

Benjamin Bossi And Norman Salant:



Robin Tolleson

Perhaps the eyebrows *are* the best means of communication between two men who are furiously honking on well-worn reed instruments. One of the biggest audience reactions at a recent Oasis show came when Salant raised his eyebrows at Bossi at a particularly strategic moment in one of their songs. In the saxophone duo, every moment becomes important, everything is magnified. "When there's only two people onstage, it's not confusing at all," says Norman. "I guess instead of having all your senses assaulted by clothes, movement, lights and a hundred-thousand decibel sound, you don't have to screen anything out. You can open up and look for things to be stimulating rather than shut them out, which is good."

The music of Salant and Bossi is kind of like pop, because the saxmen play melodies that are easily grasped much of the time, and keep steady rhythms a lot. But there's an element of jazz there too, because it's going to be different every show. "The trust and reliance on someone, and vice versa, is really a risk-taking way of approaching music that I hadn't experienced before," says Bossi.

Benjamin is known for his exuberance onstage as the former saxman with Romeo Void, bending, nodding in time to the music and whipping his hair out of his eyes. He doesn't get so wild playing with Salant — at least he hasn't yet — but you can see from the playful look in his eyes he's having fun. "Nine times out of ten I'm just ecstatic to be doing music that I enjoy doing, and putting it out to an audience. It's part of what makes me tick. That nervousness before the show, being announced and then getting up there and the lights coming up — something happens. It transforms me."

The duo's music isn't all pre-planned. There is improvisation during their set, but they don't strive to confuse their audience with flashy solos. Rather, they work together to create interesting textures and accessible sounds. "The most obvious thing to do in a saxophone duet is to play avant garde, outside stuff, explore the real outer fringes," says Salant, whose two records, *Saxophone Demonstrations* and *Sax Talk*, have earned him a place among leaders of San Francisco's experimental music scene. "People have been doing that for years. But there hasn't really been anybody that Ben or I was aware of

that was trying to play *inside*. So that was our goal, to try to attract people who would be alienated by the outside stuff, but not alienate the people who also like outside stuff." Their set manages to mix a doo-wop tune, Duke Ellington's "In A Sentimental Mood," and the riff to "A Hunting We Will Go," along with some jagged, fast-paced jams. "It's funny how Elmer Fudd came into it," says Bossi. "We were out at the arboretum on a hot spring day and were thinking about those old soundtracks, and 'A Hunting We Will Go' came up."

"We improvise constantly while warming up, and sometimes we'll hit upon things, and that'll be our opening piece, or the first piece we put down in the studio. So that's what is exciting. It's always changing, and being in a duo like that affords you the risk-taking that being in a band sometimes doesn't."

In a little over six months as musical partners, Bossi and Salant have performed at Wolfgang's, Noe Valley Ministry, the Roxie Theatre, Oasis, Nine, the V.I.S., Club 181 and the Whitney Art Museum in New York. They've also opened for Big Audio Dynamite and Los Lobos at the Fillmore. The latter show, on New Year's Eve, was a memorable one, according to Bossi. "The people had all these party favor horns, and we sat there in the dressing room and knew we had to incorporate them, because no matter what, they were going to make the association. We got out there and just had this sort of honk-for-all, and they honked their horns and we honked. We had this dialogue going. In one country song we do there are these spaces, and all of a sudden these people were playing the spaces. It was hysterical. That sort of communal thing is a lot of fun."

So cocky have these two guys gotten that they now go onstage most of the time without a set list of songs to play. "We just call audibles. That's how we do things a lot of times now, and it's really the most fun," says Benjamin. "The more of a challenge we give ourselves, the more it seems we're forced to listen to each other and take each performance as a new experience, so nothing gets too set or too safe."

That's also why you might run into Benjamin and Norman at an art opening, wedding reception or birthday party. Or, you might find them one night building their repertoire at Nikko Sukiyaki Restaurant. "We have to play *real* quiet there," laughs Bossi, "which is something saxophones aren't usually known for." □

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