

MUSIC

Pole Star

BY JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

Copernicus  
Nothing Exists  
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Copernicus  
Victim of the Sky  
Nevermore

I DON'T KEEP UP LIKE I USED to. I just heard of this guy Copernicus a couple of months ago. A friend loaned me the 1985 lp, *Nothing Exists*. "Here, you like this weird stuff." What's he do? "You know. That weird stuff you write about."

It's a peculiarity of these word of mouth acts that people usually don't know what words to mouth. Turns out the guy was a regular in the East Village clubs of the early 80s and his two records have gotten raves in bunches of small press and punk fanzines. But even they generally begin with some variation of I like it but I don't know why and I don't know how to describe it. Which is usually the kiss of death, but you should always leave yourself open for the exceptions.

You could say that Copernicus is just another hippie beatnik performance poet fronting a spacy rock band. Then you have to add that his deep-throated growls and bellows sometimes remind you of Jim Morrison, sometimes John Cale, sometimes John Giorno, Beefheart or Barry White on bad acid. And that he began his performing career in 1978 when he jumped up on stage where a couple of guys were playing Irish folk-rock, and grabbed a mike, and started yelling poems into it, and they jammed along, and it sounded better than what they'd been playing anyway.

And that the band grew into this loose-knit orchestra of umpteen guitars and several drummers and singers, saxes, violins, keyboards and etc. Who sometimes make tumble-down cosmic jazz like Sun Ra's Arkestra, and sometimes wait away on synths like all those Eno-Cluster European space cadets, and sometimes churn a metallic post-punk sludge of Jesus And Souxsie Swans kill-me-quick dirges, and sometimes bop along to some pretty snazzy NYC-type art rock.

And that Copernicus' real name, god I love this, is Joe Smalkowski.

If you're a sucker for these obscure cult legends, Joe's your man. A big,



As Copernicus, Joe Smalkowski lives up to his name.

shaggy bear of a guy, he was one of those world-wandering hippies of the 60s and 70s, spent a number of years bumming around Europe, served a hitch in the Navy, and settled down in New York about 10 years ago. He has a trunkload of unpublished novels and poems, and he's constantly churning out more, which isn't hard when you consider that most of what he does is spontaneous—he makes it up on the spot, spinning out the words and whatever images come to mind, urged on by the band, urging the band on. He says he never repeats himself, and couldn't if he tried.

He also says "Copernicus" is not just his stage name but his alter ego, because he and the original Copernicus are both great Polish thinkers. As the original shattered preconceptions by removing the earth from the center of the solar system, Smalkowski has what he considers a shattering philosophy of his own. It's a cross between nihilism and the theory of relativity, with reality only existing on the subatomic level ("Atomic Nevermore"), where everything changes from instant to instant, so that what we perceive is just an illusion.

While that's fun stuff to know, none of it really explains the compelling, hypnotic attraction of this work. You sort of need to hear the work, both albums in fact, to get the effect. Copernicus

rules a surreal undersea kingdom of flitting images and coldly luminescent ideas emerging from the murky subconscious depths. You need to walk the streets a while to feel like you know the place.

Though not released until last year, *Nothing Exists* contains material that goes back as far as a live performance at Max's Kansas City in 1980. The rest of it was excerpted from several hours of spontaneous word-and-music jams in the studio.

If a guy like this can be said to have hit tunes, they would have to be "Quasimodo," "I Know What I Think" and "Nagasaki," all punkesque noisemakers from that first album. Released as a single, "Quasimodo" got some college radio play. The band cranks up an angry, industrial punk storm of distorted guitars and metallic drums that sounds a little like The Residents or Pere Ubu and a lot like a busy factory on the ocean floor. Copernicus, his voice filtered to sound like a short-wave transmission from Pluto, moans and shouts big, barrel-chested praise of the hunchback in English, German, and I think French and Polish. He slips in some of his philosophy, speaking of a time when people finally realize that reality is a dream "and death will be dead, and life will be dead," which leads to some maniacal laughter in an

electronic whirlwind and the triumphant cry: "The barbarians cannot win this way! The barbarians will never conquer this fucking Rome!"

What's it mean? Damned if I know but that's part of what makes it fun. You feel like you've walked into a dark cinema in the middle of a Duchamp film of *Paradise Lost*, with this beschizy poet playing Satan. If you were going to make or break Copernicus fans, "Quasimodo" would be the test case.

In a similar punk-metal vein, "Know What I Think" jangles and crashes like an inside-out "Gloria" with Egypto-psychedelic organ trills, hardcore beat, and Copernicus ranting and raving in a hurricane of echoes like a drunken Polish Lear in the kingdom of the damned. The aptly-named "Nagasaki," also clipped from a gig Max's, is five minutes of rock holocaust, of feedback bombs, spaceish bloop and bubbles, garbled shout and rattles. It ends with Copernicus yelling a pretty good trope of his philosophy: "Death does not exist! Birth does not exist! Life does not exist! Copernicus does not exist! Earth does not exist! Max's Kansas City does not exist!" The audience responds with hoots and claps, and Copernicus, in a lovably ridiculous turn, sighs and growls at them, "You think your poor applause is going to change anything? You think the clap of your poor lips on your poor chest is going to change the structure of the atom?" I've always wanted to hear a rock idol say something like that to his audience. Kind of a drunken intellectual's version of Jim Morrison's *It's a Wonderful Life*. I guess.

The rest of *Nothing Exists* is quiet, mostly Copernicus grumbling to himself, strange images while the band constructs envelopes of Euro-acid psychedelia. The most cosmic is called "Blood." Copernicus offers the theology that "It's just ignorance that creates our blood," while the band makes hallo-ween noises with a rambling violin tinkling vibes, breathy synths and a couple of death's head chick singers going oo-oo in big echoes. The straightest cut, "I Won't Hurt You," is a last shot bit with a lot of deep romantic growling. Like Barry White tripping out with Popol Vuh, it's Copernicus. Joe says, at his most "gentle and normal." Which makes it in some ways the weirdest cut here.

I think what gives *Nothing Exists* such a dangerous, exhilarating energy is the spontaneity. Listening to the album is like hearing a complicated morass of industrial machinery laboring at top speed just before it flies into million pieces. But where so much damage noisemaking is just noise and teenage angst, Copernicus' work has an internal, dreamlike logic and a poetic sensitivity that hold it together and make you want to listen beyond the initial rush. Hardly every pop consumer's cup of tea, but pretty hard to ignore.