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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 melowered in the few years since we last heard him?

“A mellower 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.”

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.”



TAKESHI TADATSU

Copernicus comes down from his mountain in Ecuador.

“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.

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