

## Johnny Reno...

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So Reno took up the saxophone. It took him a year to get to the point where he felt comfortable on stage at the Bluebird.

His experience at the Bluebird helped him define the role he desired the saxophone to play in his music, as well as develop his style.

"I wasn't really trying to become what I call a technically proficient and

jazzy kind of player, I was more like interested in the total style that these guys played. They didn't use a lot of what I call notes and jazz technology. They really worked a style and rhythmic approach as opposed to a lot of notes and improvisation stuff," he said.

"It was more rhythmic. It was a lot of use of the horn and its range — from honking to a real subtle soft kind of style to just a wail on top, just a screa-

min' wail that sounded like a freight train comin'. That whole style really intrigued me."

After developing a sound, Reno hit the road with a series of Texas-based bands, including Stevie Ray Vaughn and the Juke Jumpers. In May of last year, Reno left the Juke Jumpers to form the Sax Maniacs. The band's purpose was easily defined.

"Our main goal is to make saxophone king of the bandstand again," he said.

Helping Reno pursue that goal are Frank Harrell (bass), Gerard Dailey (keyboards), Jeff Howe (drums), Kevin Hinks (saxophone) and Bill Eden (saxophone). Several of the band members can play saxophone, which gives the band both an accessible and innovative sound.

"I'm really trying to move the instrument to a position of mass popularity," Reno said. "Therefore, I'm not really concentrating on the blues as much as other bands. When I started this band the idea was to try and reach kids that listened to the radio and heavy metal a lot..."

"The instrument that I play and playing it really flamboyantly like I do will get their attention, before they sit down and listen to the music," he said. "Once you get their attention and kind of start listening to it I think that there's a chance for us to do better on a larger scale."

The visual aspect is an important part of Reno's act. His performances at the Zoo have been distinguished by his on-stage histrionics, which include wandering into the audience and jumping onto the Zoo's tiny bar.

As important as the visual image is, Reno acknowledged the importance of signing a major recording contract. The band released its first album, *Born To Blow* late last year, on tiny Black Top records. Reno currently is pinning his hopes on a contract with Elektra Records, a subsidiary of the giant Warner Communications empire.

"We have a record with Elektra Records coming out May 1. It's a com-

pilation of several Texas bands. It's sort of a taste for the market to see which bands might get a little attention," he said.

Recent trends in the record industry have made it more difficult for a regionally popular act like Reno to hit it big. "Before the years of the big record conglomerates, in the late '50s, and all the way up to the early '60s really, you could have independent labels working certain regions and still have national hit records. And that's almost impossible now, that hasn't happened in years," he said.

Reno said he didn't experience any major problems in the transition from a "live" act to a "canned" one. "I didn't find it difficult, just challenging. It's challenging to make a good record — it doesn't necessarily take the same ingredients to make a good record as it does a good live performance," he said.

Of course, live performances do have one key advantage over recorded products: spontaneity. "A couple of crazy things happened last night," Reno said of his Friday night Zoo performance. "I don't think people really notice because it goes by so quickly. But you notice it if you're a musician and you play a certain pattern the same way 100 times and it winds up being different because either the rhythm section or the horns do something different. Technically you call it a mistake. But I think mistakes are the most interesting parts of art."

The life and work of rock 'n' rollers like Johnny Reno and the Sax Maniacs are rarely glamorous. Since they have no roadies, they do all their own dirty work: loading and unloading their truck and trailer, driving themselves through a Midwest circuit which provides nearly 200 dates a year. The glamour of the big time may be less alluring to Reno than the simple prospect of having a hired hand or two.

"Once you start doing a little better, it enables you to have a couple people around to help. At this level, you're very humble. If we hit it big, that's, man, great. I can handle it."

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