

Norman Salant: On the forefront of innovation

The Norman Salant group has risen from the depths of opening the smaller clubs to the heights of opening for world-class headliners, like X, in the incredibly brief time of 6 months. Their last album, *Saxophone Demonstrations*, has sold out of its first pressing in record time. To try to find out the secret behind such phenomenal success, I tracked down the group's namesake and driving wheel, lead saxophone player Norman Salant, at the KUSF studios, to get his views.

by Eddy Larkin

Eddy Larkin: You seem to have gone from opening act to headliner really quickly. What's the secret of your success?

Norman Salant: Time is relative, and what seems quickly to some people seems like ages to others. We felt that we should have been doing that right from the start, because of the type of music and the quality of musicianship that we had going into the group. People who are booking clubs see you in terms of longevity, which has to do with draw, in that the longer you're around, the larger a following you can have. But from our point of view, it has taken much too long to get there, and we wish we could have done it sooner. Six months can seem like a long time.

EL: How long has the group been together?
NS: Since January. So we've just finished the seventh month. Two more to go and the baby comes out, hopefully an album. We just started the basic tracks last night. We're recording at Harbor Sound with Paul Stubblebine. We're just going to do a couple of songs and then see if we can raise some more money to finish it.

EL: Does that mean you're finished recording *Sax Talk* at Corasound studios in San Rafael?

NS: Yeah. Steve Ashman, our bass player, and I started doing a demo there and we brainstormed the song in the studio with a drumbox and 15 saxes on it. We overdubbed some drums afterward. We haven't come up with a final mix yet so it's sort of in the works. It has eight new talking saxes on it.

EL: Do you consider your group to be a disco-New Wave crossover group?

NS: It really takes a lot of effort for us to come across as a disco-New Wave crossover. The tendency for us is to be more esoteric, to do more wierd things, and not to play straight time or dance tunes. When we started out six months ago, we were a lot more spacey than we are now. But since the only venues for us to play are clubs, we assimilate the scene on the circuit. We get influenced by what the audiences want and by what they react to, and by what makes us feel the best in the environment in which we're playing. So we've been playing more up-tempo music lately. The contemporary influences are there. I mean, we all listen to KUSF all the time. But there are other influences, too. Hopefully, there's more than just a dance beat going on.

EL: Where is your music going from where you are right now?

NS: Every person in the group has a different idea on where the music is going to go. The longer we've stayed together, the stronger the influence of the individual



photo by Alan Grosso

band members has become. It's at the point now where songs are being co-written by everybody, and it's getting really interesting. One direction we might go in is to add some vocals on at some point. There's still a lot to do instrumentally before we do that.

EL: What have you been up to, lately?

NS: The album, *Saxophone Demonstrations*, has done well, the first pressing sold completely out. I played on Romeo Void's new album, thanks to Benjamin Bossi. I'm also on the Resident's album, *Tunes of Two Cities*, that came out in May.

EL: Who is in the group?

NS: There's Morey Goldstein, from the Readymades, on sax and clarinet, Steve Ashman on bass, Jeff Nathanson on guitar and synthesizer, Jeff Kaplan on guitar, and Bruce Slesinger, from the Dead Kennedys, on drums.

EL: What can a horn do that a guitar can't do?

NS: Well, for one thing, each instrument has its own history. The saxophone has a short history compared to the violin, but compared to the guitar it has a long history, starting back in the days of the Ragtime players in the early 1900's. It's got a jazz history for sure. The influence of Jimi Hendrix is much greater on the guitar than on the saxophone, while the influence of Charley Parker or John Coltrane is greater on the sax than on the guitar. The electronic technology has been applied first to the guitar, bass and even drums, while the sax has been ignored as far as that goes. There was a Rod Stewart hit that used a digital delay on the sax to make it sound double, and for a while that was the sound, alto-sax solos with delay. But you haven't really heard heavy-duty electronics applied to the sax yet. John Hassel and Miles Davis have applied it to the trumpet, mostly through wah-wah and echoes. For me, I hit on the flanger and it seemed like fun. I started playing around with it, and I heard all these new kinds of sounds. Then I started looking for music that would be a perfect context for these new sounds. For me, the trip was using these new sounds and combining the technology with the sound of the horn, using it to accentuate and exaggerate certain qualities that the sax has: the vibrato, the control over the transparency of the tone, and the sensitivity of the tone. Since it's a wind instrument, your mouth is on it, which is the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd most sensitive part of you body, depending on your preference. Then there's your breathing, which

is central to your entire being. Because of the involvement of all these, the sax takes on a quality that I don't think other instruments have, which is its identity and which comes from that sensitivity. When you take the nuances of tone and shading and run them through some kind of electronic alteration, it adds a new dimension to it, not unlike a double take of sound, in which you hear the electronics that remind you of a synthesizer, but then you hear other things that can only be a saxophone. When the horn plays high and sweet, hardly anything can sound like that, although in another year or two synthesizers will copy that exactly. I'm trying to be true to the sound of the horn, not so much to the technique or the style (jazz, bebop, etc.), but being able to open it up and play any music you can conceive of, using the horn for the sound of the horn, and using it in places where you might think a guitar, bass or keyboards might belong. That's what *Saxophone Demonstrations* was all about, taking synthesizer and guitar parts and putting horns on them to see what would happen. I think it ele-

EL: What saxophone players have influenced your style?

NS: First, there was Pharoah Sanders, and from him it was a small jump to John Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Ornette Coleman, and Frank Wright. All of these guys could really scream. Charlie Parker, Ben Webster, Lester Young, and Coleman Hawkins for that full-bodied tenor sound. Anthony Braxton, for his experimentation, and the guys in the Art Ensemble. But I'd say my main influences are Pharoah Sanders for his sound, and John Coltrane for his overall mastery.

EL: Can you describe your creative processes?

NS: The album was done with very little planning. We brainstormed it in the studio, mostly by trial and error and accident. Now I write mainly in my head without having to have the horn in my hand. Then I bring the results to the group for their ideas. I start with a conceptual idea, rather than with a song as such.

EL: In which direction would you like the music to go?

NS: I want to keep experimenting with horn overdubs and textures. I'd say our goals are to play better and more interestingly, and to try to stay on the front of innovation; to do what no one else is doing and to try to get there first. Hopefully, we won't get there too early so that no one can figure out what's going on.

EL: Your group seems to have succeeded due to the high level of energy that you put into everything that you do. What is the source of this energy?

NS: Grape Nuts. Really, it's just trying to fulfill all potential, to do everything that could possibly be done to attain real quality. There's a real passion behind it. It would mean more to me if my albums were regarded as good music 60 years from now than if they were superpopular for two years and then forgotten. That's the level of quality I'm aiming at. —Eddy Larkin