

Sage Francis's *Copper Gone*: A critic, but frustrated

By Nick Barrickman
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Copper Gone (June 2014, Strange Famous/Speech Development Records) is the fifth studio album by Providence, Rhode Island-based lyricist Sage Francis (Paul Francis, born 1976 in Miami). Associated with the American "Indie" hip hop scene since its beginnings in the latter half of the 1990s, Francis is best known for his passionate vocal performances and thought-provoking lyrics that express understandable anger at the conditions of modern society.

A noticeable characteristic of the artist's work is an outspoken opposition to authority, best captured in the titles of such works as "A Healthy Distrust" (an album released in 2005 on Epitaph Records). Francis demonstrated personal and political courage in releasing "Makeshift Patriot," which is critical of the "war on terror," in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

On that song, Francis issues a searing indictment of the US political establishment for their efforts to turn the 9/11 tragedy into a chorus for militarism and attacks on basic democratic rights. "Don't waive your rights with your flags," Francis memorably comments at the song's conclusion.

Francis's work is interesting, sometimes highly evocative and poetic, but uneven. His courage and ability to criticize certain aspects of American capitalism are limited at times by a tendency to direct frustration at the populace itself. He often berates people for their perceived willingness to knuckle under to the authorities that oppress them. This sentiment leads the artist to retreat inward at certain points, focusing on his personal affairs and difficulties with those closest to him.

On *Copper Gone*, the artist's first release since a self-imposed hiatus, taken after 2010's *Li(f)e* (ANTI-/Epitaph Records), the level of frustration is

perhaps the most palpable element of the entire work.

A continuing theme is the artist's disgust with certain social conventions and structures that stifle him. "Send my well wishes to your nutritionist, your dietician, your pharmacist/ your personal trainer and your accomplices/ your partners in thought crime/ your criminal group thinking doctors online..." raps the artist on "Grace," a song seemingly addressed to a woman, but that could very well be applied to the broader society.

The production on *Copper Gone* is mostly dark, with chaotic electronic and rock-infused melodies meant to match the intensity of the artist. At times, however, the intensity of the production as well as the artist's somewhat overzealous delivery tend to weaken the overall effect. The artist's more thoughtful lyrics are sometimes buried under the tumultuous instrumentation, while the verbally ambitious lyrics, often struggling to remain on time with the beat, can overwhelm the listener in a torrent of words.

Intriguingly, the title of "Vonnegut Busy," another song on the album, refers to the novelist Kurt Vonnegut and quotes from the latter's *Cat's Cradle* (1963): "Of all the words of mice and men/ The saddest are, 'it might have been.'"

Sage couples his opposition to the official political establishment to a general irritation with society. "We walk undercover, deadpan blending in with other human puppets/ discussing nothing but the sports and weather/ if I stare long enough they all morph together," he rhymes.

He goes on:

"One, two and to the three and to the foreclosure
They said the war was over, but we know it wasn't
They wanted more soldiers so we said 'sure, f*** it'
Here's a fresh batch of people with setbacks

The poor folk, in fact they're all broke cause of your debt traps
Picking the pockets of people who probably needed assistance most
Selling them lies, selling them out, sending them off to a distant coast"

At the end of each verse, Francis issues a call that the listener "do something" to change things.

The beat on "Vonnegut" is perhaps its strongest point, as the song's dramatic guitar and piano riffs along with a thumping drum track lend a certain gravitas to the lyrics.

The urgency of the album enters more problematic territory on the downbeat "Dead Man's Float," in which the artist likens humanity's future to that faced by the Earth's population in the Biblical fable of Noah's Ark. Fearing for the future of human beings, which he refers to as "waterlogged subordinates," Sage says "It's been said 'faith could move a mountain'/ faith couldn't even move low-income families away from Biblical floods when they were all drowning." While denouncing religious complacency, the artist apparently sees nothing positive or possible in the future, simply repeating the refrain "go away, be extinct, disappear, float on."

It may be that Francis is simply being provocative here, hoping to arouse his listeners from what he takes to be their apathy and indifference. Or is this a genuine bleakness?

Both sides of the difficulty, the population's apparent paralysis as well as the artist's pessimism, are objective phenomena. Francis grew up in a time of political stagnation and reaction, the Reagan-Bush-Clinton years, which witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the supposed "end of socialism." He has never experienced a mass movement of a progressive character. The trade unions and their hangers-on have done everything in their power to subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party, most recently to Barack Obama, with disastrous results.

Francis's aggravation with society, its institutions and his personal relationships needs to be seen within this context.

This is further demonstrated on "Make 'em Purr," a song detailing Sage's reclusiveness. "It's been a minute since I left this domicile/ no need to change my

outfit, I rock it like it's going out of style/ it's not in style? Ain't no one here to tell me otherwise/ it gets more difficult to stay inside during the summertime," he says. The emptiness depicted in the artist's life is matched by the somber melody; Sage *knows* there is something wrong with this picture.

This is serious stuff, but there's also a lot of confusion. Intense anger at the state of things and at the lack of means to counteract it pervades the album. This is largely expressed through intense musical backdrops and lyrics that attempt alternately to berate or capture the attention of (or plead with?) the listener. One hopes that in the coming period of mass struggles, the artist will feel more heartened by humanity's prospects and be drawn more fully to the world around him.

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