

*"In not being the same from one moment to the next, we cannot claim to exist. We are just an illusion of our own poor eyesight and hearing. I believe it's very destructive to go around calling reality what is not reality." - Copernicus*

The record announced itself boldly enough: this guy hunched over a microphone looking for all the world like Michael Stipe's debauched older brother, cigarette in mouth hovering above an outstretched lighter from the audience. Thus we were somewhat aghast to plop the needle down, anticipating yet another post-punk/performance art variant, only to hear some lazy funk, whispered hoarse vocals, and noncommittal backup choruses which suggested nothing so much as washed out Barry White. It was easy enough to shudder, lift the needle and immediately dismiss the disc, which the normally avant-garde NMDS had somehow been tricked into distributing. A few snatches from the LP's other cuts did sound more offbeat, but we weren't curious enough to investigate in depth before shutting it off to a reviewer. But you can't dismiss Copernicus that easily.

A few weeks later the review came back, and much to our shock it was a rave (*"Fuck this is good. Compelling!"*) More accolades began to circulate in the alternative press. It was obvious we'd missed something, so we sent for another copy. The guy who had initially dismissed it with me played the LP in full, after which he pronounced to his satisfaction that the record was indeed "dreadful". Now it was my turn.

My job with OPTION requires that I listen to a great deal of records - too many, in fact. If you think it's a treat to receive hundreds of free indie releases, you're wrong. At least ninety percent can be classified into a narrow genre within seconds (and not a few of these releases are accompanied by press clippings boasting about how they "cannot be categorized"), and Copernicus' NOTHING EXISTS was easy enough to dismiss in this fashion. But after listening to the LP in its entirety several weeks after my first encounter, I conceded a goof. Here was an album that was baffling in its incomprehensibility - with the sprawling, almost disconnected stylistic shifts (the Barry White influence disappeared for good by the end of the second track), it was ultimately impenetrable in its murkiness. I listened to it again while cooking dinner the following evening, but came no closer to getting a handle on Copernicus. Was he a lounge funk act going slowly awry over the course of forty minutes? An avant-garde joe trying to go commercial but unable to stifle his obtuseness? Was this a parody of rock and/or the avant-garde? All, some, or none of the above? All of which was complicated when my roommate came home from work, listened while I continued to cook silently, and cheerfully announced, *"I like it."*

NOTHING EXISTS won't top my best of '85 list, but it does get my vote for the least classifiable record I've heard this year - no small compliment given the amount of competition. Even those I know who actively dislike the album admit that it is *"some fucking weird shit he's into."* Like some of the other original talents of today's music underground - Jandek, Walls of Genius, Kathy Bloom - there is no middle ground with Copernicus; you may love him, hate him, or stand slack-jawed in puzzlement, but he is difficult to ignore. Who is Copernicus, and what does he want?

Copernicus began to ascend in 1961, when Joe Smalkowski (as Copernicus is known offstage) returned from Europe and "decided to be an artist." Over the next few years he wrote five novels "which were never really published, or no attempt was made to," he recalls. He also wrote poetry "in a very spontaneous way - I just sat in front of the paper and created." It was "a style that went up and down the page - only one or two words per page."

During this time there was a stint in the army in 1963-65 and world wide travel between 1965 and 1973 before he settled in New York. All the while playing guitar as well, writing some songs for himself, and continuing to write novels and poetry, but never attempting to publish anything. "So today I have these boxes full of material I haven't seen for twenty years. When I get the desire I'm gonna go back and read some of this stuff - I hope some of it's good."

So far this is just the story of many restless souls who came of age in the 60's and 70's, but Smalkowski finally went public one night in 1979 after downing a few beers in a Lower East Side bar. Playing there were a couple of Irish fellows calling themselves Turner and Kirwan of Wexford, performing Irish and romantic music with synthesizer, guitar and drums. Smalkowski told the bartender he'd like to do "a piece" with them. The bartender spoke to the duo, who grumbled in assent, and Smalkowski "went up and did something spontaneous. We loved what we did and people loved it." Thus was Copernicus born.

