

Michael Penn

Returns with 'Free For All'

by Hollywood Rob

In 1989, Micheal Penn's debut album *March* appeared on the music scene to great critical acclaim, but in the world of pop, that acclaim is usually the kiss-of-death. Luckily, that wasn't the case and listeners eager for something other than dance dreck that sounds like they should be titled "This is What it Sounds Like in my Crank Shaft" got Penn's unique blend of folk-rock.

The single "No Myth" with its sing-along chorus ("What if I was Romeo in Black Jeans...") climbed the Billboard Hot 100 slowly until finally settling somewhere in the Top 10 in the spring of 1990. Meanwhile, their creative video clip earned Penn MTV's Best New Artist award. Unfortunately, the Grammys favored Milli Vanilli.

"So," says Penn, "I guess I was the only best new artist that year."

This week, Penn returns with his sophomore-set *Free for All*, a follow-up in the purest definition of the phrase. There is no evidence of a carbon copy. Penn says "I don't think it's a different direction. It's just more of my songs."

Penn has chosen not to include anything as instantly sing-along as "No Myth"—and with good reason. Every aspect of this record has been crafted and balanced to surpass his debut. The good news is the record matches the artistry level in almost every way, even if the songs aren't quite as likeable on first listen.

Penn's style lends itself to his folk-pop roots recall-

ing his contemporaries Crowded House and Matthew Sweet. It is Penn's own derivation of the musical form that helps him succeed where so many others have failed. He isn't an imitator—he's the real thing.

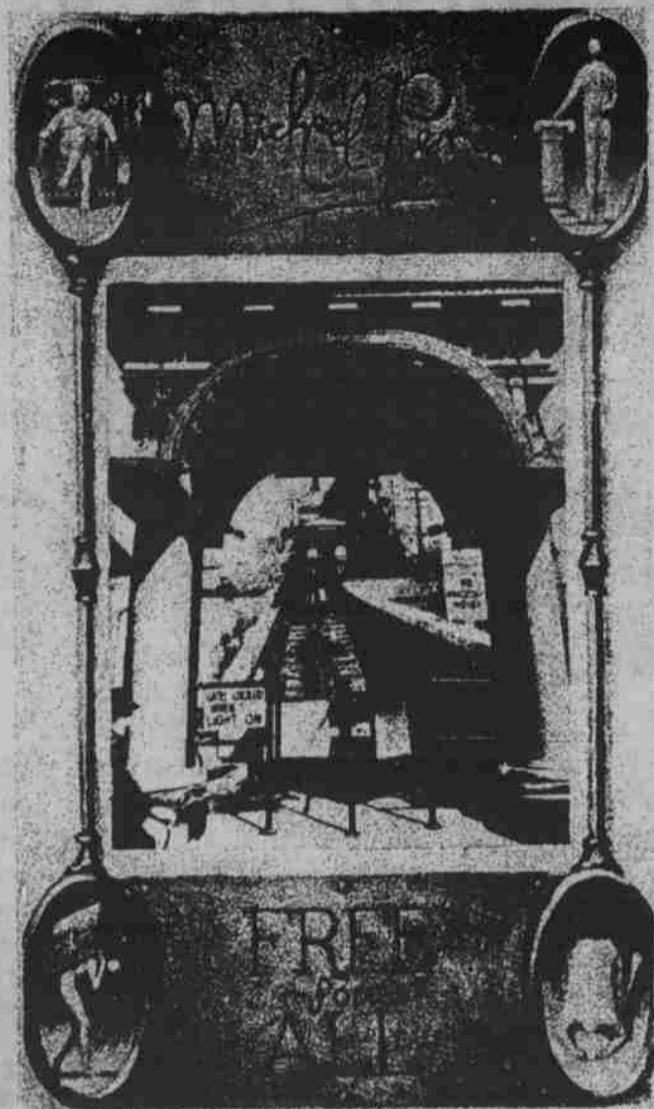
Penn calls the shots by opening the album with a somber number from the immediately post-*March* period called "Long Way Down (Look What the Cat Drug In)." This song was a staple in the set of 1990's *March* tour.

As it goes, Penn's lyrics remain as interpretive as ever, but "Long Way Down" seems to be an impassioned plea from a lover suspicious of his partner's fidelity. Regardless of his jealousy, he still cannot resist her. It catches you off guard and draws you in for the 10-tune ride.

