

FIRE OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN

A walk through the music I love

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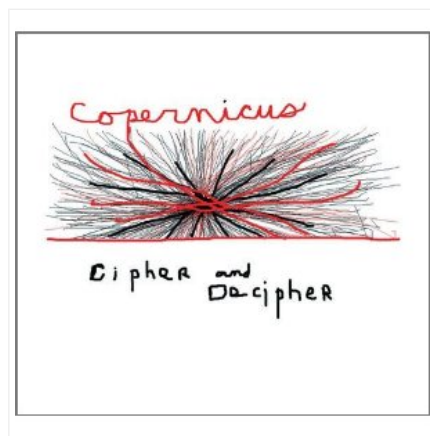


« Live Review: Moraine at Orion Studios, Trey Gunn – I'll Tell What I Saw (2010) »
Baltimore – April 30, 2011

Copernicus – CIPHER and

Decipher (2011)

May 8, 2011 by progmistress



TRACKLISTING:

1. Into the Subatomic (5:21)
2. Free at Last! (5:17)
3. Mud Becomes Mind (5:14)
4. I Don't Believe (5:53)
5. Matter Is Energy (4:55)
6. Comprehensible (6:38)
7. Infinite Strength (8:05)
8. Where No One Can Win (8:05)
9. Step Out of Your Body (5:12)
10. The Cauldron (15:18)

LINEUP:

Copernicus – poetry, lead vocals, keyboards
Pierce Turner – musical director, piano, Hammond organ, percussion, backing vocals
Larry Kirwan – electric guitar, vocals
Mike Fazio – electric guitar
Bob Hoffnar – steel guitar
Raimundo Penaforte – viola, acoustic guitar, cavaquinho, percussion, vocals
Cesar Aragundi – electric and acoustic guitar
Fred Parcells – trombone
Rob Thomas – violin
Matty Fillou – tenor saxophone, percussion
Marvin Wright – bass guitar, electric guitar, percussion
George Rush – tuba, contrabass, bass guitar
Thomas Hamlin – drums, percussion
Mark Brotter – drums, percussion

The thirteenth album by New York-based performer-poet Copernicus (aka Joseph Smalkovski), and the third released by MoonJune Records (which is going to reissue the artist's whole catalogue), *Cipher and Decipher* is definitely not your average 'progressive rock' album, ambitious but ultimately accessible. In fact, is one of those records for which the expression 'acquired taste' seems to be tailor-made. and which is at the same time easy and difficult to describe:

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easy if you want to simplify matters, and say that it is based around a somewhat loopy guy's ranting and raving over a rather free-form musical background; difficult if you want, instead, to avoid platitudes and offer would-be listeners a more in-depth, nuanced analysis.

Needless to say, even from a quick perusing of the release notes it should be clear that *Cipher and Decipher* is not for the faint-hearted, or those who like carefully structured music, engaging melodies and conventional singing. This is the archetypal underground production, a marriage of music and poetry steeped in the American beat tradition, dripping with existential ennui and metaphysical musings, in which the music often feels like an afterthought, often sharply diverging from the vocal parts in a sort of schizophrenic effect. Clocking in at slightly under 70 minutes, and barely offering any respite from Copernicus' over-the-top vocal exertions, it sounds more than a bit daunting (even for a forward-thinking label like MoonJune) and as such quite unlikely to appeal to casual or mainstream-oriented listeners.

And yet, in spite of all these drawbacks, *Cipher and Decipher* exerts a weird sort of attraction. After a while everything seems to click and, so to speak, begins to make sense. Even as Copernicus' voice may rub you the wrong way, and make you wish he limited himself to publishing books of poetry like most other people would do, the music perversely sucks you in, and you may find yourself actually enjoying the experience – almost in spite of yourself. At times Copernicus' secular-preacher recitation blends with the music, at others the two go their separate ways, in a somewhat frustrating fashion. He roars, cajoles, whines, chants, emotes like a Shakespearian actor, leaving very little breathing space to the listener, repeating the key words around which his whole work seems to revolve with a sort of incantatory effect, often augmented by the loose yet oddly mesmerizing nature of the musical accompaniment.

