

MUSIC



Copernicus is out there somewhere, alone.

Raging Pole

Copernicus Has Plenty of Nothing

BY JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

Copernicus
Deeper
Nevermore

COPERNICUS, AS COPERNICUS himself often tells us, does not exist. Then again, neither do New York, the United States, you and I or the rest of the universe. To be blunt, as the title of his first album proclaimed, *Nothing Exists*.

It's certainly true that Copernicus doesn't exist from the perspective of the commercial record biz. Besides a few rave reviews in unimportant places like *Belgium* and *City Paper*, and some brief play on the world's 2-watt college FM stations, he's barely pricked the surface of sub-sub-underground obscurity.

And yet I swear I smell a whiff of breakthrough on *Deeper*, his third and maybe his best lp. (After *Nothing Exists* in '85 and *Victim of the Sky* in '86.) Surely not a big-MTV-lunch-with-Sting-duets-with-Willie-Nelson breakthrough. But I think the world's ready for Copernicus to break through from nearly total obscurity in the sub-underground to something more like an underground cult—a lot more FM play, maybe his own fan club, some judicious name-dropping in the right publications by East Village hipsters, and who knows, he may even sell some records. *Deeper* will be the album to do it.

Copernicus, a.k.a. Joe Smalkowski, is a New York performance poet. In fact he's the raging bull of New York performance poets, a bellowing minotaur prowling the labyrinth of the subconscious, hurling cryptic visions like insults and propounding an even cryptic-er philosophy of cosmic nihilism. He's a little like Charles Bukowski, a little like John Giorno and a lot like William Blake. He's backed by a large, ever-shifting mongrel horde of jazzbos, rockers, folkies and space cadets who make a horrible, wonderful monster mash of post-punk no wave space jazz.

He's also the self-proclaimed King Of Spontaneity, and this is one time when a self-proclaiming poet actually makes good. Copernicus' usual m.o. is to toss himself and a lot of musicians into a club or recording studio and let 'er rip—the words as well as the music generally invented on the spot. Sometimes the words inspire the music, sometimes vice versa, and sometimes you get the impression they're not listening to each other at all.

Given his method, Copernicus makes prodigious, startling leaps from the profound to the ridiculous. At the best of times Copernicus and his musicians surprise each other and create something weird and wonderful that probably could not have been planned. It's automatic writing, improvised music and speaking in tongues all at once. The surrealists' exquisite corpse shambles up on stage and grabs the microphone, hollering messages from the beyond. At the worst of times it's just freely improvised jerking off.

Copernicus makes an honest effort to give you maximum profanity with minimum jerking off. All three of his albums have been spliced together from

excerpts of marathon jam sessions recorded from as early as 1980 to last Spring. You get the impression that many hours of embarrassing doodles lurk behind the spontaneous gems that get onto these records. An interesting side effect is that where most recording artists evolve or devolve over the course of several albums, Copernicus' work seems oddly timeless: the work on *Deeper* spans the last seven years.

There's "Chichen-Itza Elvis," an eight-minute rant that's destined for college radio cultdom. The 16-piece band cooks up a horn-heavy Bo Diddley shimmy embellished with glockenspiel trills and a fiddle that slips from Arabic minarets to Irish airs. Copernicus comes in on a bullish, demonic laugh and raves up an amazing, freely improvised world tour of ancient and sacred places. "Khajuraho sings a silent song/Screaming with its own blue village...Monte Alban whistling with its gold...The song walked upon Machu Picchu/Turned me into my own dance."

As the music gets funky Copernicus seems literally possessed by some kind of avant-oodoo spirit and out spews the speaking in tongues. "Talk with Zimbabwe/Long with my own lord," he roars. "Lord in my own prayer/Where the mirror reflects the visions of nevermore/And the ashtrays of the songs/Wash their ashes into the sea/And the sea laughs like a fool."

On the seven-minute mini-slick "Son of a Bitch from the North" the band goes space rock and invents rainy jungle mountains with electronic storm clouds grumbling overhead. The scenery inspires Copernicus to improvise an old man and woman climbing the mountains gathering sticks for firewood. They pray "*Que no nos caen/Las bombas de los gringos*" ("May the bombs of the gringos not fall on us.") But the gringos' planes do swoop in like roaring synthesizer valkyries and the children run and hide from "*Hijo de la chingada del Norte*."

