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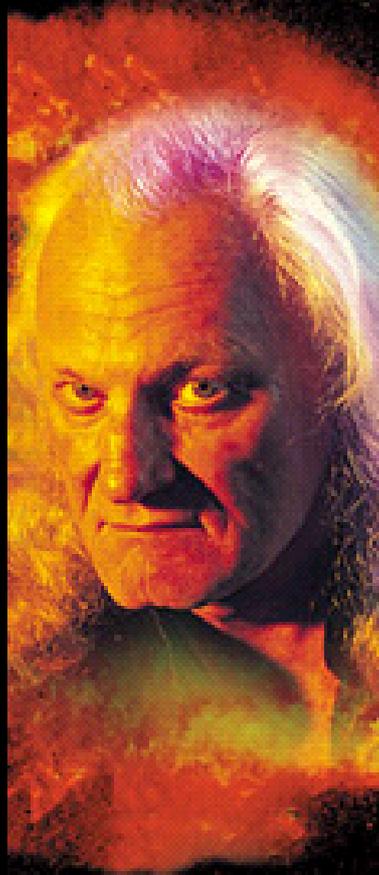
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Interview With Copernicus

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Copernicus (nee Joseph Smalkowski) is a poet, recording artist, visionary, philosopher, writer and genius. He first began releasing his own music in the mid 80s, and soon he would catch the attention of the open-minded all over the world. Often described as wildly avant-garde, his music often involves marathon sessions with large groups of musicians, who are simply instructed to "play", while Copernicus delivers his spontaneous lyrics. What often results is absolute brilliance. Copernicus has traveled the world extensively, released several albums, and has recently written a book entitled "Immediate Eternity". He is currently based in New York.

His recorded pieces often center on the fact that he is an existentialist, who firmly believes that nothing exists. Many of his compositions also focus on the atomic and

the sub-atomic levels.

Being a fan of Copernicus since the late 80s, I was ecstatic to get in touch with him and discuss numerous topics. I was pleased to discover that not only was this man an intriguing philosopher and intellect, yet also a true gentleman.

1. Please tell us about when you first began performing live. What forces encouraged you to take to the stage?

I first began performing live in the poetry circles of Manhattan around 1965 where I would spontaneously create poetry and deliver them live. Then, I started a solo cable TV show where I did the same thing, spontaneous poetry live. Then, I found a saxophone player, Melody Peach, with whom I performed spontaneously and live in clubs and poetry circles. Then, I met up with Turner and Kirwan of Wexford, Pierce Turner and Larry Kirwan (now the leader of Black 47) where with Tom Hamlin we actually formed a band named Copernicus and played the club circuit of Manhattan- CBGB, MAX'S KANSAS CITY, PRIVATES, THE CAT CLUB, SIBERIA. And then of course there was Europe- Berlin, Moscow, Prague, Sopot, Poland, Vilnius, Hamburg, Cologne, Hannover, East Berlin, East Germany. I toured solo the west coast of the US. Everything that I ever did in art was for the purpose of growing in my ideas through expression and secondly, to share my vision with the people. My concerts were challenging purges of energy and thought that left me vacant of energy and rich with thought and deeper vision. Every concert was a new experience and an adventure until we toured in Europe where it was decided that we would not improvise every show on tour and so we actually developed planned pieces that were derived from the albums.

2. What forms of music are you passionate about? Would you say that any artists in particular have influenced you?

I am not passionate about forms of music. I am passionate about ideas and encountering new ideas. Music, in general, actually inspires me to bring up new thoughts and lyrics spontaneously. It could be Montavani, Chopin, Copernicus musicians, Spanish guitars, Russian dance music, or Mozart. It could be the sound of a thought that actually inspires another thought.

What happened unfortunately after 5 albums was that I began to repeat myself. The easy fruit off the top of my brain had been picked and in order for me to go deeper and create new, it was necessary for me to write a book, "Immediate Eternity," in order to get new material out of me. The philosophy had become too complicated to be just expressed off the top of my head. Getting to the top of the mountain became more difficult as the altitude increased. I am now ready for another new book. I cannot imagine too much new to come out of me without the book.

