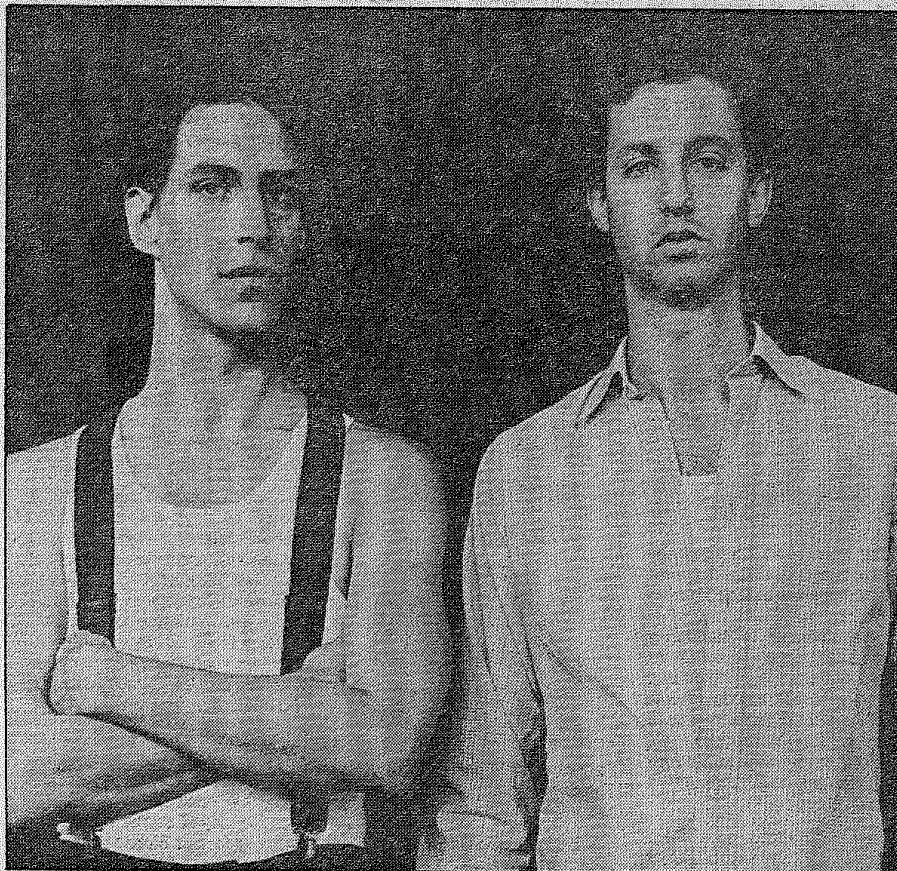


DATEBOOK

SEPTEMBER 14, 1986

MUSIC

BENJAMIN BOSSI, NORMAN SALANT



BY HARUKO

Benjamin Bossi, left, and Norman Salant: 'We're simply showcasing the sound of two saxophones in tandem'

Two Local Saxmen Shoot For the Big Apple

Pop musicians turn to avant-garde

BY MICHAEL SNYDER

THE IDEA of starving in New York for your art is a romantic notion. So when was the last time you heard of anyone actually doing it? Listen up.

"New York City is a suicide mission for us," said Benjamin Bossi, sitting across from partner Norman Salant in a South-of-Market cafe. "But, after all, this is war!"

Bossi and Salant — two instrumentalists who began their collaboration in San Francisco — are waging a war to survive and prosper in the Big Apple as avant-garde musicians. Their weapons are saxophones; the trenches are the various stops on Manhattan's downtown

Benjamin Bossi and Norman Salant will perform at the Noe Valley Ministry in San Francisco on Saturday night.

performance art circuit. The martial references are brutal metaphors for a brutal business. There may be no tougher task for any artist or musician than trying to live in New York City without a day job.

As Salant explained, "In New York, it's tough to get mainstream gigs as a musician. In pop music, the competition is fierce and jobs are scarce. It's even harder to make a living if what you're playing is the least bit unconventional."

DATEBOOK CONTENTS

MUSIC

Diamond Ringer By Stephen Holden	19
<i>Neil Diamond, above with wife Marcia, holds onto his decades-old popularity.</i>	
Madonna's in Hot Water By Patrick Goldstein	20
<i>The singer's caused a stir with her teenage-pregnancy song.</i>	
New York-Bound By Michael Snyder	22
<i>Benjamin Bossi and Norman Salant set their horns for the Big Apple.</i>	
Rambunctious Ramones By Tom Lanham	24
<i>With a new album out and club appearances galore, the Ramones are a racy bunch of punk rockers.</i>	

Considering that the acclaimed contemporary composer Philip Glass drove a cab well into middle age before he could live off his minimalist scores, the two saxophonists have their work cut out for them. The irony here is that Bossi and Salant were both on their way to establishing themselves in pop music before they met up at "The Horn Reborn," a special concert spotlighting wind instruments held in North Beach in 1984.