Regarding the concept on which *Cipher and Decipher* is based, my readers will be able to find all the background information they need in the links I have provided at the end of the review – as well as in the album's very thorough liner notes. While other reviewers have dedicated at least some space to the album's lyrical content, I would rather concentrate on the musical aspect, even if I realize it is far from easy to divorce the two. Generally, I do not particularly care for nihilism, and have to admit not being too interested in speculations about the nature of the universe, though neither aspect disturbs me as other kinds of content (i.e. overtly racist lyrics) would. My main interest here is the music, and this is why I would rather avoid launching in any detailed analysis of Copernicus' message which is much better presented elsewhere.

When listening to *Cipher and Decipher*, it is important to bear in mind that the music and the vocals often seem to be at odds with each other instead of working together, as would happen in more mainstream recordings. This means that special attention to the musical part is required, and it obviously helps if you like almost completely unscripted music as opposed to the carefully constructed patterns of most conventional progressive rock. Provided by a veritable orchestra of 15 outstanding musicians (including 4 guitarists and almost a full horn section) led by long-time Copernicus associates, expatriate Irishmen Pierce Turner and Larry Kirwan (the latter, together with Thomas Hamlin and Fred Parcells, a member of Celtic-inspired band Black 47), the musical accompaniment to Copernicus' proclamations is a wildly eclectic mix of influences ranging from experimental free-jazz to early Pink Floyd-style psychedelia.

Organ-drenched opener "Into the Subatomic" immediately sets the scene, both musically and lyrically, followed by the lovely but somber "Free at Last!", the most genuinely Pinkfloydian number on offer, embellished by some noteworthy acoustic and electric guitar work; while "Mud Becomes Mind" sports a cheery, Afro-Brazilian vibe. The disc's central section owes quite a lot to free-jazz, rather gloomy in "I Don't Believe" with its lonesome-sounding trumpet, sparse yet upbeat in "Matter Is Energy". On the other hand, "Comprehensible" superimposes an overt homage to Pink Floyd, with Larry Kirwan repeating "set the controls further out of the sun" (a paraphrase of the title of one of their most iconic early compositions) to the somewhat chaotic free-jazz template, and "Infinite Strength" (based on Van Morrison's celebrated "Gloria") sounds like something out of the Blues Brothers soundtrack – making you want to dance in spite of Copernicus' weighty proclamations. More Latin influences surface in the funky "Step Out of Your Body", and the references to Iraq and Afghanistan in "No One Can Win" are aptly punctuated by Middle Eastern echoes conjured by flute and strings. The album climaxes with the sonic and verbal apocalypse of the aptly-titled "The Cauldron", a 15-minute, voice-driven space jam.

As the previous paragraphs clearly illustrate, *Cipher and Decipher* is a very peculiar effort, targeted to adventurous listeners, and likely to send the more

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conservative set or prog rans running for the exits. This is not background music, and is definitely not relaxing – on the contrary, it can easily become a tad wearying, especially on account of Copernicus’ very idiosyncratic vocal delivery and apocalyptic lyrics. The album’s running time can also be an issue, so those who find it hard to concentrate for long might want to avoid tackling it in one go. However, its somewhat sneaky allure may well win over those who are not afraid to get acquainted with less predictable approaches to progressive music.


Links:

<http://www.copernicsonline.net>

<http://www.moonjune.com>

http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=74511 (interview)

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2 Responses

Gary on May 9, 2011 at 7:29 pm | [Reply](#)

They must be doing something right to have 13 albums out; but I never really cared for bands with so many members ... Although Yes had several on "Union."



Looks like the cover art was done by a child.

progmistress on May 10, 2011 at 5:49 am | [Reply](#)

Copernicus is not the name of the band, but the pseudonym of the artist himself, who is a poet rather than a musician. As I said in my review, anyway, this is not a typical prog album, and it’s very much an acquired taste.



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