

COPERNICUS

• NEW YORK PRESS •

Art of Noise

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BY JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

IT'S HALF PAST midnight, Thursday inching into Friday morning at RCA's recording studios on W. 44th St. Over in Studio C, where Elvis used to record, the Miss America organization

Copernicus Is A Musical Genius Who Doesn't Know When To Quit



has wrapped up a session and gone home.

There's still life in Studio B, a cavernous 50s-era room, but it's dragging. You wonder what Elvis or Bert Parks would have made of this. The air is ringing and feels as limp as the old drapes look, like they've had 30 years of dust beat out of them by pure sonic barrage. The floor is littered with beer bottles, smoking ashtrays, pork rind chips, tangled wires, broken cymbal stands and split drumsticks.

The band stumbles and yawns. They just got paid and they're packing up quick—trying to slip out before the big guy with the booming voice, the hippie hair and the stony Rushmore face can lock them in another bear hug and bellow, "Hey, where are you going? Come one, man. Just one more

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Photo: E. Parton

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song."

"You know I love you," one of the singers says. She put her hand on his arm. "You were brilliant tonight. But I gotta go to work in the morning."

"You're fucking up a masterpiece here, man," Copernicus tells the emptying studio. "Don't you have *three minutes of greatness* in you?"

The yawning organ player and one tired guitarist take up the challenge. You want greatness? They prop themselves up and diddle bluesy-spacey late night noodlings. Copernicus drops onto a piano bench, hunches over a microphone, and begins to rumble a freely improvised poem about love and loneliness. One of his deep-chested, gruffly romantic monologues that have been likened to Barry White on acid.

A horn player is sneaking out the side door. "The guy is a genius," he mutters, "but he doesn't know when to quit." In the production booth the engineers shake their heads and get in line for the phone. The old we're-running-a-bit-late-honey.

It's no wonder everyone's beat. They've survived another marathon jam session with Copernicus, the raging bull of Queens, *Angel Exterminador* of poet-performer-philosophers. The self-proclaimed King of Spontaneity, Copernicus whumps up records with the same sort of creative abandon Mother Nature displays when she reforms land masses. He tosses a bunch of musicians into the studio, hooks them all up to a power source, and whips them into a frenzy of spontaneous noisemaking. Very little is planned and nothing is rehearsed. The tape rolls. It's one-take, balls-out, don't-look-back creativity, without a net.

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NICHOLAS AUMILLIER

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welcome!" Copernicus roars. Guitarist Larry Kirwan's wife has brought their baby, Jimmy. Jimmy gets carried into the studio. Copernicus wants him to cry for this piece. Jimmy doesn't want to cry. He seems to be getting off on it all. As Copernicus leans over him, bellowing into his face, Jimmy reaches out of his blanket and grabs the mic. Another star is born.

After two solid, flat-out hours of it, the band shows signs of strain. It's wheat and chaff time. Time for Howard the roadie to go out for more bear. Clementine slips out before midnight. She's got her gig at Chelsea Place. Copernicus doesn't want a break. Maybe he can't afford one. He keeps rolling with whoever's left. The band expands and contracts like an amoeba. A piece will start with four or five musicians and four or five more will drop in as it rolls along.

After midnight the defections begin in earnest. Musicians' rides start showing up and hang around in the corners. Copernicus breaks down and hands out the pay envelopes. He throws his arm around the shoulders of the quiet, long-suffering Howard, whose duty for the evening has been reeling in the chords of Copernicus' mic and headphones so the guy doesn't strangle himself in a fit of genius.

"Howard, do you exist?" Copernicus asks.

"Howard shrugs. "So far," he says.

Around one, the engineer tells Copernicus he's out of tape. Five hours of tape in all, containing over 20 songs. As Copernicus goes back through it in the coming months, some pieces will turn out to be as spontaneously brilliant as they seemed at the time, others will reveal themselves as hopeless jerking off.

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tive abandon Mother Nature displays when she reforms land masses. He tosses a bunch of musicians into the studio, hooks them all up to a power source, and whips them into a frenzy of spontaneous noisemaking. Very little is planned and nothing is rehearsed. The tape rolls. It's one-take, balls-out, don't-look-back creativity, without a net.

When the night began there were 15 or 16 musicians. Rock guitarists, a folk guitarist, a couple of drummers, WFMU's Montego Joe on congas, a guy paddling an Irish bodhran, pianist Clementine Jones who plays the blues at Chelsea Place, a couple of trumpets, a sax, a breathy Eno-Hassell trombonist, funk bass, two singers, *Beggars Banquet* recording artist Pierce Turner on synthesizer, Jimmy Zhivago at a beat old Hammond B-3, maybe a few I've misplaced. They filled up the room in an old-fashioned live take arrangement, connected by a rat's nest of chords and wires. No overdubs, no isolation booths, everybody wails and let the guy at the controls sort 'em out.

