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# Catching Up with Tuli Kupferberg, Copernicus and Others from the Old School

By John Strausbaugh

## The Old School

It's a cool movie—which, at two hours, still only scratches the surface of Smith's enigmatic life. Iglori included generous clips from his tragically fragmentary film legacy. Smith painstakingly built his avant-garde fancies a frame at a time, hand-painting, collaging, drawing gorgeous celluloid worlds that ranged from flights of bebop to multimedia synesthetic psychedelia to a ravishingly mysterious take on *The Wizard of Oz*.

Sadly, much of this work was lost during his tumultuous life—often enough by his own hand. (Smith had a destructive streak and a temper, which expressed itself especially when he was drinking. There's a story of a night of avant-garde film screenings in the mid-60s when he decided to play some rough takes from the recording of the Fugs' first LP between movies. Cops were in attendance—they often infiltrated "underground" film screenings, looking for smut to bust—and when they heard the Fugs they demanded that Smith stop the tape. He did. Then he lifted the whole reel-to-reel tape player, which were big mofos, and hurled it off the balcony at them.)

Iglori—who was with Smith when he died and became, thankfully, a Harry Smith fanatic—also shows some of his great, psychedelic mandala-paintings and jazzy proto-graffiti murals. There are interviews with his widow Rosebud, who was at the screening, and friends like Robert Frank, Jonas Mekas, Harvey Bialy and Lionel Ziprin. It was great seeing Lionel, an underappreciated poet and seminal if publicly obscure figure from New York's Beat and hippie years, up on the screen, seated in a throne-like chair in his Lower East Side apartment, his rabbinical white beard flopping on his chest, an enormous pair of sunglasses obscuring half his elfin face.

Lionel was not at the screening: he'd been taken to Beth Israel after suffering an attack of emphysema, not surprising after decades of breathing more cigarettes than air. He's a great man and an underground treasure and I wish him a speedy recovery.

•Speaking of the Fugs, Tuli Kupferberg sent me a wonderful Christmas present last week: a copy of *Electromagnetic Steamboat*, one of those limited-edition Rhino Handmade collector's editions you can only get through rhino.com. *Steamboat* compiles on three CDs all four LPs the Fugs put out in their Reprise years, '68-'69: *Tenderness Junction*, *It Crawled into My Hand*, *Honest*, the live LP *Golden Filth* and *The Belle of Avenue A*. *Belle* was the recording swan song of the original Fugs; Ed Sanders broke up the quasi-band in 1969, a move that Kupferberg would always regret. Older if not wiser versions of the Fugs would periodically reform from 1984 on.

In terms of production values, Reprise was a big step up from the indeed "handmade" sound the Fugs and Harry Smith had thrown together—sometimes literally—for their earliest recordings on the small Broadside/Folkways and ESP labels. (Tuli tells another story of Smith's rage bouts from the recording of the first Fugs LP. "I think we spent about six hours altogether doing that first record. Supposedly [Smith] passed us off as a jugband to [Folkways'] Moe Asch. I don't know. Harry liked to drink a lot. He had a bottle of whiskey with him, and when he didn't like something the engineers were doing—they were pretty straight, they didn't understand what we were doing, maybe we didn't either—he threw the bottle against the wall.") After ESP, Atlantic signed the Fugs

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in '66 and then dropped them in '67 without releasing a single record. Reprise gave them the budget for hiring professional rock musicians and backup singers to make the music much slicker than their early sound, as well as for some aural-theater production numbers that sound like bad-genes relatives of Firesign Theatre or *Hair*.

I tend to prefer the early and more fugged-up recordings, but there are gems scattered all across these discs, which also include some previously unavailable material from the band's aborted sojourn at Atlantic. For that matter, all this material has been pretty hard to find for decades. On the first CD alone we find "Wet Dream," the 50s-style teen ballad in which somebody, I guess it's Sanders, croons, "I held you in my arms and kissed your—" and somebody, I guess Kupferberg, cuts in with a basso—"—*titties!*" The chorus goes, "You're my wet dream teenage angel baby/sittin' on my face." There's a Kupferberg Gregorian chant on the theme of marijuana, the goofy cowboy swing of "Johnny Pissoff Meets the Mad Angel," the "Burial Waltz" ("Bury me in an apple orchard that I may touch your lips again...") and a documentary taping of their famous attempt to levitate the Pentagon, with tribal drums and invocations of various pagan deities from Zeus to "the Tyrone Power Poundcake Society in the sky..."

As with all of Rhino's multiple-CD retrospectives, there's some filler by the time you get to the third CD. But with almost four hours in the package, *Steamboat's* worth the attention of any Fugs completist—if there are in fact any out there. It's a hobbyhorse of mine that the Fugs were a crucial and yet now oddly undernoted avatar of 60s protest-joke-folk-rock, in some ways more important to and influential on the tenor of their time than a lot of better-remembered contemporaries. *Steamboat* is a small but welcome corrective.

Tuli's been feeling under the weather, too, lately. I called last week to ask how he's doing. He replied in a minstrelly singsong, "Sometimes I'm high, sometimes I'm *looow*, oh yes Lord." I hope he's out and about again soon too. The most recent collection of his collages of political and social commentary, *Teach Yourself Fucking* (Autonomedia), is still available.

