

C O N F E S S I O N S O F A C O P E R N I C U S

BY LEIGH SILVERMAN

One advantage of being a rock poet is that the world is your analyst, and at 49-years-old, Copernicus reclines comfortably on the big white couch of New York's new music scene. With the gravel-laden voice of a Saturday night disc jockey and the conviction of a Sunday morning preacher, Copernicus has the makings for a convincing showcase. Often achieving a trance like state on stage, the six-foot philosopher delivers spontaneous poetry accompanied by an 18-30-piece improvisational orchestra.

Copernicus II—as he once called himself—may well resemble his namesake. A towering presence, with long, wavy, silver hair, this philosopher of the '80s has a physique strong enough to support the enormous weight of his



as important as his." Copernicus' vision rings clear in "Atomic Nevermore" on *Nothing Exists* (1984). "Living in illusion is an error and the cause of all human suffering," he warns. "Come to the end of the illusionary human world. Come into Atomic Nevermore. No past, no future, no present..."

It's hard to pinpoint where this modern-day philosopher/performer came from if we are to believe his theory of human evolution ("From Bacteria," *Victim of the Sky*, 1985): "The pope is descended from bacteria/Ronald Reagan is descended from bacteria/Bruce Springsteen is descended from bacteria/Copernicus does not exist—therefore he could not descend."

For historical purposes we'll say that Copernicus was born and raised in New York. In the early '60s he studied at Columbia University and then fulfilled a two-year stint with the Navy. During the next 10 years he traveled throughout Europe, writing novels and poetry.

In 1978 Copernicus was hot on the Manhattan poetry circuit. "It was always spontaneous," he says, referring to the readings he attended. "I always hated people who would go in and do their 'work.'" One night Copernicus went downtown to see the Irish duo Pierce Turner and Larry Kirwan and decided to finish out the last set with them. The three hit it off and began performing together regularly. Eventually they pooled their talents in a recording session from which sprung "Quasimoto," a 34-minute symphonic piece *Nothing Exists*.

The trio took on other musicians and eventually ballooned into a rich composite of guitars, drums, vocals, synthesizers, violins, coppers, etc. Each member of the



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ego. But what sets him apart from the astronomer Copernicus is that he sees the world through a microscope, rather than a telescope, reducing everything to a subatomic level at which change is constant. "I believe that nothing exists," he declares. "I believe that we do not exist. I believe that we do not stay the same from one moment to the next and by not staying the same from one moment to the next, we are not really here."

Copernicus indulges a wild, nihilistic streak based on the idea that life, death, and birth are pure hogwash. "It's a total illusion," he claims, "It's really a horrible thing to believe in. So I call myself Copernicus because I am in that tradition of people who deflated man's vision of himself and I stand for a new vision of what reality is."

But why Copernicus? Why not Shakespeare or General Grant? "I really feel I have something equally important to say as the first Copernicus," he explains. "Until the first Copernicus came along, the Western world had believed for 2,000 years that the earth was the center of our system and that the sun went around it. And then this guy came along and blew away the world with this revolutionary thought that challenged man's way of looking at himself. Seeing that, I thought my message, my philosophy, my way of looking at things, is

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terry involved in three or four other projects. Boasts Copernicus in a fatherly tone: "Pierce Turner has a deal with RCA right now; Larry Kirwan is a playwright who just had a play put on in Dublin; Tom Hamlin has his own band named Chill Faction; and Steve Menasche has his own band. They're real professional guys."

While Copernicus never gets involved with the musical end of things, he considers the music and his own vocals to be equally important. "I'm not backing up musicians and I don't want musicians to back me up. We're all individuals expressing ourselves. If they're in a studio and they create a great musical masterpiece without me, I will put the thing on an album and call it Copernicus."

Most of their performances and recording sessions are done without preparation. "I sometimes think of themes," Copernicus says, "but we don't rehearse anything. The musicians don't know what's going to happen." Doing a piece is usually a one-shot deal. In "I Won't Hurt You" (*Nothing Exists*) Copernicus wrote the words and Pierce wrote the music, but there was no rehearsal. "I've only done the piece once in my life and I'll never do it again. If you asked me to do it now," he adds, "I wouldn't even know the words. It's the same with all those pieces."

The ensemble often ventures into new territory. They draw heavily on jazz and arbitrary sounds, but some of their most memorable backdrops are stampeding punk jams ("I Know What I Think" and "Nagasaki"). Both of these are on *Nothing Exists*, an album characterized by a wide range of dynamic levels. Also from this album comes "I Won't Hurt You," a willowy reggae tune in which Copernicus delivers mellow, gentle prose, one of his least exploited styles.

Perhaps Copernicus' next album will be recorded in a language of his own invention. "I really feel I should devise a new language so that things can be expressed in a more direct way. I'm using the language of the old world, the world of illusion, and I can't do it. You can't say, 'I, you,' when there's no such thing as 'I, you.'"

As for his ensemble, "They don't believe me. Not one of them," he concedes. "They think I'm crazy."