3. I understand that you began as a writer. Would you say that writing is something you have to do? Are you currently working on anything at the moment?

My first writing was always poetry and then I wrote my first novel, and then my second novel, and my third novel. More poetry. Art is a means of getting stuff out of yourself so that you can see it and understand it. For me, in a way, if I do not write, I do not get to understand in a deeper way. We have perceptions inside of us that we do not even know about. It is necessary to release those perceptions through some form of expression so that we can see what those perceptions are and to find out what we really think. Art for me is only a means of discovery and evolution. It is my pay in a world materially dominated by pop culture.

4. Do you have one album or track that you are most proud of?

I love them all as if they were my children though "The Authorities" in "Null" is a favorite.

5. You have been very closely associated with the New York arts scene over the years. I was wondering if you could please comment on your feelings towards this scene.....how has it changed over the years? What is it like at the moment?

I have not been closely associated with any arts scene. All I ever did was my own thing with very little relationship to anyone else other than the local musicians with whom I performed. The musicians brought in relationships to other people in their music, but that had very little importance to me other than the fact that they inspired me to produce spontaneous lyrics for the albums.

6. Much of your work centers on the atomic and the sub-atomic. Do you feel like there is an ultimate truth at this level?

I believe that there is an ultimate truth at the subatomic level. It is possible that this truth cannot be found anywhere else. The macrocosm is made up of the microcosm. Logic takes us to the microcosm to find explanations. Lately, humanity has been peeling the onion of hidden knowledge more quickly than ever before. It is my job to interpret every new level for myself and then to communicate my interpretation to whomever is willing to listen. Whether Ultimate Truth is able to be discovered or not is the adventure of acquiring "knowledge" even though the "knowledge" is subject to change sometimes 180 degrees of change. For humanity, the realization that humanity does not exist, was never born, and can therefore never die is pure beauty, a liberating beauty that unfortunately very few appreciate. Sic- the work of the present Copernicus.

Finding the ultimate particle that never changes and remains the same forever, the particle upon which everything is built is the foundation for all material and intellectual truth. This truth is built with this particle. But again, nonexistence possibly trumps ultimate Truth. If you are not here and have never been here and will never be here, it may be possible to take the attitude that in nonexistence, Absolute Truth is irrelevant. But then again, encountering Absolute Truth may uncover an individual existence, a special ego that lives forever, (I doubt it, but anything is possible.) but for now, nothing exists.

7. How has your work evolved over the years? Thematically, are you taking on different topics as you progress through time?

Over the years, there has been an enormous evolution of thought. Do not forget. I am alone in these thoughts of nothing exists. There is no one else that I know who has ever recognized nonexistence. Nonexistence is a

real breakthrough in human thought. Unfortunately, the concept of nonexistence must overcome the false propaganda of millions of years that taught existence. Also, because of the revolutionary implications of the theme of nonexistence, the powers that be would not even consider suggesting the idea of nonexistence as a credible view to the people. The powers would lose control of the people. Consequently, human populations occupied with their stomachs, sex organs, and ridiculous religions never come to the realization that true reality is beyond the perceptions of their bare human senses and that this reality beyond their senses that they cannot perceive with their bare senses actually prevents their existence.

In the past, I was able to record fifty different themes off the top of my head in one five hour recording session with 20 improvising musicians. Now, not because of old age, but rather because of the complexity of the material, the implications of nonexistence, the theme in which I am really interested, must come out through concentrated writing and then regurgitating in a recording session. Consequently, I am dealing with the same theme of nonexistence and exploring its depths. You can see this evolution taking place if you listen to the albums in the order that they were created. The book, "Immediate Eternity," also must take its place in the order of creation.

8. You've traveled extensively throughout your life. Has there been one particular city or event that left a very indelible impression on you?

