

Pop/Jazz

Bands Without Singers Gaining

By ROBERT PALMER

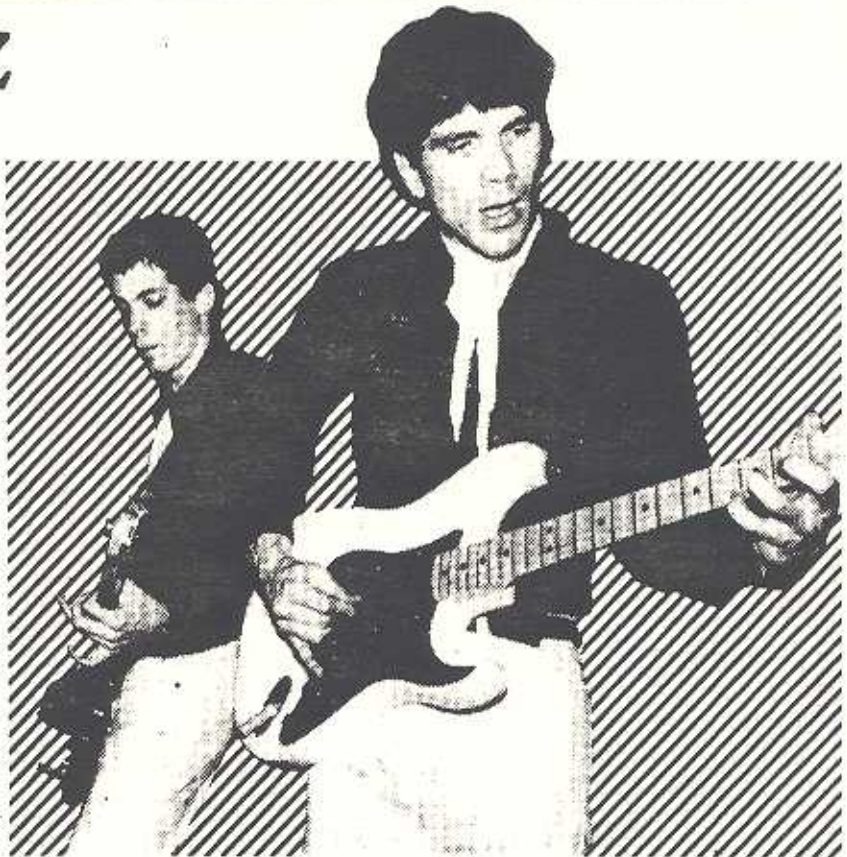
TODAY'S hit records have one common denominator — they all feature vocalists. Purely instrumental recordings rarely make it into the top 40, and they almost never crack the top 10. But it wasn't always so. In the late 1950's and early 60's, there were big all-instrumental rock-and-roll hits. Johnny and the Hurricanes, Link Wray, Duane Eddy, the Shadows and the most prolific instrumental group of them all, the Ventures, scored success after success, and so did the surf bands — the Champays, the Surfaris and the rest.

Most of these groups are long gone, but their sound — a streamlined rock-and-roll beat, clean melody lines and "twangy" guitar — is coming back. It has been preserved by the original Ventures, who have been playing to packed houses in California recently and will be at Privates, 1251 Lexington Avenue, at 85th Street (744-1973), next weekend. And it is being updated by younger performers, most prominently New York's Raybeats, who will be at Camouflage, 38-17 Bell Boulevard in Bayside, Queens (631-7656), tomorrow night and at Maxwell's, 1039 Washington Street in Hoboken, N.J., (201) 658-9632, on June 27.

"I listen to all the bands today and hear a lot of our influence," Mel Taylor, drummer of the Ventures, said the other day. "The kids are getting back into the roots of rock, and that's getting them into our sound. We really started to notice it around the middle of last year, when we were doing some recording in Los Angeles. Kids kept dropping in on the sessions and telling us that what we were doing sounded exactly like what the younger bands were playing. And we were playing the same stuff we've always played."

Together, Almost Intact, Since '59

The Ventures have been together since 1959 with only one personnel change — Mr. Taylor replaced the



Laura Levine

Danny Amis, left, and Jody Harris of the Raybeats play in Queens tomorrow.

original drummer after the group's third album. The arrival of the Beatles and other English vocal groups in the 60's brought an end to the reign of the Ventures on the American and British best-seller charts, but they continued to make records, more than 80 all told, and their simple, melodic arrangements of everything from current pop hits to classical melodies have remained consistently popular in Japan. The Japanese market has been largely responsible for keeping the Ventures together; they have toured that country every year for the last 16 years and have scored numerous gold records there. But in the last few months they have suddenly become a popular club attraction in the United States again.

"We gave our first U.S. performance in 10 years on Dec. 18, 1980, at the Starwood in Los Angeles, and when we came on stage the place went crazy," Mr. Taylor recalled. "Since then we've played five nights at the Roxy, gone back into the Starwood and performed several dates at the Country Club, all in the Los Angeles area. We're doing a U.S. tour now; we've postponed this year's Japanese tour because, obviously, we'd like to start happening again in the U.S. in a big way."

The roots of the distinctive Ventures sound are difficult to trace. The guitarists Nokie Edwards and Don Wilson, the bassist Bob Bogle and the original drummer, Howard Johnston, formed

the group in Seattle in 1959 and recorded their first hit, "Walk, Don't Run," the next year. "Our music is just what came out when the four original musicians got together," Mr. Taylor said. "That was the way they all played. I know the guitarists were influenced by Les Paul and Chet Atkins, and I listened a lot to the jazz drummer Gene Krupa."

An Inspiration for the Raybeats

The Ventures were an important inspiration for the Raybeats, four musicians from the Middle West, who have been one of New York's most talked-about club bands of the last two years. Several of the Raybeats were involved in avant-garde, punk and no-wave bands before they formed the group; the drummer Don Christensen and the guitarist Jody Harris were members of the Contortions, and Pat Irwin, saxophonist, guitarist, bassist and organist, was with 8 Eyed Spy. The original Raybeats bassist, George Scott, was a key figure in the Contortions and 8 Eyed Spy as well. His work with these bands was forward looking and influential, but he also collected recordings of rock-and-roll instrumentals and surf music and played an important role in orienting his fellow musicians toward that relatively neglected style. When he died suddenly last year, the Raybeats replaced him with Danny Amis, who