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# Copernicus

## EXPLORING THE NULL AND VOID

**Michael Bloom**

Improvising poet who calls himself Copernicus has a message of penetrating simplicity: "Nothing Exists." That's also the title of his first album, and it's a theme he continues to refine. You see, the more we investigate the building blocks of matter, according to the latest discoveries in physics, the more elusive and ephemeral they become, until we can't be sure of anything. His latest CD release, *No Borderline*, on his own Nevermore label, considers one important corollary of this notion: that the fluidity of this underlying reality allows no fixed boundary between him and you or I or that chair over there; that we are all one, in both the quantum mechanical sense and the mystical.

Certainly his own identity is subject to change. Within this world of illusion, Copernicus is known as Joseph Smalkowski. The two names do seem to signify two distinct personalities. In performance, Copernicus is frightening: stalking the stage like a caged lion, declaiming words with the charge and pin and strangeness of the most arcane varieties known to science, in an eldritch voice that sounds like the spawn of Vincent Price and Diamanda Galas. We believe we spoke instead to the Joseph entity, an affable dude who at one point in our phone conversation had to get up and let his dog out. But he retained enough of the Copernicus persona to begin to explain his philosophy, and to get all fired up over its ramifications.

"The name Copernicus was chosen because Copernicus challenged 2000 years of thought, right? And I felt at the time, and I still feel, that I'm challenging four million years, maybe ten million years of thought, where people are saying that reality is what they see, and perceive with their senses. And I'm saying that's not right, that is not real-

ity: seeing is not believing, what you see is not what is, what you hear and touch and taste and smell is not what is. And to go on living and saying that that is the only reality is wrong thinking. And confining your perception of reality by just that one limited thing is the real cause of all man's problems. That vision is so narrow, and wrong—it's wrong! There's a billion realities in a sense, or no reality, but to say that one is the absolute reality and attach everything to that, I think it's really the cause of violence. It's very ignorant, and ignorance is the cause of violence."

One of his most important pieces, "The Authorities," depicts the enmity the original Copernicus endured, simply because he taught the scientific fact that earth revolved around the sun. The current Copernicus draws parallels with the forces of ignorance in contemporary materialistic society, and insists they can be overcome. His 1990 CD *Null* includes a live recording of this piece, with an improvising rock band, from West Berlin in 1989; nine days later, the Berlin Wall came down. Four pieces from that gig appear on the last two CD releases, and the entire concert is available on video from Nevermore. (Bassist Dave Conrad later wrote up his experience of that tour in a moving account published in *Option*.)

Most of the Copernicus oeuvre, however, is improvised. "Basically it goes back to the early days of poetry circles, a thousand years ago, when a guy would get up and have his piece of paper and read, in a very boring way, what he had written. And it was just an unreal experience, and I didn't like that."

"Plus of course that whole time there was also a belief in spontaneity in itself, in the fact that the truth was there, and if it's there, it comes out. So when I would do my stuff I would just do it, do whatever I could do, and express myself in a spontaneous way. It's

a talent, like a muscle, you practice it a lot. When it's very good it's great, and when you get good at it, it's not really ever very bad. I don't think any of my spontaneous work is really very bad."

It's still a risk, however, especially in the recording process. "You go into the studio and come out with 30 or 40 pieces of work," he says, "and I was happy if I got one masterpiece, something I thought was great." He books vast quantities of studio time, and enlists dozens of players—he counts 28 different musicians on the ten pieces that comprise *No Borderline*, and his previous releases employed similar forces. On this CD, however, the performers are grouped in smaller, more specialized ensembles, ranging from the rock band Chill Faction (featuring singer/songwriter Pierce Turner and guitarist Larry Kirwan of Black 47) to the Lithuanian fusion group Bix to a traditional Mexican mariachi band to a studio composer with a \$250,000 Synclavier.

One spontaneous creation Copernicus is particularly pleased with is a number called "Ra" from *Null*. It was realized in a mammoth session in RCA Studio C, with 18 participating musicians. Copernicus invokes Allah and the elder gods of the pharaohs in a tumultuous recitation. "I had been to Egypt, 12 days I was down the Nile, and those gods were living in me, man! You can't get away from it, you spend 12 days doing that, going in and out of all those places, I mean, you go to sleep with them! Some people go there and they just never leave. It's just overwhelming, it's

the intellectual mother of the Western world, and so everything is right there: all Christian, Jewish, Moslem thought is right on the walls of ancient Egypt. So I did it in 11 minutes, the musicians just started and I just blasted it out."

He admits that working with musicians spurs him on. "I find I'm not as good alone



sometimes, and when I'm pressed by the musicians, sometimes they push you into worlds that you don't even know are there, and that's the excitement of it. Sometimes things will come out in improvisation that I don't even understand, take me a year or two to understand what I said, and that's when you're really great, when you don't even know what you're doing." Nevertheless, Copernicus is going it alone for the time being, giving solo recitals. "I know how to grow," he maintains, "Copernicus is about growth."

## word processing

"It's our job as communicators," he insists. "I'm not a scientist, but scientists are not communicators, I'm a communicator. Scientists can't do my work, and I can't do the scientists' work. I can only communicate what the scientists dish out, really, and interpret it, and try to make people aware of what's going on as far as what we know and the ultimate sense of things. So that's what I do."

"This is where the power structure that allows artists to express themselves is failing. We're living in a country that is really cheating its people of its artists, we're not giving the artists the opportunity to express themselves. And it may be worse now than ever. Always through the history of man it's been this way, but it may even be worse now. In 19th century France you had at least circles of people where the people got together and they talked. We don't even have circles now, everybody is circled around the TV set. These big entertainment companies that have so much power to dominate all expression, no matter where you go you're trapped by these four or five guys who own everything." He then explains that, although he's based in New York, he does most of his live work in Europe.

"I still haven't given up the hope that there is something absolute that doesn't change, and who am I to say that there isn't? But from what I think humanity can see at this point, there isn't. There may be some absolute subatomic particle that is unchanging, but from what we know, temperature could change anything. And as long as there's nothing unchanging, then there is nothing knowable, everything is chaos! But the thing is, to get locked into a world of saying that what you perceive with your senses is real, and to live a life like that, you're cheating yourself! You're cheating yourself of the universe. You're cheating yourself of the microcosm and the macrocosm."

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