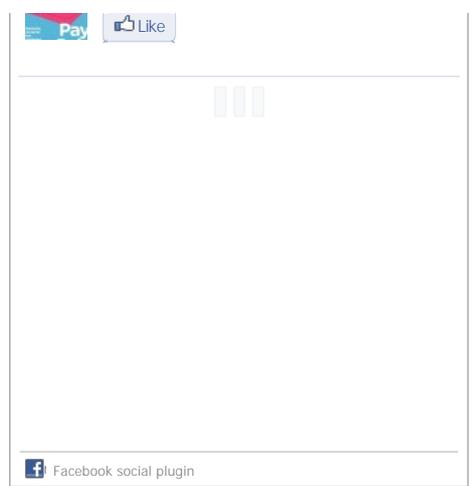
Remember Copernicus? Not the early 16th-century astronomer in Poland. The late 20th-century rock ranter in New York. AKA Joe Smalkowski of Brooklyn. Another kind of old-school New York figure. This Copernicus is the big guy with the deep voice and the leonine hair who self-produced albums like *Nothing Exists* and *Victim of the Sky*, on which large gaggles of musicians would improvise while he roared and ranted his on-the-spot poetics and philosophy about how nothing we think is real is real. When the song ended, it was history; no song was ever repeated. At its worst this would just come off like jam band noodlings, only with this raving lunatic fronting the band. At its best it was like chaos theory set to words and music, the band frothing up a maelstrom of impromptu noise, Copernicus writhing on the stage or the recording studio floor, getting all tangled up in his hair and his mic chord, bellowing, sobbing, whispering his idiosyncratic message that you don't exist, I don't exist, nothing exists but the atoms and the spaces between atoms.

It's been a few years but he's back, with a new CD (his sixth) and an accompanying book (his first), both called *Immediate Eternity* (Nevermore, 200 pages, \$12). For this CD his lyrics are prepared texts—excerpts from the book—and the music is provided by what I suspect is the only prog-rock band in Guayaquil, Ecuador, called the Nomadas. He met them while on a trip to Ecuador to buy "the top of a mountain that overlooked a bay of the Pacific Ocean." They speak no English and his Spanish is rudimentary, but then I don't think many of Copernicus' New York bands knew what the hell he was shouting about most of the time and it never seemed to foil the collaboration. Splitting the difference, they recorded both an English and a Spanish-language version of *Immediate Eternity* (*la eternidad inmediata*). The book was published in a Spanish edition as well.

Asked why Ecuador, Copernicus tells me, "I don't know. There's this little magazine called *International Living*, and they said Ecuador was cheap. And I always wanted to own something by the sea. So I just got on a plane, didn't know what I was doing, fell down in Guayaquil, got some guy in a truck and after five days along the coast of Ecuador I found this incredible mountain above the ocean. He never had been up there. I pointed like Moses and said, 'Clear that up there and I'll come back.'" He did, and bought the land, on which he says he has no grand plans to build a vacation house. He has "a bodega up there, with electricity and water."

The first thing one notices about the CD is that while Copernicus still does some of his trademark bellowing, the general tone is less stormy, almost gentle. And the book is certainly more meditative than anything he's done in song before. Has Copernicus the ranter mellowed in the few years since we last heard him?

"A mellow Copernicus?" he muses, chuckling. "Well, I had a hyperactive thyroid—" (Which explains some of those earlier recordings, I'm thinking.)"—and I was taking two little pills to bring me down a bit. Maybe that affected it. I don't know. When you have a hyperactive thyroid it's like driving a car with the accelerator down. Plus, I'm not into craziness. I'm into intelligence."



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The book's a plain-language philosophical treatise in the grand tradition of the solitary thinker putting down his case for why the whole world should be stood on its head—or in this case, acknowledged not to exist in the first place—and then nailing said document to the church door (or in this case, publishing it himself; Nevermore is Copernicus' trading-as). The basic theme is familiar, but elaborated at lengths he could never do in his songs. The philosophy is a sort of Western Buddhism ramped up by particle physics. All human error stems from the erroneous notion that we exist as separate individuals inhabiting a world we perceive through our "bare senses." Only when we delve into the subatomic level and realize that nothing exists can we attain "Absolute Truth."

"I did the book because I knew it was the only way I could go farther with these ideas," he says. "See, it got to a point where all I was saying was—" He adopts a whiny voice. "*—nothing exists! Nothing exists!* I thought, 'Wait a minute, I've said that before.' I had to take it further. I had to drop out and go into a room with a computer for three years and go at it..

"I tried to make it as simple as possible," he goes on. "My mother's up to page 80. She says it's very well put together," he laughs.

My favorite passage may be where a friend, Mary, happily tells him she's going off to "find herself," and he tells her don't bother. "There is no self to find. The moment you think you've found Mary, Mary has slipped from your grasp and changed into something else. In fact, Mary was never born. Mary has never graced the nonexistent planet Earth. Mary will never grace the nonexistent planet Earth. Leave the mirage of Mary alone. Mary is an illusionary creation of poor eyesight and ignorance of the atomic world. Be free of Mary!" And so on.

Copernicus has been performing with the Nomadas in Ecuador, including shows at what he calls "the Lincoln Center of Guayaquil." It's been three, four years since he performed in New York, but he may reappear. If he exists.

*Nevermore, Inc., POB 170150, Brooklyn 11217.*



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