

# PREVIEWS

## Talking Sax: A classic mismatch

BY DERK RICHARDSON

Besides their tenor saxophones, which are a few serial numbers apart, and their ages, which are a few months apart, Benjamin Bossi and Norman Salant appear to be a classic mismatch. Bossi was raised in San Francisco, is exuberant, outgoing and spent the last five years as a member of Romeo Void, one of the city's most successful post-punk rock bands. Salant, on the other hand, is a native of the Bronx, speaks quietly and reflectively and characterizes himself as "the quintessential solo artist."

For the past two years, these opposites have experimented with the highly unusual format of just two saxophones — without bass, drum, guitar or keyboard and often without any amplification at all. The duets would not be out of place in jazz, where similar instrumental combina-

tions are acceptable and where such groups as World Saxophone Quartet and the Bay Area-based ROVA use an all-horn line-up. But Bossi and Salant play something outside any clear-cut genre, something neither can readily define, yet something that is exceptionally fulfilling and challenging to each.

During March, Bossi and Salant are performing around the area in a variety of venues, beginning with the Noe Valley Ministry this Saturday night. Their partnership is "open-ended," they say: it could prove to be a temporary alliance or a longstanding artistic association.

### Bustling and brash

Bossi spent last month scouting the terrain in New York City, absorbing as much music as he could by going out to clubs and taking sax lessons. Reached by



Benjamin Bossi (left) and Norman Salant: a classic mismatch — and an 'interesting statement.'

PHOTO BY STEFANO MASSEI

telephone at a Lower East Side apartment, Bossi was gushing with excitement. "I wrote out a list of all these guys that I've seen already, do you mind if I read it to you?" he blurted, before the Bay Guardian had posed a single question. In a flash Bossi rattled off 20 big-name reed players, from Sam Rivers, Arthur Blythe and Joe Henderson to Junior Walker and former Tower of Power saxist Lenny Pickett. "Unbelievable!" he exclaimed.

Bossi was getting mixed messages from the bustling New York club scene. He was running into old friends playing in new bands, "but from what I'm hearing," he said, "it's really hard to get gigs around here." Yet he was particularly upbeat about the possibilities for his project with Salant: "I feel that we could do really well here. There seems to be a place for experimental music."

Bossi also said he was feeling at home with the legendary energy and pace of New York City life. Born in New Hampshire, having moved out West at the age of two, he admitted, "I love San Francisco but I've never felt like a Californian. And it's interesting spending a month here and realizing, 'Man, this is more my style.'"

### Shy and self-taught

Meanwhile, back in San Francisco, during the recent first full flush of spring, Norman Salant was shy and introspective, parked at a table at the Cafe Flore on Market Street. He said he spends much of his day thinking about what he is going to do. But it "kills him" to have empty time on his hands. He wondered if he could be "one of those people" — meaning innovators like Stravinsky, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Ornette Coleman or John Coltrane, who've never been excelled. And yet Salant was hard-pressed to come up with reasons for the

Growing up close enough to Yankee Stadium that his eyes still light up when he talks about baseball, Salant hopped a Greyhound \$50 express to San Francisco in March of 1977. "Why not?" he recalled. "I was living here five years before I decided to live here. Before that it was temporary."

Although he studied guitar and oboe as a youngster in school, Salant didn't become a serious musician until his late teens. Then he heard jazz sax giant Pharoah Sanders. "He could play so beau-

tifully that my heart would stop," he recalled. "No one else could do that. He made music seem easy, and it was the most beautiful music I'd ever heard."

Self-taught on saxophone, Salant has recorded two albums of his own music, *Saxophone Demonstrations* (Alive Records), and last year's *Sax Talk* (CD Presents). "I've had it easy here in San Francisco," he said. "I've been able to find an outlet and audience." Still, his career is fairly circumscribed. Despite stunning production and inventive arrangements reflecting Salant's full range of influences — from jazz through the progressive rock of Roxy Music and Talking Heads to the cerebral textures of Jon Hassell and Brian Eno — *Sax Talk* was one of the least-heralded albeit superb local albums of 1985. And when Salant wanted to mount a show around it, with an elaborate scheme for a six-piece band and vocalists singing a fictional language, he couldn't convince a local club to support it.

So maybe he hasn't had it so easy. "Finding one place to play in New York," he admitted, frustrated, "would do more for you than finding ten places here."

### Two to tango

Salant was playing a 1981 New Year's Eve show at the On Broadway, sitting in with the Passengers, when Bossi showed up. The two immediately formed what

Bossi calls their mutual admiration society: "What I love about Norman's playing," Bossi said, "aside from a beautiful tone, is a real sense of melody and development that incorporates a sort of folk music in the way he plays." "He's a great player," Salant said of Bossi, "I don't have to teach him anything."

When they played together again in 1984, during a special "Horn Reborn" show that featured local bands with saxophones, Bossi and Salant discovered an emotional "sympatico" in their playing and decided to pursue it. Although he has led his own groups, Salant is staunchly "anti-band" in his approach to performing. "Having to subordinate my vision to other people's is very difficult," he explained. "I have to feel they're better than me. Finding a collaborator is very rare."

And when Romeo Void broke up early last year, at the peak of its popularity and at the end of a successful European tour, Bossi sought a new context. He wanted the challenge of playing without a rhythm section, "as close to being solo as one can get," while still enjoying "the community and collaboration with another human being."

"The potential for success or failure is greater," he explained. "If it messes up it sounds terrible, but if it works, one gets a real sense of two people interacting. That's what I've always loved about all music." The duo has played art galleries, parties and clubs in the past year. Last New Year's Eve they opened for Los Lobos at the Fillmore. "It was such a personal triumph for me," Bossi said, "because when I was 12 my father took me there to see the Grateful Dead, and then 20 years later there I am up onstage, playing for about a thousand peo-

ple and they really enjoyed it."

While they've worked up their act, Bossi and Salant have also sustained their individual projects. Salant says Bossi has more of an image as "one of the guys," and so gets called to play with other bands, such as Wire Train, Three Mouse Guitars and the Mysteries. Somewhat wistfully, he described a phone call from the popular San Francisco band, Translator, soliciting suggestions

for a sax player. After mentioning several people, Salant said, "How about me?" "We wouldn't presume to ask you," came the response.

"I guess I have this image as more than a horn player," Salant said, "an artist/producer busy all the time with projects and difficult to work with." In fact, Salant says he rarely turns down work and has interests far more diverse than many presume. He's

acted (in a Japanese Shick commercial), produced a tape for Infant Bonds of Joy and has been writing dance-groove pop songs for singers, notably Lynn Mabry of Talking Heads fame.

When it comes to defining what he and Bossi do, beyond contrasting his own perfectly still and meditatively intense stage presence with Bossi's more flamboyant and bouncy style, Salant is virtually tongue-tied. According

to Bossi, their original songs are very "major-key sounding and accessible."

"It's really something I've always wanted to do, to be able to play for a group of people who like rock and roll or jazz or whatever, and sort of bridge a gap in there," Bossi explained. "I just think the two of us make an interesting statement, but to tell what that is at this point is anybody's guess." ■