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SWING/SHIFT

B Y R I J S M I T H

Theoretics

ON THE LEVEL OF SUBATOMIC particles, there is no rush. This is why Copernicus has taken so long to emerge as a recording artist. Born in South Jamaica, Queens, in 1939, he's only in recent years been putting out LPs—wailing, largely improvised poetry shouted over rafts of buzzy, tipsy music in a cloud chamber. You don't prod bosons and mesons, and you don't make Copernicus hustle.

"I see in my poetry the influence of the atom, it has a lot to do with how I see reality. The core of Copernicus's philosophy"—oh yeah, he often refers to himself in the third person—"is that we do not exist, that we are no reality. That's why I called my first album *Nothing Exists*. The true reality is on the atomic and subatomic level." Howling at the world like an Old Testament prophet who smokes too much, he doesn't let up. In the early '60s Copernicus read poetry in West Village coffeehouses. One day in the late '70s he heard keyboardist Pierce Turner and guitarist synth/player Larry Kirwan jamming at a jazz club, and ended up on stage with them, free-associating. They've stayed together since. Your typical Copernican rant might be musically improvised as well as poetically new, full of shouts and voices and sometimes requiring explanations: "Chichen-Itza Elvis" on the new LP *Deeper* (Nevermore: POB 170150 Brooklyn, NY 11217) has 13 footnotes, referring to various



You don't exist

CAROLINE HOWARD

Mayan and Indian cities. "These lyrics all poured from Copernicus spontaneously in six minutes in 1980," the liner notes observe. Hey I'm not saying this is a hotdog with mustard or anything, but I'm glad the man is around.

Why call yourself Copernicus? "The first Copernicus blew the world's mind away. Ptolemy, with the geocentric theory, said the earth was at the center, and the sun went around it. That dominated human culture for 2000 years. That's a long time," the performer-philosopher avers. "They wanted to burn Copernicus, because he challenged the status quo as it existed. And I think my philosophy that nothing exists, that identity is a false creation of ours, I think that's as revolutionary as the first Copernicus." Friends have told him his self-less ideas evoke various Asian philosophies, but though he has been to India, he dons the garment of the autodidact. "I go farther than Buddha. He said there was something there. I say there's nothing there."

After years of traveling and studying, he's making his move. He explained for three hours on WKCR, did other radio shows, last Friday he played Siberia, and he's contemplating a road show. He's big in France. In short, after some 40-plus years, he's out. "I disagree with practically everything in the society we live in. If you believe that you do not exist, and you live in a society that believes in its existence—right there you've got problems, right?" Uh—right. But he's coping fine. ■