Why Copernicus? Because Smalkowski believed (and believes) that he, like fellow Pole Copernicus, has philosophical ideas of shattering significance to share with the world. As Copernicus destroyed our image of the earth as center of the universe, Smalkowski's Copernicus (he always refers to his stage presence of Copernicus as a separate third person entity) seeks to destroy our belief in our own existence. "Humanity does not exist - this is the great illusion that has to be shattered in human thinking."

The reception was encouraging enough that Copernicus continued to do "spontaneous poetry with spontaneous music" with Pierce Turner and Larry Kirwan at the end of their gigs, as well as performing with a sax player on the poetry circuit. "Generally when I performed, people just sat there with their mouths open and did not exactly comprehend what the heck was going on. But my impression was they were over-awed by the energy that was going on, and a certain few were picking up on the philosophical things I was trying to say."

Around 1980, Copernicus got a little money and embarked on the difficult task of translating his performance pieces onto tape and record. By this time, Kirwan and Turner (who Smalkowski refers to as Copernicus' musical mother and father) had added bassist Peter Collins and abandoned their Irish romantic music for rock 'n roll, now calling themselves Major Thinkers ("I was not involved in the reasons they made this radical change in the music, but they did it"). This aggregation laid down "one of the most exciting sessions that we ever experienced - totally spontaneous," yielding Copernicus' vinyl debut the single "Pink Lips" / "Quasimodo."

"Pink Lips" is as close to straightforward rock 'n roll as Copernicus has come on record, which isn't to say that it sounds anything close to the Jam - after all, it opens with Copernicus hoarsely shouting, "you gonna play this dumb shit and I'm gonna dance to it, right?" The band plays around a riff loosely based on "All Day And All Of The Night" (they even chant the chorus a few times), Copernicus continues to shout himself hoarse with rebellious epithets (some against Jimmy Carter, which gives you an idea of just how long "post-punk" weirdness has been with us), proclaiming between maniacal laughs at the end that the US, Russia and the atomic bomb do not exist (common themes in Copernicus tunes). "It was a very rebellious song," says Smalkowski today. "I'm still rebellious, (but) I'm more secure in myself now. I don't have to put society down to say what I want."

Perhaps more indicative of Copernicus' emerging direction was the B-side "Quasimodo" (also on NOTHING EXISTS), which (like "Pink Lips") was excerpted from a 35 minute piece. Against a sluggish, dense gloom-rock drone, Copernicus abjectly moans a

paen to the hunchback, who he looks up to as an inspiration and a hero, identifying with Quasimodo because although Copernicus is not a physical freak, he feels like an intellectual freak. The final cut on side one of NOTHING EXISTS, this is the point at which most listeners become either intrigued or hostile.

From the "Pink Lips"/Quasimodo" session came a demo cassette (perhaps to be remixed and released, in part or full, in the future) through which Copernicus landed a gig at Max's Kansas City, where "we blew their asses away." More spots at Max's, CBGB's, the Mudd Club and the poetry circles followed, as Copernicus began to add musicians with every gig, incorporating flutes, a violinist, extra drummers, and electronic trombone into the lineup. Such was the free-floating nature of the ensemble that Copernicus didn't meet electronic trombonist Fred Parcels until after Parcels had done his first gig, having performed onstage impromptu at the invitation of one of the musicians in the band. "There was a guy who played drums with his hands, and a special effects person," remembers Smalkowski. What this gave was a pool of musicians able to create onstage spontaneously. "There was always the temptation to rehearse, but Larry Kirwan always fought against that and maintained our spontaneity."

Such was the communication between the ensemble ("it wasn't just a jam session, it was an art form") that Copernicus was able to create fifty four original "pieces" within a year. "I never repeat myself ever - I'm not able to. Some of the expressions might repeat, but the way it's done is not repeated." This left Copernicus with an abundance of material at hand, and again they entered the studio, this time as a large ensemble. Pierce Turner didn't "want to go to any more shit studios," so Copernicus went whole-hog and rented the football field-sized Studio C at RCA, which yielded the bulk of the NOTHING EXISTS LP.

