



Michael Penn

Free-for-All

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RCA Records

Michael Penn *Free-for-All*

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We are bones, liquid, and organs sealed in skin and sent off into the world to do the best we can, sent off to create some sense of meaning. Our brains pave private pathways culling the materials for our internal architecture from our perceptions and interactions with others, even fictional others because not everyone who helps us fall into who we are possesses a tangible body. I met the narrator of Michael Penn's *Free-for-All* when I was fourteen.

Ours was not a subtle friendship; it was all or nothing at first. I wanted to impress him with my willingness to nod and move, sing along as we traversed his corridors of insecurity and facades of apathy. He warned me with the first two tracks. Indeed, it was a long way down, and, as promised, my free time disappeared as I sat in front of the speakers and made the journey with him, again and again, but my reward was his acknowledgement of the absurdity that was already becoming apparent to me. "Should I remind you," he asked, "that this is the end of camels and masking tape?" I wasn't alone, and sometimes that is the best news of all.

My new friend talked to himself, saw love as a battle, felt he had been or was certain to be betrayed, but could not keep himself from reverence for the strangeness all around him. He prodded, "Do you want to know that ignorance is bliss?" and as he repeated this phrase, I felt his wink and shared his grin. The fierce reservation in his voice echoed through my days.

I was a kid who knew she wasn't as smart as some of the other kids, but I desperately wanted to be. In elementary school, some of my friends were sent to a class called Resource. It was for gifted students, and I wanted to be included. I would watch them walk out of our classroom and wonder what they could possibly be learning that I wasn't capable of processing. I begged my mom to ask if I could go, and one day the gray haired teacher took me into the little room and gave me a test. It must have been some sort of IQ or spatial reasoning test. I was never asked back. I compensated by reading, constantly. Books were the only way I knew to staunch my craving for complexity.

By the time I made it to middle school, I was searching for sophistication in other mediums as well, even behind plastic jewel cases. The cover for *Free-for-All* is a sepia toned image of the entrance to an incline railway. Four naked figures inhabit the corners of the image on an overlaid border made to look like concrete. The first figure's bulging belly sits behind his spindle legs as he tries to look confident from his perch. The second figure has turned his back on the audience. The third bears an unidentified weight, and the fourth has buried his head, willingly or not, and is no longer able to remove it. They are him. They are me. They are all of us. I still cannot clearly articulate what this cover said to me, but I knew that I needed to listen to the music inside.

In so many ways, adolescence is about subversion. Looking back, it is no great wonder that I was so taken with this person and the world he had constructed. Successful subversion can only take place when one can demonstrate complete competence and understanding of the original materials. The melodies and arrangements, the guitars and repetition – in lesser hands, *Free-for-All* would have been a more commercially successful record because it would have stopped at mastery. Instead, the album uses organs and bells, strange interludes, darkness and silence to push further and further, to

crawl out from under popular expectations and right across the line into exceptional. I was busy digging my own way out from under piles of assumptions and presumptions. "If this ain't by the book, then the book must be wrong," he sung, and I responded, "Amen."

Originality isn't something that can be taught, but I can trace my first understanding of any number of concepts back to the time I spent inside this record, inside his world. "Free Time" and "Drained" taught me the power of meta commentary, first by making me chuckle, and then by showing me how much freedom a writer can weld through chinks in the fourth wall. The juxtaposition of battlefield language in "Bunker Hill" with natural imagery in "Strange Season" and the repetition of this pairing showed me how to put internal conflict on display. Cover figures framing the uphill journey ahead of us all showed me how varying mediums can add layers of meaning. The unorthodox use of instruments and intrusions to create measured chaos in "By the Book" made a stellar argument for the strength of non-traditional organization and how it can be a metaphor for the absurdity of modern life. All of these elements helped to route my mind and to shape how I think.

One of the tasks of aging is looking back and examining earlier iterations of myself. What have I kept? What have I thrown out? When I first encountered this record, I played it front to back, needing it as a whole entity, but time fragments. It is one of time's jobs. Now, I'm much more likely to listen to an individual song, almost always because it has come to me before I've even opened my eyes for the day. Whether Penn intended these songs and the cover art as the voice and vision of one character as I have understood them over the years, matters not. What matters are his words and music still lingering, still providing a sly smile, still reminding me that I'm not alone in this surreal and duplicitous world. And, this world is indeed a free-for-all. May it always be.