that rise steadily, threatening to break into a full chorus, but don't quite get there. "Geist" is an album built on patterns, but not those which are

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