"Nothing exists" is more than a recurring theme in Copernicus' ravings; it's his unified field theory. To the drifting space-warp music of "Hurl Silence" he sighs, "And then it seems if I had anything to say I would hurl only silence to the world allowing the atomic and subatomic particles to make all the noise." He reminds us of the dinosaurs and asks what will humanity leave when it goes? "Silent asphalt melting in the sun with the irresponsible wind whistling through disappeared humanity in the dust to dust cliché... The silent dust that made so much fury."

On the brooding "Atom by Atom"—with the band whipping up an incredi-

ble primordial soup of electronics, primitive drums, rattling bone marimbas, aboriginal hums and an Irish flute—declares himself "Free of humanity, animals that have everything and nothing... Humanity—enemy of the car—Oh, blow yourself away! The soon you turn yourself back to atoms that's better." When the band strikes up an off-kilter "Star Spangled Banner" shouts, "The United States does not exist!" And on "Come To It" he proclaims, "Nothing exists... There is nothing! There is no one! There will never be anything!"

On "Once, Once, Once Again" Copernicus breaks with his usual method: it's totally unspontaneous. The music tracks—the only pre-planned music he's ever worked with—is a synthesized space operetta of sampled symphony and twanging *Miami Vice* percussion. Copernicus spent a month listening to it and wrote lyrics to match. He spent another month overdubbing his voice. The affect is a pretty powerful piece and another candidate for FM late night stardom, but he complains in the liner notes that "the King Of Spontaneity had taken three months to create a three minute piece. For Copernicus this way of creating may never happen again."

Almost a whole side of Copernicus' last lp, *Victim of the Sky*, was taken by a kind of one-act radio play for the '80s—a bitter, bar-stool-hugging, Bukowski monologue by Joe Apples, crapped-out Archie Bunker type bitching about his slob of a wife and his ingrate kids. Now, in the remark "Death of Joe Apples," we find the obnoxious bollocks wasting away in a poor man's hospital bed, beaten by the Big complaining as usual: "They wash with the rag. They dress you three times a day. What a racket. Eat. Sleep. Drink water and piss." The day he's buried his wife goes out dancing with a new man. The band welds together a great mongrel version of a New Orleans death march—part bluesy trumpet and piano, part Irish fiddle, a wood flute patched in from some dirt hut in the Twilight Zone, and a stubborn heart beat of conga drums.

Spontaneous combustion is a tricky business, and things don't always go for Copernicus and his band. He there's the long "Disco Days A-Over," with the band falling into two or more dithering camps and two or three back-up singers kind of fighting Copernicus for the spotlight. In another accident, "They Own Everything" the band whips up some nice, spool electro-dungeon groans and squawls but Copernicus fails to think of anything much to say.

All the shouting and banging and



marathon demonic possessions must be exhausting. For the last track of this p Copernicus chose a piece called "Come To It," which was also the last bit recorded in a mammoth four-hour slug fest in 1985. It sounds late. The band is dead. The pianist drags his fingers over the keys in a dreamy last-waltz dirge. An organ, fiddle and guitar wander in and out. You can hear people packing up their equipment at the back of the studio.

Copernicus is beat. He leans into the mike and you can hear his breath whistling in his nose. He sounds a little weepy and a little drunk and his voice cracks. "But then again what is a man and what is a woman?" he wonders. "They have to see everything through their own eyes and..." His voice shrugs. "...And get it together. And come to it...A kiss. Yes. Hold me. There is nothing. There is nothing."

What more can you say. I love this guy. He's profound and ridiculous and funny and furious. I love the way he abandons himself to the wild spirits, lets the visions and the poetry play him like a Muse Kazoo, rip through him in all their uncensored genius and stoopit-ness.

He's out there somewhere, and he's out there alone. I should mention that Copernicus funds, organizes, records and produces these albums on his own hook. He is the Nevermore label. He designs the covers and writes the liner notes and writes his own p.r. blurbs and he'll even autograph the damn record if you send him \$8 (or \$14 for two) to P.O. Box 170150, Brooklyn N.Y. 11217. Not bad for a guy who doesn't exist.