At that time, Bossi was enjoying a nationwide top 40 hit with the San Francisco rock band, Romeo Void, and Salant was producing records for local musicians while playing studio sessions with such cult heroes as the Residents. By the middle of 1985, the twosome dropped more commercial ventures to join forces and pursue a mutual artistic vision.

It's not that their music is abstract or bizarre, although their repertoire is incredibly diverse. Bossi and Salant perform everything from Glass-type minimalism to jazz standards to country & western and doo-wop interpretations, but they do so as an unaccompanied instrumental duet. They seldom use amplification, also forgoing any electronic effects. They're two guys playing saxophones, pure and simple. The partnership rises or falls on that basis. It's the proverbial high-wire act sans net.

What Bossi and Salant are trying to do is more "the horn un-

adorned" than "the horn reborn." "The sax is the richest voice in solo instrumental music," said Salant. "We're simply showcasing the sound of two saxophones in tandem and harmonizing against each other."

Although both in their early 30s and lanky of build, the associates — back in town for a series of performances — are dissimilar in most other regards. The contrast between the two men sitting across from one another in the sunny So-Ma eatery is remarkable.

Salant — originally from the Bronx — has short, curly hair and favors pastel cotton garb, projecting a sort of innocence. With long, straight hair and a dark leather vest, Bossi — a San Franciscan since childhood — gives off a more haunted vibe. This is reflected in their musical differences. Salant is compositional and attentive to form; Bossi's more aggressive and boisterous. But they are united in purpose.

"The heart of what we do is the empathetic relationship between our styles, and we believe in what we're doing," said Bossi. In a short time after deciding to duet, they developed a repertoire of novel covers such as Duke Ellington's "In a Sentimental Mood" and the theme from TV's "Perry Mason" and a number of spare originals (i.e. "Doo-Wop," the homage to '50s rock and roll ballads, and "Intro #2," a staccato fanfare).

Their reputations gave them the opportunity to open local shows by the Los Angeles barrio rockers, Los Lobos, and the British techno-funk band, Big Audio Dynamite. Despite the difference in the respective styles of those two bands, Bossi and Salant were warmly received by the audiences at each concert. It was a swift validation of their full-time pairing, which came on the heels of Romeo Void's dissolution.

A year and a half ago, Bossi was touring Europe with Romeo Void. The song, "A Girl in Trouble," had hit number 35 on the American pop charts, powered by Bossi's mournful sax hook. Though on the verge of a major breakthrough, the quin-

et called it quits. "We had been together for five years," Bossi said. "We had surpassed all our expectations, but creative differences set in." After the split, Bossi joined Salant, deciding he wanted to do something other than play in a band.

Salant came to San Francisco in 1977. He played in bar bands until some of his home recording experiments met with enough peer approval to encourage a self-produced solo album. That record led to a second LP, which begat a Salant-led group for live performances. Unfortunately, he didn't much care for leading a band.

"I'm really not too big on performing," said Salant. "If there are a lot of logistics, I don't wanna do it."

'When you're into weird, vibrant stuff, it's nice having a community of like-minded people around'

I'd rather stay home and record. The fewer musicians, the less the hassle."

Because a pairing with Bossi sounded manageable, Salant agreed to it. The twosome gravitated into their current alignment.

They had no trouble finding work in San Francisco, but they decided to relocate to New York. "I went there in March to listen to every sax player I could find," Bossi said, "and I didn't hear anyone playing anything that sounded like what we were doing. I thought we should play there to reach as many people as possible."

Bossi and Salant are subjecting themselves to the stress of New York "because the opportunities are there." They need the sort of

artist representation that will lead to tours on the new music, arts and lectures circuit that nurtured such artists as Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, John Giorno and William Burroughs.

According to Bossi, "We play an art gallery and someone sees us and likes us, leading to a show at another gallery. We also pass our demo tape around. That led to a great gig we had at Tin Pan Alley, a midtown bar and performance space that's like the Lower East Side meets Time Square: downtown artist types mingling with pimps and crack dealers.

"We've had good luck at the Alchemical Theater. That's an anarchist meeting hall in Lower Manhattan, but every other Sunday, there's a performance series. You go down these metal steps in the sidewalk to a basement that holds 40 or 50 people. Talk about underground..."

"You might not make a big financial killing, but there's a great support system for anyone attempting the new and unusual," said Salant. "New York is full of people who were on the outside in their hometowns. Now, they're all crammed together in a small geographical area. When you're into weird, vibrant stuff, it's nice having a community of like-minded people around."

Even if it means sharing a one-room sublet and scrambling for gigs. To make ends meet, Bossi is doing the occasional recording session. He played on the recent solo album by former Romeo Void vocalist, Debora Iyall. Salant was cast in a Japanese TV commercial to sell razor blades. Primarily, they've been living off their savings and the money that they can earn playing San Francisco.

The sax maniacs don't mind returning to their old stomping grounds for a few select dates. "We can make a better living here," Bossi said. "We're already known, and the minimum pay is twice to three times what you get paid in New York."

No matter what they say, there's only a certain amount of romance in starvation. ■