If anything by Copernicus could crack the Top Forty (which wouldn't be that bad a thing, actually), it would probably be the opening cut, "I Won't Hurt You", the whitewashed-out Barry White takeoff (?) which ignited my initial hasty misjudgement of the record. "I wasn't too crazy about it," admits Smalkowski, but it was included on the advice of band members who wanted "something more gentle and normal than a lot of the other music we were putting out." Actually, within the context of the record it serves its purpose well, preparing the unwary listener for a "gentle and normal" tone that will be destroyed within minutes. Try playing it for a Barry White fan (if you can find one) and see how long it takes them to catch on.

Instrumentally, the next track ("Blood") is quasi-laid back seventies progrock a la Steve Winwood with comforting keyboard washes and smoothing female backup vocals, but Copernicus' tortured voiceover is a long ways from complacent in its mood. "Ignorance in life causes the blood," remarks Smalkowski about the song, which he says was 100% spontaneous. "It's a man's greatest problem."

Things reach full steam with "I Know What I Think". Kicked off with the menacing whisper "let the musicians declare war!" the ensemble proceeds to pretty much do just that and noodle and bleat all over each other. Now this is definitely spontaneity in the studio. Of the lyrics, Smalkowski says it's a declaration of confidence that he does indeed know what he thinks. "There was

a time when I didn't know what I thought - I hope it's not a sign of old age when you have two days in a row when you think the same way."

"Quasimodo" ends side one, and then we're on side two with the eleven minute "Let Me Rest", Copernicus' most wrenching vocal performance. Here he sounds like a demented punk Billy Sunday on the cross, blending with the stately but mournful dirge backup to conjure up some sort of soundtrack to the climactic scene of a metaphysical film noir (starring Copernicus) that has yet to be made; sermons like these would make your church or synagogue a cutting-edge hangout for sure. It's described as a "struggle for spirituality" by its protagonist, who adds that he has the feeling that said protagonist never achieves said spirituality.

"Nagasaki", recorded live at Max's Kansas City, is the most rocking cut, my fave, a solid metallic frenzy that ends with Copernicus declaring that "Life does not exist. . . Copernicus does not exist. . . the earth does not exist. . . MAX'S KANSAS CITY DOES NOT EXIST!", followed by barely comprehensible mumbles about atomic structure. It's also available on video (as is "I Won't Hurt You"). Let's hope MTV shows it soon, as it's way more subversive than all the albums under investigation by the senators' wives could ever hope to be.

The curtain-closing "Atomic Nevermore" is as straightforward a rundown of Copernicus' philosophy as you'll get on vinyl; luckily he doesn't take himself unduly seriously, breaking into gurgling, almost self-parodical laughter as the piece winds down. Indeed, while Copernicus/Smalkowski is quite lucid in delineating his philosophy in conversation, my feeling is that the music/performance itself wouldn't be nearly as interesting if it was equally clinical. Written description can't convey the dense murky sprawl of the music, which accentuates the snarling stream-of-consciousness lyrics of Copernicus, whose person flip-flops between abject, theatrical, almost self-pitying moaning and surly sermonizing which verges on anger, obscurity being a common thread. Impossible to suss no matter how intently or often it's listened to, but that's why it sticks with you when many other records - even those you may "enjoy" much more - have been regulated to the back of the stacks.

Copernicus has been busy of late, recording with the full ensemble at RCA Studios in May '85, and again with two other musicians (with whom he'd never been in the studio before) a couple of months later. A new LP, titled HIGH TENSION,\* will be culled from these sessions and should be out as you read this. Of the new record, Copernicus says "there is no style of music - eight pieces of music, eight different styles - from country and western to disco to rock 'n roll to poetry to abstract music to jazz. I like it that way. It means that we don't have to do the same thing every time; we can do what we feel like." He adds that he's financially solvent enough to release an album a year for the rest of his life. Copernicus may not exist, but like it or not, he's not going to go away anytime soon.

by Richie Unterberger

\*Title changed to "Victim of the Sky"

