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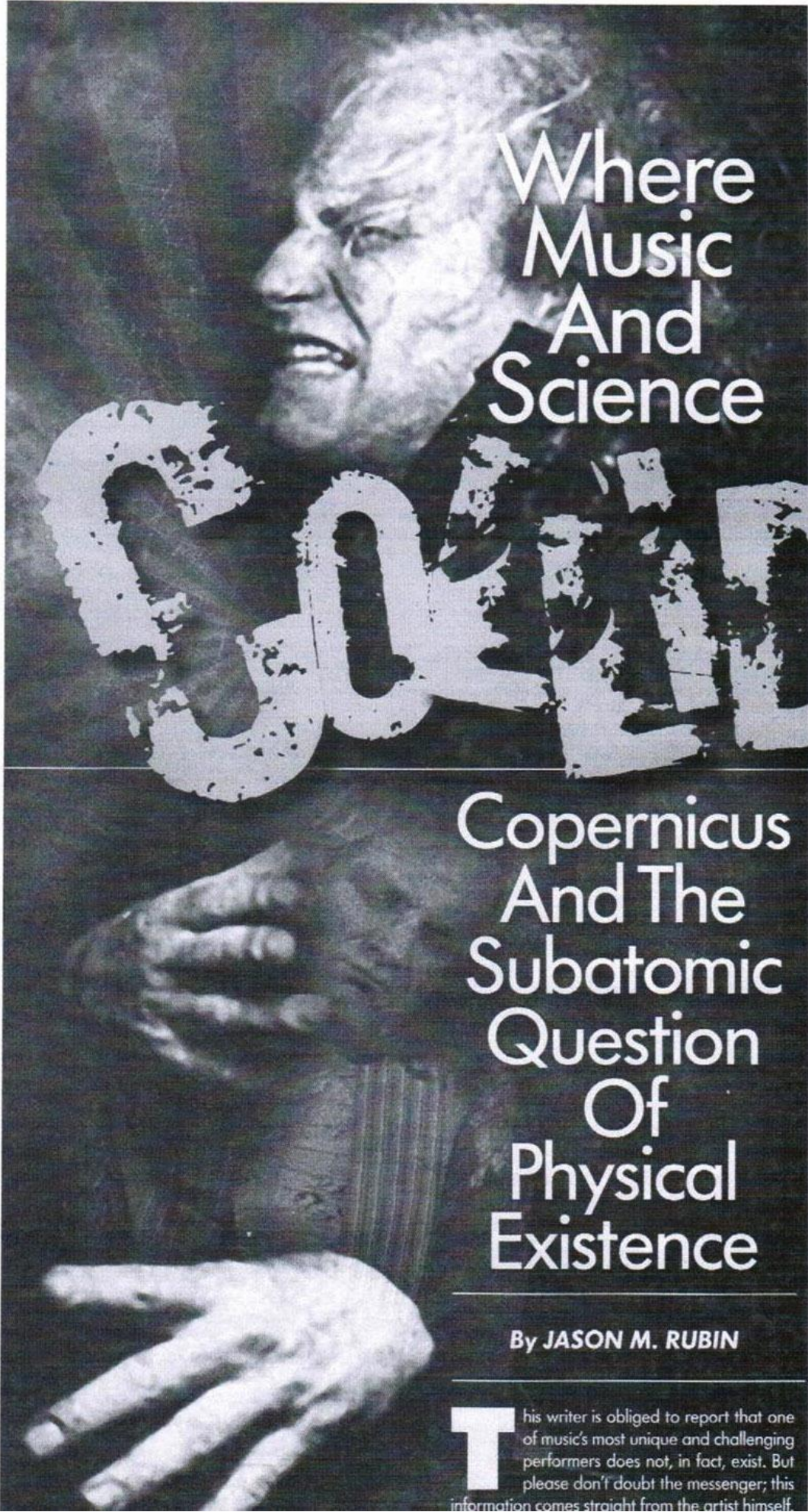
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Where Music And Science

COPIERNICUS

Copernicus And The Subatomic Question Of Physical Existence

By **JASON M. RUBIN**

This writer is obliged to report that one of music's most unique and challenging performers does not, in fact, exist. But please don't doubt the messenger; this information comes straight from the artist himself.

The 74-year-old Copernicus – otherwise known as **Joseph Smalkowski** (unless, of course, he doesn't exist either) – has honed his philosophy and art in studios and on concert stages for the better part of five decades. While raging like an Old Testament prophet about the subatomic world (which does exist), he professes not to care if anyone hears his message or buys his recordings. But if you like intelligence, intensity and spontaneity in your music, you'll want to lend an ear: Copernicus has created a body of work so compellingly original that once you're exposed it's impossible to ignore.

