

Norman Salant

Benjamin Bossi

Calendar

M A G A Z I N E
The Bay Area's Arts & Entertainment Guide

A Study in Advanced Saxophone

BY MARION RUST

In 1846 Adolphe Sax invented an instrument that combined the virtues of the cello and the brass, and named it after himself. 140 years later, two champions of his invention met in a seedy nightclub.

Benjamin: I was standing somewhere, and I heard this saxophone, and I thought it sounded unbelievable, a really beautiful sound. I thought who the hell is this guy and I ran down and it was Norman. This was at the Or Broadway, New Year's Eve, 1980.

Norman: Right, and you helped me with the sound check.

Benjamin: Yeah, and I looked at his horn, that was the other thing, I thought, it looks like my horn, so when we compared, our numbers were eight numbers apart, which, when we're talking serial numbers and they're in the 92,000 range, is pretty close. And also our birthdays are only like three months apart.

When Benjamin and Norman play—an eloquent man in an artfully paint-splattered suit and a tall thin one with his stiff white collar hanging off him—the effect is somewhere between 6th grade band practice and a junkie's interpretation of the heavenly choir. The two men look strangely isolated on a stage that is bare of everything but two mikes.

"From the moment we step out there we're exposed," says Norman. "And when we start playing, we're really exposed. If we play poorly, it's obvious. If we play out of time or out of tune, it's obvious. There's just the two of us. It's really invigorating to do it, and it's frightening too."

"There's no time when you're not playing," continues Benjamin. "It's more of a challenge to me than anything I've done yet."

Benjamin and Norman are constantly trading parts. First Norman holds down the beat and Benjamin takes off—then vice versa—then both are jamming at once. They see the ideal

performance as one where, according to Benjamin, "it's almost like one person breathing." But their customers seem most interested by the tension between the two men, which adds risk and texture to what they're doing and makes it more than a test of skill. At one performance the audience became so involved that when Norman raised his eyebrows at Benjamin in the middle of a song the whole crowd laughed.

In their half a year as a full time working duo, Norman Salant/Benjamin Bossi (or Benjamin Bossi/Norman Salant, depending on which gig you catch) has played the V.I.S. Club, Channel 181, the Oasis "Block 15" series and a score of galleries and private parties. On New Year's Eve they played *Nine* and the Fillmore.

One proud local proprietor announced their gig:

Norman Salant and Benjamin Bossi (\$6)-
*The Great Avant Garde Saxophonist
Meets The Leader of Romeo Void*

Benjamin wasn't actually the leader of Romeo Void but a founding member—Norman has made albums like *Sax Talk* and *Saxophone Demonstrations* among other musical projects. But current reknown is probably better explained by the Bay Area's taste for the atypical. Benjamin and Norman are like kids who suddenly become popular because they always did things differently from everyone else. "Ideally, we'd like not to use any amplification at all," Benjamin says. "But it's going to be very hard in 1986 to get that."

To Norman, "a band is like this big train—if you wanna stop it, you tell the conductor 'ok hit the brakes,' by the time the train actually stops it goes another quarter of a mile. When you're with two people you say 'stop' and you stop, on the dot."

"People don't play together any more," says Benjamin. "What's become pervasive is machines and intellectualizing and putting things together to make it sound like people are playing together. It's not the same thing... (With this duo) you're not dependent on anything but the fact that you have wind and a reed and an instrument."

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If this sounds like a sixties revival group or classical musicians lamenting the birth of the electric guitar or even a couple of fringe rock purists, Benjamin and Norman would like to

make it clear that just because they're a duo doesn't mean they play, according to Benjamin, "folk, or classical, or traditional jazz." Norman doesn't even think they're doing anything to redefine pop. "It's not avant-garde. It's not even innovative. I honestly don't feel like we're doing anything on the horn that hasn't been done, even compositionally... In popular music, a new great song doesn't have to be innovative and it doesn't have to be different, it's just a great song is a great song."

One night I was at a party where Norman and Benjamin were playing. At the appointed hour everyone filtered into what looked like it had been a garage not too long ago, sat down on the floor, and turned their heads to the stage. After the performance I asked Benjamin and Norman if they thought their music was too cold. Norman looked surprised, as though the question had never occurred to him. "Cold?" (Later I asked them whether they ever missed having a woman in the band, and got the same blank look from both men.) Maybe one reason they resist being called avant-garde is that they don't consider their music a formal exercise but the most emotional music of which they are capable. "If there's one thing I'd like to do," says Norman, "it's to play something really sad. I'd like to do something that makes you cry. If we could do the equivalent of a Lionel Richie ballad, I'd really like that."

Benjamin Bossi/Norman Salant will be performing at the Noe Valley Ministry March 8th.