Perhaps inevitably, the set-up ran an hour behind schedule, a delay which put a visible edge on Copernicus' already souped-up disposition. As he paced and smoked you could see him thinking about how time is money—his money. He personally foots the bill for these sessions. Rents the space, buys the tapes and the beer and the pork rind chips, pays the musicians and engineers and roadies. His out of pocket on an evening of free creativity runs around \$5000.

When the big ensemble does roar into life it becomes a magnificent 21st Century swing band on an intergalactic search-and-create mission. Considering the size, the disparate backgrounds and the mix of veterans and novices, it's pretty impressive how quickly it finds a flight pattern, a kind of space-rock re-bop that's like a fusion of Sun Ra, one of those Euro-hippie bands of the 70s, and a global ethno-funk a little like

a total independent and wild hair.



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BY JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

Fela or Ofra Haza. In the gusty, shambling, two-tone tornado of sounds, odd bits of familiar idioms spin by—a blues riff on Clementine's piano, a flute trilling a snatch of an Irish reel, the percussionists suddenly coming together to pound out a giant, sinuous Afro-Arabic beat.

You can tell the Copernicus veterans from the novices because the vets leap head first into the maelstrom while the novices hang back at the edges watching the listening, ducking in and out. Copernicus doesn't like that. He's happiest when everybody is blasting away at full throttle. "You can't be timid in Copernicus," he explains. "You have to reach down inside and dig it out." One of the newcomers, the sax player, catches a breather in the booth. He opens door to the studio, leans into the cacophony blasting out of there like a stiff wind, and grins. "Whoa, here I go!"

Copernicus starts the evening on a slightly raised platform, working from a few typed sheets of poetry. It doesn't take him long to get possessed by the whirlwind. He rants into his mic, raving in tongues, throwing his arms and his mug around like a hipster Mussolini. He jumps down off the dais, writhing on the floor,

prowling among the musicians, laughing, pulling faces like Japanese gods, hurling flashing thunderbolts of wild, cosmic-comic visions for which he's been compared to Blake, Bukowski, and Buddha.

Central to all of Copernicus' imagery is the philosophical nugget neatly summed up in the title of his first lp—*Nothing Exists*. It's kind of the Uncertainty Principle translated into an optimistic nihilism. For Copernicus, the knowledge that you don't exist, and neither does anyone or anything else, makes you free to be yourself. Or something. "I don't have any hands!" he shouts in one piece. "I don't have any arms! I don't have any trunk! I am free!"

When he's done the few written pieces, Copernicus starts winging it along with the band. As one piece staggers to an end he'll give them a theme for the next one. "This piece is about loneliness," he'll say, or "this one is about minimalism," or "this piece is about the desert. Hey Brownies, can you play like the desert?" "Sure," the trumpet player replies. "B-flat, right?"

In the middle of one big ethno-funky jam, the guitarists start to sing "Thank you for letting me be myself, again." "You're

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Copernicus has done these studio all-nighters about once a year for the past several years, in addition to live recordings. He's got material going back to the early 80s—27 pieces from last year alone. He combs through mountains of it to cull the pieces that go onto his albums. "I've got more than enough stuff for a good album,"

he says. "But Copernicus doesn't want to make a good album. Copernicus wants greatness."

At the Nevermore, Inc. record label, Copernicus gets what Copernicus wants. Copernicus is Nevermore—producer, director, talent, promoter, distributor and sole financial backer. He's put out three albums—*Nothing Exists* in 1985, *Victim of the Sky* in 1986, and last winter's *Deeper*. He'd like to have the next one out by Spring. Some of the new pieces from the RCA marathon will no doubt be on it, with the best of the rest mixed in.

With each album, Copernicus' rap has expanded from a very underground cult of critics to an international cult of critics and college radio programmers. He's at that stage where pretty much everyone interested in independent music has at least heard of him, if they haven't all heard him. This is not a stage that makes you rich and famous; Copernicus admits that so far "Copernicus has cost me a fortune."

Which leads to the obvious question of how Copernicus can afford to be Copernicus. Does he rob banks? Deal crack? Run a Wall Street brokerage? It's just kind of hard to picture this big, shambolicking bear of a

poet holding down a regular job.

It takes a little friendly prying to get an answer out of him. Copernicus prefers to be a little mysterious about all the more mundane details of his everyday life—the life in which Copernicus is a middle-aged guy from Queens named Joe Smalkowski. He talks about both Copernicus and Joe in the third person, as though they were friends of his. He says, “Copernicus has nothing to do with Joe. Copernicus is a different world. Copernicus spends Joe’s money. Maybe they might get jealous over the same woman sometimes. Joe mixes Copernicus’ records, and gets credit on the albums.”

