

Producer Tony Berg has come to expect the unexpected from singer/songwriter Michael Penn. Take the tepee incident. Penn, keyboardist Patrick Warren and an engineer were recording their latest release, *Free for All*, at Berg's studio one night.

"I returned and I heard really strange tribal music and when I opened the door, Michael, the engineer and Patrick Warren were in a tepee and had lit candles and were doing some sort of voodoo dance," Berg says.

"We kept the tepee up for over a month for no reason other than it being ridiculous, and it nearly made it to the cover of the album. This was all, of course, Michael's doing."

So, too, it seems, was *Free for All*.

In his sophomore release from RCA, Penn continues the straightforward blend of traditional folk and rock that made him MTV's 1990 Best New Artist with *March*.

"Considering that it was my first record, it did really well," Penn says. "I'm very grateful for that and now I was able to make a second record, which everybody feels good about."

March—which stoked widespread praise for Penn—crossed folk and pop melodies with sensitive and amusing lyrics.

Free For All explores different territories yet remains as ingenious as its predecessor.

Like the previous album, *Free for All* is a

soft-spoken gesture of harmonic blends, a soothing combination of acoustic guitar and soulful voice, a kind of young-Bob-Dylan-before-Bob-Dylan-became-Bob-Dylan.

Free for All is rich in the influences of folk icons like Phil Ochs and John Prine, who left a marked impact on the young songwriter.



Michael Penn:
His friends call him
'unusual.' His music
confirms it.

in his own world

A blend of life's experiences and rich folk tradition make Michael Penn's music a free-for-all

And Penn's words, too, are rich in the world from which he draws his lyrics—"books, other people's lives who I know and who I read about and my own life."

The album really is a free-for-all when it comes to what Penn reveals about his corner of the world.

Like the track "Bunker Hill" in which Penn writes about the Los Angeles riots.

"You can run away from things that are going on [in Los Angeles], but it'll eventually catch up with you," Penn says. "But the amazing thing about L.A. is that it's so many environments that you can be close to that, and you can be in that and feel it every single day, and then decide you need to get away for a moment and be able to find a place where you're completely away from it all."

Like Penn's song writing, really. It's here that Penn prefers isolation—a problem, though, while on tour for his last album.

"The problem for me was that I was out for such a long time on tour, and I found that I couldn't write on the road, which was sort of a drag of a revelation," Penn recalls.

"And so it was an amazing seven months on one level but not too rewarding on another level from the standpoint of not being able to write."

Eventually, Penn got back to his world of solitude. And *Free For All* came forth.

"During the last record, I put pressure on myself to make a great album," he says. "But maybe it had something to do with getting signed. After being at [music] long enough to be so cynical, by the time I got a record deal, I was sort of locked in the way I did everything."

Penn, after all, has been playing his music for some time now.

He first was inspired to be a musician as a young boy, Penn says. He played a bit of piano, actually, but guitar became his instrument of choice.

Piano "wasn't as rewarding as the guitar," he says.

By 1981, when he formed the Los

Angeles-based band, Doll Congress, Penn was well versed in guitar. Even though the group showed promise and had a loyal fan base, it broke up after five years.

But, while still with the band, Penn met Warren and Berg, the pair with whom he eventually collaborated on his albums. It's a musical union with which Penn and respective friends are pleased.

"They're two of my closest friends, and we sort of just all get together in the studio and have a really great time," Penn says. "It's a rewarding experience."

Berg seems to think so, too.

"During some point in the middle of [producing] the record was my birthday," Berg recalls. "And Michael took four of my pet peeves, which are clowns, cigars, whistling and pennies and rented a clown smoking a cigar with a bag of pennies, whistling. So that's the kind of friend he is."

And the kind of musician, too.

Penn's music, after all, has become anything but predictable, which is fine with him as long as you don't try to stuff his sound into a category like "alternative."

"Anything that is labeled 'alternative' is becoming less and less alternative," Penn says. "It's like when punk became new wave and it suddenly got all cleaned up, nice and tidy."

Not like Penn, who Berg proudly describes as "unusual."

"What a lot of people don't know is that [Penn's] enamored with arcane religions and kind of quasi-religions," Berg says. "He has studied them both quite a bit, and he's well-read in Rosicrucian and Masonic literature."

"Basically, he's created his own view of the universe."

And though Berg is hesitant to define Penn's view of the universe for him, you can be sure that if it's anything like his song writing, Penn's view of the world is a keen one, undoubtedly a little strange and particularly sacred to Michael Penn.

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