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Anarchy in Prague?

When Copernicus Crossed the Iron Curtain

By David Lührssen

Rock was still dangerous in Eastern Europe during the 1980s; the arrest of musicians and suppression of concerts as illegal gatherings were still fresh memories. And yet, somehow or other, a New York performance poet at the fringe of the rock scene, calling himself Copernicus, gained an impressive following in the Soviet Bloc during its last years. A DVD has been released of his 1989 concert in what was then Czechoslovakia, *Live! In Prague*.

The end of the Communist Czech state was only months away and surely many of the 9,000 young people in the arena for this concert played some role in its demise. Copernicus performed his song-screeds in English, and one can only wonder how clearly the crowd followed as he ranted, "I've always been in trouble with the authorities" and urged them to "dare to see for yourself what to see." Shaking to the beat, the audience was probably decoding the gist of his anarchic message.

The band, which included longtime collaborator Larry Kirwan on synthesizer and guitar, sounded loud, loose and unrehearsed. They provided an angry framework for Copernicus' confrontational, fish-shaking performance.

Copernicus never found such large concert audiences in his homeland, but emerged in the late '70s from Max's Kansas City, the Mudd Club and CBGB as a poet who performed with improvisational musicians. The label behind *Live! In Prague*, New York's Moonjune Records, has reissued no less than five Copernicus albums on CD. Recorded from 1984 through 2009, these discs document the poet declaiming on the necessity of freedom from pernicious illusions. Much of what we think is wrong and we need only to look to quantum physics to see that reality is more than the shell of appearances. Occasionally his voice is reminiscent of Captain Beefheart's growl, but he speaks rather than sings, surrounding by a varying sonic palette of squawking synthesizers, skeletal punk beats and reggae echoes.

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