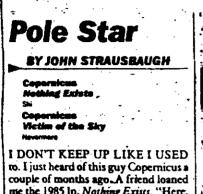
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MUSIC



to 1 lost near 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 poer fronting a spacy rock band. Then you have to add that his deep-throated growis 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 where 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, sazes, violins, keyboards and etc. Who sometimes make tumble-down cosmic jazz like Sun Ra's Arkestra, and sometimes waft away on synths like all those Eno-Cluster European space cadets, and sometimes churn a metallic postpunk 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 Smallkowski.

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



As Copernicus, Joe Smallkowski 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 He has a trunkload of unpublished novels and poems, and he's constantly churning out more, which isn't hard when you consider that most of what he does is spontaneous-he makes it up on the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 thé earth from the center of the solar system, Smallkowski 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 "Quasi-modo," "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 shortwave 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 trium phant cry: "The barbarians cannot w this way! The barbarians will nev conquer this fucking Rome!"

What's it mean? Damned if I know but that's part of what makes it fu You feel like you've walked into a da cinema in the middle of a Ducham film of *Paradise Lost*, with this b schizy poet playing Satan. If you we going to make or break Copernic: fans, "Quasimodo" would be the te case.

In a similar punk-metal vein, " Know What I Think" jangles ar crashes like an inside-out "Gloria with Egypto-psychedelic organ trills hardcore beat, and Copernicus rantic and raving in a hurricane of echoes li a drunken Polish Lear in the kingdo of the damned. The aptly-name "Nagasaki," also clipped from a gig Max's, is five minutes of rock hol caust, of feedback bombs, spacesh bloops and bubbles, garbled shou and rattles. It ends with Copernic yelling a pretty good trope of his phil sophy: "Death does not exist! Bir does not exist! Life does not exis Copernicus does not exist! Earth do not exist! Max's Kansas City does n exist!" The audience responds wi hoots and claps, and Copernicus, in lovably ridiculous turn, sighs and grow at them, "You think your poor applau is going to change anything? You this the clap of your poor lips on your po chest is going to change the structure the atom?" I've always wanted to he a rock idol say something like that his audience. Kind of a drunken into lectual's version of Jim Morrison's f I guess.

The rest of Nothing Exists is quiet mostly Copernicus grumbling l strange images while the band or structs envelopes of Euro-acid psych delia. The most cosmic is call "Blood." Copernicus offers the theo that "It's just ignorance that crea our blood," while the band makes hal ween noises with a rambling viol tinkling vibes, breathy synths and couple of death's head chick sing going 00-00 in big echoes. The straig est cut, "I Won't Hurt You," is a la soul bit with a lot of deep roman growling. Like Barry White tripp out with Popol Vuh, it's Copernicus Joe says, at his most "gentle and n mal." Which makes it in some ways weirdest cut here.

I think what gives Nothing Exsuch a dangerous, exhilarating eneris the spontaneity. Listening to t album is like hearing a complicat morass of industrial machinery labing at top speed just before it flies int million pieces. But where so much a damage noisemaking is just noise a teenage angst, Copernicus' work has internal, dreamlike logic and a poor sensitivity that hold it together a make you want to listen beyond initial rush. Hardly every pop co sumer's cup of tea, but pretty hard ignore.

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