Benares, India changed my life by helping me to bring out, in a way that I could see and understand, the conclusions of all of my thoughts up until that time. I traveled 3rd class trains all over India in 1970. The old world of India was still in charge. No cellphones or computers-just large groups of humans and their religions. Outside of Benares where Buddha had made his first sermon, I found a thin booklet in English entitled, "What is Buddhism?" When I started reading the booklet, it blew my mind. For the first time in my life I had found a voice with which I could agree. There was so much in that booklet that agreed with my thinking and it helped me consolidate my thoughts. I had found a friend who agreed with me. People in the US only laughed at me. Now there were also thoughts in the booklet with which I did not agree. I maintained my thoughts and definitely did not join the Buddhist religion. However, the years went by and I realized that Buddhism involved an ego and an individual soul as does Hinduism, and therein lay the difference between Buddhism and Copernicanism. For Copernicus, there is no ego and no individual eternal soul. For Copernicus, there is nothing.

9. When did you discover the findings of the original Copernicus? Would you say he was the original rebel?

The findings of the original Copernicus are taught in grammar school that the Earth is not the center of the Universe rather the Sun is the center of only our solar system and the Earth revolves around the Sun. Imagine that before the original Copernicus, for two thousand years, western intellectuals believed that the Earth was the center of the entire Universe not only the solar system and these characters would kill you if you disagreed. They would burn you at the stake. Ask Giovanni Bruno. He was burned at the stake in Rome for telling the world that the Earth was not the center of the solar system.

The original Copernicus was a priest, Nicolai Kopernik, and not really a rebel. He published his book on his deathbed. These are not the actions of a rebel. Copernicus had held his heliocentric theory for more than 20 years in secret. His book was revolutionary, but the exterior social actions of its writer were not rebellious. It is very difficult to combine the original thinker with the rebel. They are two different jobs and require two different talents.

I took the name of Copernicus because both Copernicus and I were Polish and also because he blew away two thousand years of false belief. I felt and still feel that I am blowing away 4 million years of false thought that teaches that the bare human senses perceive reality and that humanity exists.

Copernicus was not the original rebel. It took a rebel to take humanity to every level of evolution needed to create the modern world. The first monkey who left the safety of the trees and jumped into the grass and then stood up to see above the grass should be considered the father or mother of the modern world, the original rebel. He or she rebelled against the status quo of life in the trees. He or she dared to make the move and took a chance and left the trees for the benefit of us all.

10. I understand you've collaborated with many talented artists over the years. Has there been one or two artists in particular that you've collaborated with whom you felt a distinct kinship?

Pierce Turner- the father of Copernicus music who still maintains his solo career creating albums and touring in Ireland and New York.

11. What do you think of the internet?

I am still way behind in appreciating the Internet, but for the little that I do use the Internet, it has been fantastic.

12. There's always been a definite tension between the forces of art and finance. Do you think this struggle is especially pertinent today, or do you think it's the same as its always been?

The tensions between art and finance has always been a subject close to my heart. My major in college was history and I was interested in art. Consequently, I made an analysis of artists in history. I discovered that there were two types of artists in history.

1. The first type were those artists like Michaelangelo who created but had a patron to please whether it was the Pope or the Medici family and therefore generally earned good money. 2. The second type were those artists like Van Gogh who really had no patron who suffered for lack of money and perhaps whose suffering because of lack of money provided impetus to create unique art a type of art that could not be created if the artist was working to please another human being. This was art for the expression of a vision of the artist not art to make money.

Consequently, in 1961, as I was returning from Europe on a boat from Europe, (A boat was the only way poor people traveled to Europe in 1961.) I decided that I was going to be an artist. To me an artist was someone who expressed his vision by whatever means he choose be it painting, writing, or whatever with no regard to an audience or to a patron. The true artist cared only about expressing his vision of Truth. Caring about pleasing the patron or the audience was the job of entertainers and entertainers were not true artists. They were just entertainers- someone who would do or say anything for money.

Consequently, the first choice of being an artist with a patron was not acceptable for me. Also, being the

starving artist like Van Gogh also did not appeal to me. Art should be a positive wonderful liberating adventure not a source of hellish suffering.

Therefore, I invented my own new third road to being an artist which I have maintained all of my life since that decision. Since I lived in the richest country in the world and though I was poor, I would make my own money and create my own art with no regard to any audience or any patron. I would be the ultimate judge of my work since I would be paying for it.

