



Norman Salant "creates music to realize his abstractions" by modifying the natural sound of the saxophone.

Reinventing the Sax

THE NORMAN SALANT GROUP

Everyone knows what a saxophone sounds like and what its role is in music, right? It can range from funky, honking bass, to rich, full tenor, to keening, squawking soprano, and if it's not part of a horn section, it should be doing an extended solo, right? Wrong. Norman Salant is reinventing the sax.

You can hear it on his own records and those of Romeo Void, the Residents, and others, where he has reassessed its role in arrangements, and modified its natural sound with electronics until it sounds like a synthesizer, with layered sounds in sequencer-like patterns.

On his first album, *Saxophone Demonstrations* (the "a" is an attempt to emphasize his different approach), Salant uses up to 15 tracks of sax for parts that would conventionally be played by guitars, keyboards, or bass. Because of the harmonies and rhythms, the music might be categorized as rock, but his unique sound and eclectic sources make it impossible to be more specific. There are traces of Eno, Bowie, George Martin, the Feelies; in fact, bits and pieces of most of the good pop music of the past 20 years. But Salant sublimates it all and marks out his own new territory (anyone who would call this music "jazz" is either narrow-minded about the sax or deaf.)

Salant's approach grew out of his experience in a free-form rock band dedicated to textural improvisation

rather than individual parts. What he has kept from that band is a premeditated, deliberate approach, music founded more on ideas and concepts rather than a certain style or devotion to unfettered expressionism. He conceptualizes first, then creates music to realize his abstractions: the pieces on *Demonstrations*, for instance, grew out of eight "problems" (a certain sound, an electronic effect, a particular mood).

The Norman Salant Group was formed when *Demonstrations* began to get airplay on local independent radio. "At the beginning of the year, after the record came out, my friends kept saying, like they always do, 'Let's put a band together,' and I'd say, 'naah, I don't want to do a band,'" remembered Salant. "But then Gerry and Olga (who book shows at the On Broadway) offered me a gig. I was planning to move to New York and had nothing to do for two months, so I said, 'OK, I've got this great band.' Then I called people and said, 'Look, we've got two weeks, let's do it. Give me a month of your time, and if at the end of the month, if we haven't got three gigs and a couple of magazine articles, we'll break it up.' Nobody had any intention of doing it for longer than a month or so, and I never had any intention of staying in San Francisco." After their first few gigs, the Norman Salant Group was headlining packed shows on the local club circuit and opening concerts for Mike Oldfield and X.

"Then it was a question of getting the band to New York. When I went back east to do the Romeo Void record, I had every intention of setting something up so I could come back

and tell the band we had all these gigs and we could all move to New York. But none of the clubs would book us because they'd never heard of me." Several members of the group left to pursue other projects after their remarkable initial success showed signs of fading. At the same time, Salant began to pull back from the "faster, faster, louder, louder" influence of the nightclub scene.

"At the same time I was into real noisy, escapist rock'n'roll. I wanted something different, more serious. As you play it over and over, you develop and embellish it, and after six months a song that once had a lot of space is full from end to end, loud, intense, relentless—it's overkill. It reached a point where I didn't want to do it any more." The band's old style will be memorialized on Salant's next releases, "Sax Talk" and a reworked-up version of "Golden Arm."

While the band is continuing to record and perform with various guest musicians, Salant is looking for new personnel to essay a different style. Inspired by such ethnic-influenced pop as David Bowie's *Lodger* LP, David Byrne and Brian Eno's *Bush of Ghosts*, and Peter Gabriel's *Security*, he wants to draw on his long-time interest in non-western musical traditions to provide rhythmic intensity without the mind-numbing side effects of club rock. He also plans to add vocals to his compositions on a "separate but equal" basis with the instrumentals.

—Robert James Lauriston