Described elsewhere as equal parts **Alan Parson Project, Sun Ra, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Socrates** and **Ram Das**,

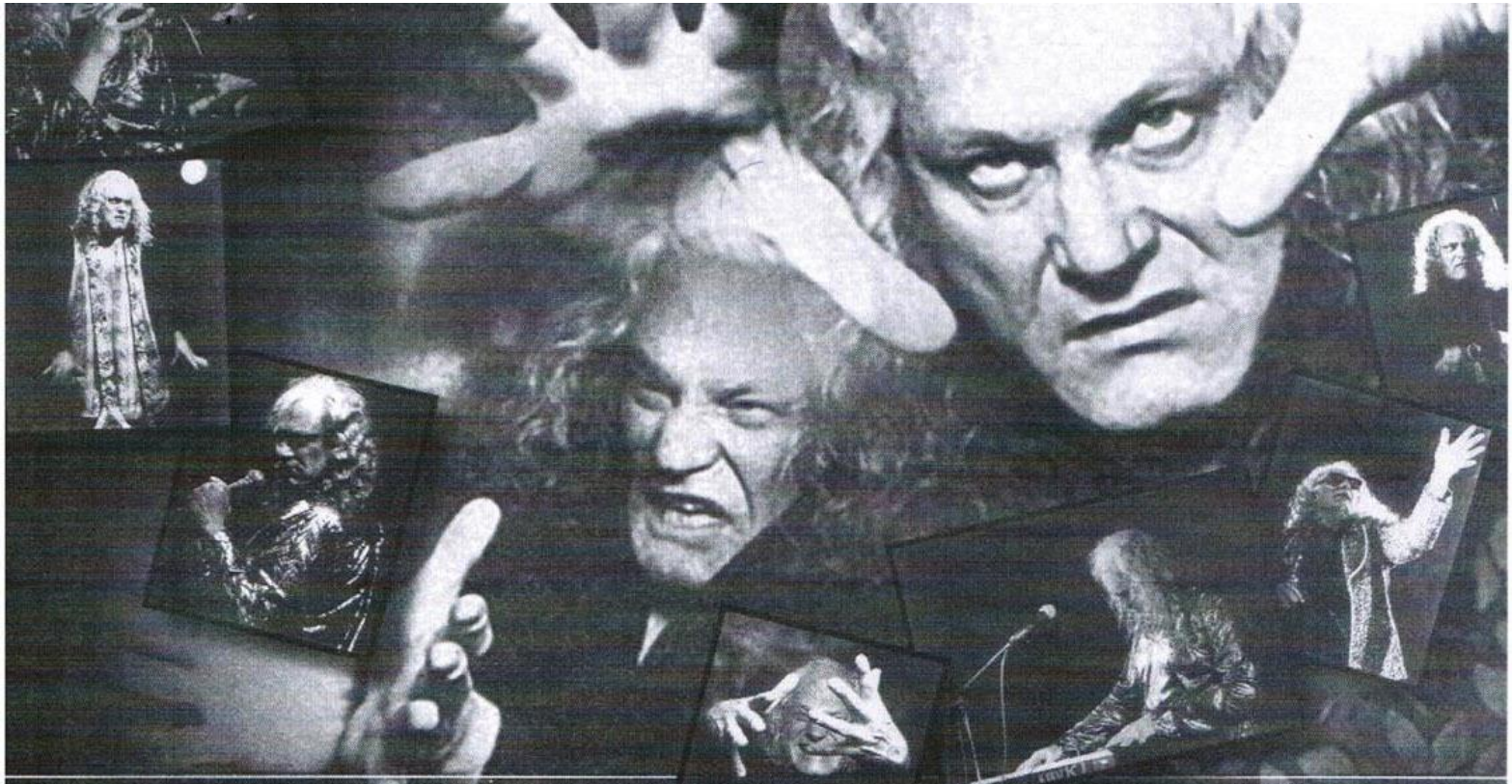
it would be useful to begin explaining Copernicus by the science-based worldview informing his lyrics / prose-poetry. More useful, still, if he explains it in his own words. "I left the Roman Catholic church in 1974," he says. "I didn't agree with their myths and wanted to find out what was true. There started to be information about atoms coming out and I latched onto it.

"Now, if everything is made of atoms and these atoms are constantly moving around, nothing is the same from one moment to the next. If nothing is constant then nothing really exists! You can call me Copernicus now, but what do you call me a moment later when I change? Therefore, there is no Copernicus. And there is no past, present, or future. There is just a subatomic world that human senses cannot decipher."