As a result, all of the albums of Copernicus have been released with my money and the book was published with my money. I have not been an aggressive marketeer of Copernicus, but I always said that the day will come when an angel will appear and properly market the work of Copernicus. My job is the creation and publication. There is something inside of me that does not like to market my own work. I really do not have the time. I could spend the rest of my life marketing.

Finally, to answer your question, if you have your own money and losing it is not an issue, then there is no conflict over money and art. However, if money is being invested to earn money, then there will definitely be tensions between the artist and the money investor because in reality the artist and the investor may have different goals. Soon the true artist under these conditions will be transformed by his environment into an entertainer. The artist wants to supposedly express the truth, but the investor just wants to earn money. It could be that telling the truth will not earn money; it could be guaranteed that telling the truth will not earn money. You must tell the audience what they want to hear like the politicians and then you will get elected or sell records. You must please the audience. The audience becomes the patron. All of this is not for Copernicus. To hell with the audience and the patron.

13. It seems that people who hear your recordings are typically either fascinated or baffled by them. Why do you think your work divides listeners in this manner?

Copernicus records are ahead of their time. People are either open minded or close minded. Consequently, depending on who is listening to something that is ahead of its time, the reaction will be fascination or bafflement.

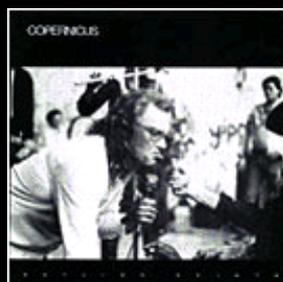
14. What is next on the horizon? Do you plan to record any new albums anytime in the future?

I grow through expression. Consequently, when I am 110 years old, I will be writing or recording if it is possible. The formula for personal evolution is through expression. Intellectual evolution is the paradise of life. There may be no other way to evolve intellectually. You have to get the inside of the brain outside of you so that you can see it and understand it. Whatever you are is inside of you and it has to come out. I believe that if you do not get it outside of you, you will not grow at the rate that you should grow. You could possibly die and never know yourself, never know what you really think. What you think you think may be what the TV or some rap record has placed in your brain. Frightening.

I love to perform, but there must first be the process of the new thought, followed by the recording and then followed by the new concert. For the last two years, I have been whipsawed by unexpected uncontrollable exterior materialistic forces which have forced me to grow silently and inside myself. These exterior forces are now more in control and I will soon begin to write the new book after once again reestablishing the writing discipline and then begin to record and then to perform concerts.

Copernicus' Website

A RETROSPECTIVE: THE FIRST TWO COPERNICUS ALBUMS



"Nothing Exists" (1984)

This is absolute brilliance caught on disc. It opens with the hypnotic and sensual "I Won't Hurt You". On this track, Copernicus' vocals bare a striking resemblance to James Earle Jones. The song struts with a sexy reggae pace. "Blood" sounds exactly like the profound philosopher that Copernicus is. Skeletal music is mixed with spooky female backing vocals and Copernicus' vocals which are spontaneously created right then and there. The man can wail like no one else. "I Know What I Think" is beautiful chaos, while "Quasimodo" perfectly walks the line between genius and insanity. It, like the rest of the album, is absolutely intoxicating.



"Victim of the Sky" (1986)

This album begins with "Lies", wherein Copernicus defiantly screams "I am free!". "The Wanderer" has a Leonard Cohen feel...it is a haunting examination of perpetual loneliness. More so that the previous album, on this outing Copernicus seems to be focusing more on characters. Perhaps this was inspired by folks he met on his journeys. "White From Black" is fantastic and sprawling; it is a history lesson from what sounds like an all-knowing pastor giving a sermon. There are also more electronics on this album. The drum machine on "Not Him Again!" is absolutely pulverizing, and the song is unrestrained insanity. And then from out of nowhere comes a surprisingly good reggae-pop song, "Desperate", which is totally hummable. "From Bacteria" is a galvanizing rant, and "The Lament of Joe Apples" says more about post World War Two America than anything else I've ever heard.



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