

Norman Salant's Futuresax

Alan K. Lipton

BERKELEY — One sunny March lunchtime on Sproul Plaza at UC, I was surprised to hear a joyous orchestration of saxophone rock suddenly filling the air. The immediate hope to classify the sound in terms of something else was soon discarded — there isn't *anyone* else that sounds like this! A good number of Bay Area club audiences have been coming to the same realization since mid-January, when a nervous band called Norman Salant opened for Snakefinger after just two weeks' rehearsals — and won the hearts and applause of all who heard them.

But accidents never happen, and the fact that Norman Salant is happening is no accident. Salant himself, within the last decade or so, has contributed his various saxophones to everything from the free-form, avant-garde school to mainstream rock, not to mention straight jazz and the multifarious currents that flow between such styles. Over two years ago, he began applying electronics to his horns, and this has culminated in three major evolutionary steps within the last eight months. First was last summer's single, "Accidents," a strikingly original adaptation of Blondie's "Accident's Never Happen." Second was December's EP on Alive Records, *Saxophone Demonstrations*, showcasing Salant's unique vision in multitracked woodwinds. Third is, of course, an appealing and talented band that has hit the Bay Area club circuit out of thin air.

"People have made a tremendous effort to set aside ego things and make the *group* sound really good," says Norman Salant of his band. "It's almost as controlled as a classical ensemble. What we try to do is create a new context, forging a new area with the sum greater than the parts. They all deserve a lot of credit for that."

Salant met bassist Steve Ashman and guitarist Jeff Kaplan several years ago in another band, and they eventually accepted Salant's invitation to augment his recordings, and later to form a band and play that material. Movey Goldstein, formerly of The Readytones, heard *Saxophone Demonstrations* as incidental music in a movie theater and, a reedman himself, was immediately captivated. Goldstein's

roommate happened to be Bruce Slesinger, drummer for the Dead Kennedys and The Wolverines. Guitarist/synthesist Jeff Nathanson had been a friend of Salant's for years. All these gifted musicians made a one-month commitment to the effort, and three gigs during that time at the On Broadway and the Old Waldorf proved that it had indeed been worth their time.

A more recent member who cannot be overlooked is soundman Ted Hatsushi, a dedicated, intent, and exacting engineer. "I guess if people liked us and we sounded good, that's a tribute to Ted," says Steve Ashman, pointing to the fact that Hatsushi does as much work as anyone else in the band, that final responsibility for the sum of all the parts.

Now comes the hard part — what words describe the music? At this time, Norman Salant is the full or partial author of all tunes, but because he allows his band democratic freedom with much of the arrangement, the listener is presented a six-fold tapestry of influences. Hard bop jazz, art rock, avant garde, delicate texturing, punk — what do you call that? It's better to call it nothing at all, but to watch, listen, or dance.

"Golden Arm" features a dancing, precise duet between Salant and Goldstein on tenor saxes over a taut, spare chunking of the rhythm section and Ashman's guttural glides on fretless bass. "Tickets Are Free" greets the listener with a joyous frontal assault, the horns weaving fluid sky-writing over simple chords, and Salant going in for a wild blow on a very mobile soprano sax. A darker side can be heard in "Bowieszawa," a sincere salute to the Bowie/Eno school of subtle texture. Over a steady percussive heartbeat, the guitarists hit slow, ringing chords, and the wind instruments lay down a minor melody of long, thick tones through sundry choruses, modified flangers, and echoplexes. While Salant casually announces to his audience, "You might have noticed there are no vocals — we planned it that way," there *are* lyrics for "On the Prowl," a dark and sepulchral piece about urban childhood. An element of wildness reigns in "Freedom," an uptempo number featuring a frenetic bop sax solo from

Goldstein, and a close, hollow, howling guitar break from Kaplan that sometimes makes even the band members stop and listen!

As of this writing, a demo containing a reasonably accurate four-song preview of the forthcoming album is circulating among radio stations. "I Wouldn't Have It Any Other Way" is a fine balance between a melodic and aggressive dance number. "Cabrini Step Forward" is an ominous demonstration of treated woodwinds in different keys of sadness over Slesinger's throbbing, war-dance beat and an army of guitars chanting a 007-ish dirge. "Europe After Dark" is very refined, a heavy, duple waltz with airy breaths of synthesizer and the horns drifting into solemn, jovous harmonies. "Same Person, Different Day" is a gentle, drifting stream of Salant's soprano, Goldstein's clarinet, a haunting, questioning guitar arpeggio, cymbal swirls, undersea bass, and a string-synth pillow, all eventually breaking into a bright and mighty rocker. And according to both Salant and Ashman, the album will be even better.

But minds like mine still need to classify, and on this score, Steve Ashman insists. "People are always aspiring to get into 'the pack.' Well, this band does not want to be in the pack, we want to *be* the pack." Norman Salant clarifies this basic premise as "staking out an area of innovation and sticking to it," in this case "incorporating electronics into the most *human* of all instruments — the idiosyncrasies of the horn fused with technology. It's an untouched area, adding to the horn itself and then fashioning a context around *that*. I don't know if I can be called an innovator yet," he concludes. "We've just touched the surface." □

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