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Copernicus: Nothing Exists

This is a rerelease of poet/performing artist, Copernicus' debut outing from 1984. Born Joseph Smalkowski, his first love is of poetry, free narration and observation, especially on science and the quantum world. In 1984 he collaborated with saxophonist, Melody Peach and later took inspiration from fellow New York avant garde circuit multi-instrumentalists, Larry Kirwan and Pierce Turner. The album features both (Kirwan plays lead guitar and keys on this album while Turner is musical director) along with Andy Leahy on violin, Jeffrey Lad and Fionnghuala on flute, Thomas Hamlin on drums, Chris Katris and Jimmy Zhivago (second guitars), Peter Collins and Fred Chalenor (bass) Steve Menasche (marimba, percussion), Fred Parcells (trombone) and Paddy Higgins (bhadran, toms).



For such a rich mixture of musicians it must have been quite an experience trying to work around Copernicus' esoteric deep bass narrations. The album consists of mostly short pieces with one longer 11 minute composition. The gentle opener features a melodic bass and simple drum arrangement which supports a whistling synth motif with Copernicus's vocal backed by choral repetition of the song title, "I won't hurt you". This deceptively commercial start is quickly washed away in "Blood", with an Orson Wells style reflection on the existence of life and the concept of 'Nevermore'. "Its just ignorance that creates all the blood" he declares, denouncing the world for failing to understand that 'nothing exists'. Is he saying that life is unreal or that 'nothing' exists in a very real form in the quantum world (dark matter and the space between atomic particles and so on)?

"I know what I think" starts with a chant of "change of rhythm" and it certainly does this along with a change in intensity, obscurity and the introduction of a powerful driving riff for the first time. "Quasimodo" gets into even weirder territory with organic, aboriginal-sounding backing, imagined Quasimodo pronouncements, distorted guitar and violent crashing piano in the background. As the piece develops he blends in his early observations of Nevermore and perhaps compares his struggle to that of Quasimodo to reveal the truth. "Let me rest" is the long track, a major lament through poetry and a minimal keyboard and violin backdrop. Almost excruciating in the intensity of Copernicus' despair, he calls for a need to understand, driven by his 'own blank paper'. The ensemble come to life for a short interlude between verses but Copernicus returns with a final series of exhortations to let him rest in various places, some less comfortable than others!

"Nagasaki" explores the first and second forced introductions of a population to the quantum world. You might be forgiven for thinking you have switched to Edgar Broughton on a Hawkwind album on this one as it riffs and surges with bubbling synths swirling around Copernicus' seething anger, spitting out expletives and pleading for the inner harmony to be gained from the understanding of Nevermore. The closing piece, "Atomic Nevermore" starts with Copernicus' Orson Wells-like observations again where he reinforces the theme that truth lies in the quantum world and that all else is illusion. Clicking percussion with spiralling guitar and keys tinkle around the stretched words and synth backed surging climaxes of ideas, accompanied by manic laughter.

This is a powerful work but it does not make comfortable or easy listening and should be avoided by those looking for a more musical and less dramatic construction. For those interested in his later declamations, try Victim Of The Sky (1987), Deeper (1989), Null (1990), No Borderline (1993), Immediate Eternity (2001), Immediate Eternity II (2005) and Disappearance (2009). His website, www.copernicusonline.net, has over 20 performance videos which give somewhat greater comprehension of what he is about.

Track Listing

1. I won't hurt you
2. Blood
3. I know what I think
4. Quasimodo
5. Let me rest
6. Nagasaki
7. Atomic Nevermore

Added: August 23rd 2010

Reviewer: Richard Barnes

Score: ★★★★★

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