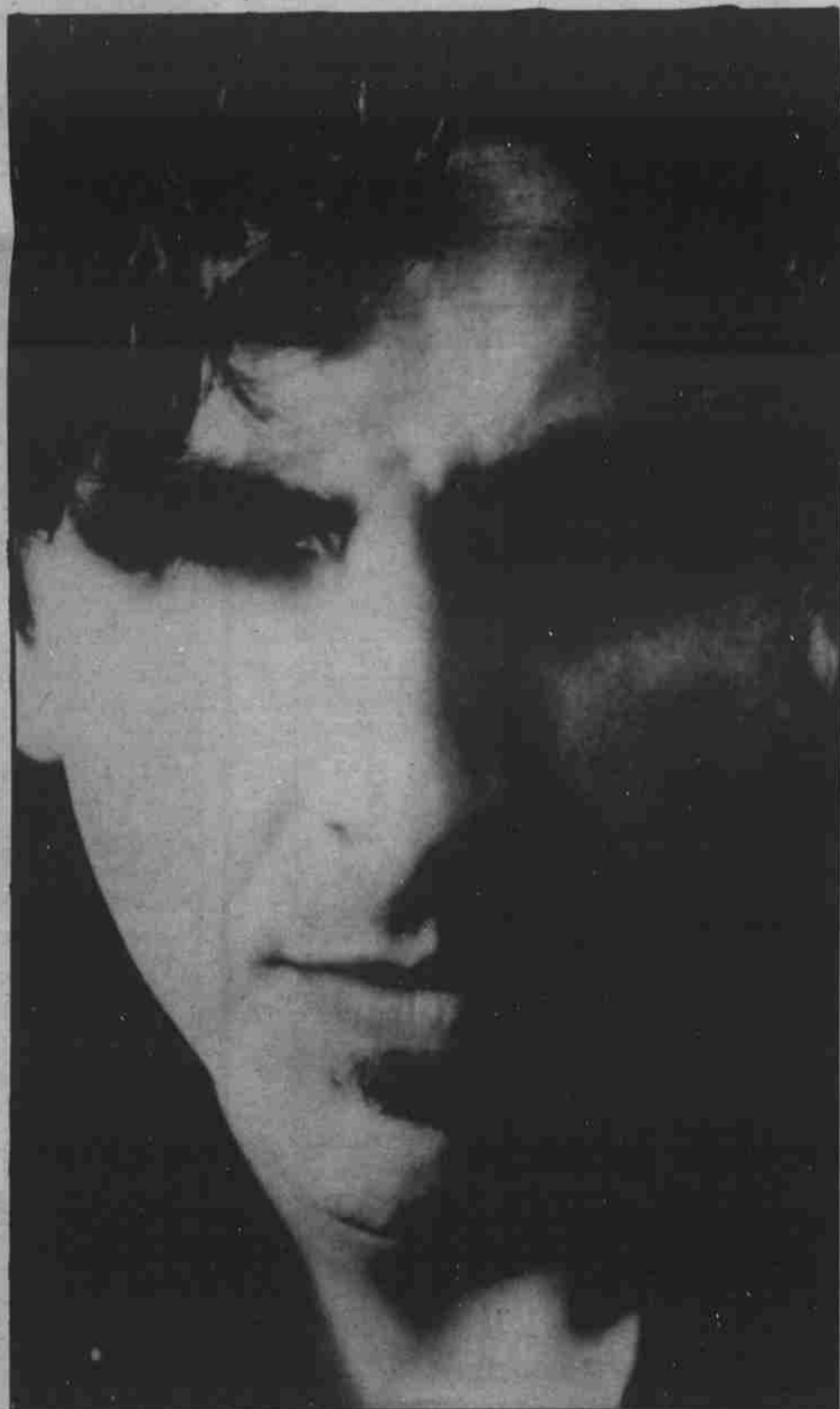
The first single, "Seen the Doctor," resembles little else Penn has written, being the only balls-out rock song in his catalog. His penchant for folksy songwriting and storytelling leads him to mostly mid-tempo conclusions, but his versatility remains on display as no track on *Free for All* could be mistaken for another, or anything on *March* for that matter.

Co-producers Penn and Tony Berg pull off the arrangements seamlessly from the sparse acoustical sound of the country-tinged "Coal" to the full-blown rock of "Seen the Doctor." Berg's previous work with Squeeze was probably a primer for this project.

Hopefully, Penn's fall tour will make its way to our city since tickets at The Roxy in L.A. were completely unavailable. I'm sure after a taste of this album there will be plenty of concert-goers eager to experience these tunes live.



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