Here’s what we pried out of him: Joe Smalkowski was born in 1939. (Which, if nothing else, must qualify him as one of the oldest up-and-comers in independent music.) His father was a housepainter. He went to Catholic grade school and high school, then studied history at Queens College. In 1961 Joe went to live in Europe for six months. Since then he’s traveled a lot through Europe, Asia, the Middle East. Somewhere in there he did a stint in the army.

He says it was on the boat trip back from Europe that he decided to become an artist. He also decided that to do it right—to have the freedom to make whatever kind of art he wanted—would take a lot of money. He didn’t have a lot of money. He didn’t think that a Polish-American beatnik-hippie poet had much chance of landing a rich *padrone* either.

So he did what all aspiring young artists do: he invested in property. In Fort Greene, down Flatbush Ave. from Brooklyn Bridge. It was the 60s, the neighborhood was derelict, Copernicus says you could pick up pissed-in mansions for a

song. He says he put in “15 years of slavery” fixing the places up.

Renting them out at 1980s rates is how Copernicus can afford to be Copernicus. He says the buildings “are pretty much on auto,” leaving him free to make his art. “I used capitalism to acquire the means to be honest,” is how he puts it.

He says it was about 10 years ago that character of Copernicus leaped pretty much full grown from Joe’s head. “I knew that Joe was not the guy who was expressing all these things I had inside me.” Sometime later, the story goes, Copernicus leaped on stage at a club where Kirwan and Turner were playing, and jammed some poetry with them. The rest is show biz.

Copernicus takes pride in his status as a total independent and wild hair. He says that some mid-echelon types at RCA have offered “to bring my records upstairs, as they put it,” but he doesn’t have any delusions that the A&R pros will see a lot of star quality in a 49-year-old mad genius. Besides, he says, “I think that would be the end of Copernicus. I don’t take orders well. They found that out in the army.” Going it alone, he says, “I can be honest. I can do anything.”

At the same time, he wouldn’t mind a little of RCA’s business sense. “I’d give myself an F in record company work.” Take the last album, *Deeper*. He thought it

had momentum. He was riding a wave of critical attention and college radio exposure for *Victim of the Sky*. He had 2000 copies of *Deeper* made, complete with a fancy gold-foil jacket, and got it out to all the FM stations in November, thinking it’d sell out at Christmas. He bought full page ads in music mags like *Option*.

He screwed up. *Deeper* reached the stations just as everybody was taking off for the holidays. It didn’t make the rotation until February. On top of that, the lead track scared a lot of programmers. It was called “Son of a Bitch from the North,” and it contained the fatal f-word. “They listened to 10 seconds of one song,” he complains, “and decided the whole album had too much swearing on it.” Stations where *Victim* had reached

number 2 on the playlist wouldn’t play *Deeper* at all.

The sad thing is that *Deeper* really was Copernicus’ most obviously successful album to date—bigger, fuller, more polished and, even with the f-word, more widely acceptable than the others. It should have been his breakthrough. Not to stardom surely, but to a much wider audience.

It’s also a self-inflicted paradox that the king of spontaneous be-heard-now creativity is known mostly through his records. He’s never toured outside of

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NYC, and even here he performs sporadically. This year he’s played CBGB’s, the Cat Club, the New Music Seminar, a Symphony Space benefit for SANE.

“A gig can’t be just a gig,” he explains. “A gig is a crucial time. It can’t be just walking into some dipshit club full of guys in black leather jackets drinking beer and going, ‘Yeah man.’” There’s the added imponderable of what kinds of gigs he’d do if his albums ever did sell big. With his insistence that every gig must be spontaneous, he could hardly give the crowd his greatest hits.

“It’s always new,” he says. “It has to be. I can’t do anything else. I can’t do requests. I’m not an entertainer, I’m an artist. It’s not my job to get into what the audience wants. It’s up to them to get into what I’m doing or not.”

Still, he likes to perform on stage. He’d like to tour. But he’d like to control it. He’s got a notion, for example, to book a hall himself and produce a triple bill: Philip Glass, Copernicus, and Sonic Youth. Which if nothing else would be a guaranteed Night To Remember.

Meanwhile, he’s not complaining. He’s set himself up to be free to do what he wants, say what he feels, when and how he wants. In the process, he’s making some very unusual records. Not a bad life for a guy who doesn’t exist.

“What would I be doing if it wasn’t for Copernicus?” he muses. “I’d probably be some dumbass driving around in a fancy car with a bottle in my hand chasing young girls. This way,” he says, “at least I have to stay sober.”

Copernicus’ albums are available from Nevermore, Inc., P.O. Box 170150, Brooklyn, NY 11217-0005.