

Norman Salant

on

Playing the Sax



Haruko

Strolling through the Mission District, something catches Norman Salant's ear. It is a new single by Sade blaring out of beat-boxes from several neighborhood storefronts. As a saxophone player who is no stranger to commercial studio work, Salant seems intrigued by the slick production and musicianship but is skeptical about what will be left of Sade after the initial hype has simmered.

Salant, self-taught and inspired by the likes of Pharoah Sanders, John Coltrane and David Bowie, manages to straddle a line between the very commercial and the avant-garde. He is most likely the only artist that can claim to have been scheduled to open for both Mike Oldfield and Haircut 100.

"I'm trying to wear a lot of hats, and in the end I think it can really hurt," Salant admits. "One type of reputation can undercut another kind. But I can't help it. I like to play jazz, and I also like to play space music and minimal compositions. Ideally, I'd like to do these things and have my stamp, my identity, on them."

Salant moved to SF eight years ago from New York. As a teenager frequenting jazz clubs in New York, he decided early that: "there was one chance in a million that I was going to be good on saxophone. I wanted to be sure that I had a unique sound and approach. Through college I felt inundated by all sorts of music students, all of whom were music robots who sounded the same. At the same time, the people I admired were really unique. All you have to hear is two seconds and you know it's them. My solution to that problem was to teach myself, and I wouldn't go to anyone for lessons until I was confident that I had my vision set so nobody could fuck with it."

Upon moving to SF, Salant recorded what would become his 1982 release *Saxophone Demonstrations* (sic) in his bedroom. Put out on his own Alive Records, *Demonstrations* is a collection of pieces all centered around Salant's unique multi-layering saxophone techniques.

Responding to the demand for live club dates subsequent to the release of *Demonstrations*, Salant assembled, for gigging pur-

poses, the Norman Salant Group. The NSG found a quick rise on the SF club circuit, headlining their own shows after only a few months. "When you start playing clubs, people want to dance and have a good time," Salant explains. "You've got to play music people can dance to. Whether you want to do it or not, it just starts happening. By the end of the group, we were doing covers of 'I Fought the Law', and I realized I wasn't doing what I really wanted to do."

As a consequence, and because of personal reasons, Salant broke up the group and began working on his own. Between studio jobs for Romeo Void, the Residents, the Contractions, and commercial advertisements, he recorded *Sax Talk* at SF's T & B Studios. After nearly a year of figuring out just who was going to put out the record, Salant settled on CD Presents, a move he does not regret. *Sax Talk* is a lush, moody record which again features Salant's accomplished, layered sax sound over various complex rhythm patterns.

The title cut, also released as a 12" single, is an infectious, straightforward dance tune. One local radio station, apparently catching on to the tune's commercial potential, took it upon themselves to use it as a music bed for an advertisement for a shop which sells the latest fashions and drug paraphernalia. Salant, more than a little upset at this, called up the station and the ad was pulled and redone. He explains: "This record I spent two years on, a real labor of love, they took and used it to sell pipes and scales and things. It's a question of respect. I consider *Sax Talk* serious music—it was hard to get out, and then they do that to it."

Recently, Salant has been collaborating with, among others, Benjamin Bossi of Romeo Void, and wants to start working on demo tapes by other artists that would be "very commercial." One current undertaking is a demo tape with Lynn Mabry, one of the backup singers in the Talking Heads *Stop Making Sense* film. As far as his own projects, he envisions his next record with a minimal, less orchestrated and more Middle-Eastern sound than in the past.

by Rory Lions