

HEADCHEESE

PORTLAND, MAINE

June 1988



Copernicus *Deeper* Nevermore Records

Reviewed by Douglas Watts

FIRST THERE IS the newness of the Copernicus experience: the Ahab-on-the-Mount bellowing in various states of synch with the "now" kinda free-jazz big band funk bottomed ensemble.

Joe Smalkowski is from Brooklyn, New York. He calls himself Copernicus and refers to himself in the third person. He tells us reality on any level above the relation between atomic particles is bitter illusion, a product of human minds that are themselves illusions.

In his best moments, Copernicus stands as a raw and primeval bard trapped in a deadeningly conforming world: an Apache ancestor scraping petroglyphs in a mesa, shouting glories and doubts to the Cro-Magnon moon, or an urban nihilist cursing the victory of industrialized world slavery in "They Own Everthing."

*to get to your job.
'Cause you want to buy a coat or a house.
They own everything*

Whether mixing improvised lyrics in two languages to music that sounds like Pink Floyd on weedkillers (SonofaBitch From the North), or insanely obscure historical allusions to a Bo Diddley beat (Chichen Itza Elvis), Copernicus & Co. brew a primordial soup of subconscious invention, breeding songs that spring from the crazy, indecipherable chemistry of two dozen musicians working without a blueprint.

Think of Victor Buono (King Tut of Batman) snorting ether, acting as a channel for the ghosts of Hegel and Geronimo, rapping over a six minute frenzied finale of an Ornette Coleman concert.

Why bother making a record if nothing, let alone an audience of record buyers exists? Copernicus answers that on "Hurl Silence:"

*And then it seems if I had anything to say
I would hurl only silence to the world
Allowing the atomic and subatomic particles
To make all the noise ...
I should just stay in silence ...
But I don't.*

Even the limpest, safest Top 40 band achieves moments when the notes seem to come from nowhere; when an unseen hand guides the music, far above the intuition of each player, and the music reaches its free-est, least contrived form. Copernicus shuns a script to take full advantage of this. He avoids the safety of the middle ground, takes big gambles and ends up winning.

The weakest song on the album, "Disco Days Are Over," gives a glimpse of the Copernicus-Flying Walenda-No-Net-Needed-Wankel-Rotary-Engine-Of-Improvisation running on two gummed-up cylinders. The musical noodling holds together fairly well, there are no obvious flubs, but the spirit and freshness that makes the other songs shine is gone.

Copernicus senses this growing inertia (?) and starts screaming, **STOP THE SHIT! THE POLICE ARE COMING! IT'S A RAID! HIDE THE INSTRUMENTS! HIDE THE INSTRUMENTS! NO MUSIC!**

Unfortunately, the comic effort to salvage the seven minute song comes too late. But by showing a failure of his spontaneous method, Copernicus strengthens his other songs by revealing how hard it is pull off a fully successful improvisation.

Theoretically, you can improvise to the point that it becomes practiced and rote: by blowing too hard to fan the flame of spontaneity you end up spitting on it and blowing it out. You don't say "let's be spontaneous" and start doing things that seem spontaneous. Like a zen koan, you just don't be unspontaneous and it comes out by itself. *Deeper* captures Copernicus and Co. sliding down this razor-edge contradiction with deceiving ease. Buy the album for \$8 through the mail and the guy will autograph it for you. (Nevermore Inc., P.O. Box 170150, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217)