Judging by album titles *Nothing Exists* (his 1984 debut), *Null, Disappearance*, and his latest, 2013's *Worthless*, Copernicus might seem a dark diviner of doom and gloom. The man's recordings and live shows indicate otherwise, however. His impassioned delivery of highly articulated vocal rants, accompanied by exceptional music, is

"...everything is made of atoms... constantly moving around, nothing is the same from one moment to the next. If nothing is constant then nothing really exists!"

like nothing you've ever heard. Right or wrong, Copernicus is no dummy. And, in a strange way, his commitment to an evolving message over the decades gives hope. After all, his nine albums may or may not exist, but somethinga real ha-



poet in the 1960s and '70s. In 1978, he hooked up with two New York-based Irish musicians: **Larry Kirwan** (who later would form **Black 47**) and **Pierce Turner**. They starting gigging as a trio and realized their unique blend of music and poetry was more powerful than the stereotypical bongo-and-beret scene of a prior generation. "I found that the music stimulated my mind," he says.

By the time *Nothing Exists* was recorded, the group included more than a dozen musicians. Lineups would change over the years as Kirwan and Pierce remained steadfast contributors on keyboards, guitars, woodwinds and percussion, fusing rock, jazz, psychedelia, and ambient soundscapes. From the outset, performances were heavily improvised. "All great musicians can improvise," says Copernicus. "When we get together, my words feed them and their music feeds me. None of us knows what any of us are going to do. They listen to what I say and play accordingly."

An exception to that intuitive process occurred when Copernicus recorded 2001 album *Immediate Eternity* with native Ecuadorans who didn't understand English, let alone his arcane ideas. As with much of his life and work, the opportunity presented itself as creative happenstance after Copernicus went on sabbatical. "I felt I was starting to repeat myself," he says, "so I took time off to write a book." That book, also titled *Immediate Eternity*, consumed three years of his life.

Copernicus purchased land on a mountain in the South American country and beckoned

unsuspecting musicians to his realm of relative existence. He recited book excerpts while the players improvised, oblivious to meaning or message. "We recorded at the best studio in Guayaquil, which only cost us \$6 an hour. So that tells you about the quality of the facility. Then we did about 25 concerts and the music evolved to such an extent that we went into a better studio and rerecorded the entire album."

This appeared in 2005 as *Immediate Eternity II* with the same track order, though most of the pieces are longer and even more intense. The cosmopolitan Copernicus ultimately released versions of *Immediate Eternity II* in English, Spanish, French, and German.

Leonardo Pavkovic, who distributes Copernicus recordings on his MoonJune Records label and has known him for 23 years, says the artist must be accepted as an altogether different breed of cat. "Copernicus has to be seen from a different perspective. He is not a musician; he never was and never will be. It's all about what he says and thinks, which is altogether very 'progressive' to me," Pavkovic says. "He is not for everyone. Either you like him or you cannot get it and dislike him. There is nothing in between."

As with most worthwhile art, the essence of Copernicus' work reveals itself over time, layer by layer. It's easy, initially, to get rapturously lost in music/vocal cadence and miss the actual words. Once you zone in, though, his lyrical prose is unquestionably interesting, provocative – even inspiring.

Perhaps most striking is how prolific he is. Granted, nine albums in three decades isn't an enormous output. But when Copernicus does record he produces abundantly in short spans of time, nearly all of it conjured on the spot. Albums *Disappearance* and *Cipher and Decipher* from 2009 and 2011, respectively, were tracked in a single day. That's more than 140 minutes of intense improvis captured in one session. For latest disc *Worthless*, 26 pieces were recorded and eight made the album, the 18 leftovers slated for future release.

But, of course, according to Copernicus, there is no future. Then again, maybe there is. "Copernicus will never say that he has the truth," he says, referring to himself as he often does in third person. "This is his opinion. Other people can come to their conclusions but the important thing is to think about it."

"The subatomic world is a real place," Copernicus emphasizes. "You have to take it seriously or else you're living an illusion. It's the elephant in the room. The next generation will understand it better than we do. [Greek philosopher] **Heraclitus** said that we never step twice into the same river; it changes every second. And one of his followers replied that you can't even step into the same river once. That's pretty much what I'm trying to say."

It's not an easy message to digest. But like medicine wrapped in chocolate, the Copernicus mix of spontaneous prose and improvised music ultimately is good for you and good to you, mind and body, down to the last kinetic atom. **Ω**