

MICHAEL PENN

Michael Penn didn't set out to make a record about post-war America in the year 1947, but somehow the subject sought him out: "In so many of my interests and wherever they take me, that year just keeps cropping up..."

Google a few of the song titles from *Mr. Hollywood Jr., 1947* and you'll understand why. This is no nostalgia trip: the events of 1947, both the occasions that generated headlines and the ones that occurred well below the popular radar, have brought us to exactly where we are today -- politically, socially, ethically. For example, "The Transistor," a brief, eerie instrumental, alludes to the invention in 1947 at Bell Labs of that crucial component for the first small, portable radios. "The Television Set Waltz" references another technological breakthrough of that year: TV shows were finally broadcast coast to coast. "September 18," an ominous snippet of synth-generated sounds, is the date in '47 when the National Security Act became law, establishing the modern Department of Defense. (Government officials had initially called the department, with chilling accuracy, the National Military Establishment, but no one in power was comfortable with the sound of its acronym, NME.) And that's not all: the cold war was taking shape; the Black List was on its way; little-known, CIA-backed Project Paperclip was allowing war-criminal Nazi scientists and SS officers to surreptitiously join the American space race and intelligence establishment; UFOs were mysteriously darting around our southwestern skies. There were more insidious, real-life, geo-political conspiracies at work than in a stack of Thomas Pynchon novels.

But all of that just sets the scene. *Mr. Hollywood Jr., 1947*, while informed by history, is more akin to a collection of short, vivid, interconnected stories. These big-picture ideas become the background for human-sized dramas that need no footnotes to be musically or emotionally affecting. Penn's austere arranged, effortlessly melodic songs retain the same yearning quality as his earliest, career-establishing work, when he channeled the protagonists and dreamily melancholic spirit of *Wuthering Heights* and *Romeo and Juliet* into his radio and MTV hit, "No Myth." Intimate relationships unravel, romantic betrayals unfold, and hopes waver amidst a fast-moving world of superficial promise. Most of this takes place, Penn says, "in a Los Angeles that doesn't exist anymore" -- a near-mythical place preserved in the period novels of Dashiell Hammett and John Fante, as well as in vintage California film noir and evocative modern flicks like *Chinatown* and *L.A. Confidential*.

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Penn constructs vividly detailed, multi-layered lyrics that often take left turns into the surreal a la mid-sixties Bob Dylan. On “You Know How,” for example, Penn conjures up an atmosphere thick with intrigue and sexual tension:

You had a ball in Edendale
I’ll never guess who came
The guy who played the lover
in the film without a name
He lavished praise upon you
And fetched umbrella’d drinks
And when you think he likes you
then you like the way he thinks

Mr. Hollywood Jr., 1947 is very much a do-it-yourself effort by Penn, following a frustrating decade at the majors, in which he had to contend with constantly shifting priorities and a revolving door of executives. Not that Penn had ever found himself creatively constrained: “I was pretty successful at being able to either avoid or ignore the suggestions or requirements of the labels, although there was probably more going on in that context than I was aware of at the time. When I did get off a major and started recording this album on my own, I realized I was having more fun that I’d had in a long time.”

Penn cut most of *Mr. Hollywood Jr.* at home with a small crew of longtime collaborators. Among them are keyboardist Patrick Warren, who has worked closely with Penn since his 1989 debut, *March*; spouse Aimee Mann, who provides occasional background vocals and bass; and Penn’s sometimes road-mate Buddy Judge, a former member of cult L.A. super-group The Grays, offering harmony vocals.

From the moment he emerged as a solo recording artist 16 years ago, Penn displayed an astonishing maturity as a songwriter. With just a little tweaking of its big Bob Clearmountain mix, a track like “Invisible” from *March* would fit comfortably now between “You Know How” and “A Bad Sign” on *Mr. Hollywood Jr.* Penn had honed his craft for years in his native Los Angeles -- on his own and, for a brief time, as a player with Patrick Warren in the female-fronted band Doll Congress. But to the world at large he seemed to have arrived out of nowhere in 1989, an impressive artist fully formed. Discussing his debut disc in *Stereo Review*, critic Parke Puterbaugh wrote, “Michael Penn is a thinking person’s pop musician, who has seemingly digested all that’s good about music in the last 25 years and processed it through his own very perceptive filters.”

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Penn still speaks admiringly of the genre-defying eclecticism that artists like one-time kings of the Sunset Strip The Buffalo Springfield or the shape-shifting Bob Dylan brought to their mid-'60s album projects, an adventurous, everything-goes attitude rare among today's many niche-oriented acts. In fact, he envisioned *Mr. Hollywood Jr.* in the classic vinyl format: "I originally conceived this as an album with two sides. The first CDs I made of this album were mastered as only two tracks – one with the songs that would be "side one", the other with "side two". That's something that's gotten lost in the era of the CD. Now you have this one long experience, 40-plus minutes of music that can seem daunting. Twenty minutes a side seems like a so much more reasonable way to listen to music. I have fond memories of being in a mood for side two of this record or side one of that one. It separates an album into two acts.

But Penn is hardly a backwards-looking guy. Sidestepping the career-killing grind of a traditional record-and-tour approach, he's found smart, alternative means of reaching the loyal fan-base that supported his other releases, *Resigned* (1997) and *MP4* (2000), which both suffered from a lack of label attention. With partner Mann, he dreamed up the Acoustic Vaudeville show that started as a bit of a goof at the L.A. club Largo, but turned into a sell-out nationwide concert hall attraction. Neither Penn nor Mann like to do between-song patter, so they semi-facetiously asked some comedian friends to do it for them while they were performing jointly, and the concept took off from there. The *Boston Globe* called their Acoustic Vaudeville Tour "a new form of entertainment...whatever you call it –bohemian vaudeville might do – the effort is totally engaging." The pair also launched United Musicians, a collective supporting their own and fellow artists' efforts to retain control of their recorded work and promote it on a grassroots level, particularly via the internet. *Mr. Hollywood Jr.*, in fact, is being released via Spin Art on Penn's own imprint Mimeograph Records.

Penn has also branched out into film composing, prodded into it at first by writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson, who had been inspired by *Free-For-All* when he was scripting his first feature, the gambling drama *Hard Eight*, and insisted Penn create the score. Anderson re-enlisted Penn for his follow-up, the brilliant *Boogie Nights*, and even gave Penn a small but memorable role as a record producer who tries to cut a side with the hapless porn star Dirk Diggler. Penn has since scored Allan Cummings' and Jennifer Jason Leigh's collaborative *The Anniverary Party*, an acid, insider's look at Hollywood, as well as Bob Odenkirk's *Melvin Goes To Dinner* and the forthcoming documentary, *The Comedians of Comedy*. He's also taken on some record-producing chores for other artists, including the Wallflowers, Aimee Mann and Liz Phair.

Michael Penn continues to perform monthly at Largo, though he will interrupt his open-ended residency there to bring the haunting hometown tales of *Mr. Hollywood Jr., 1947* to venues across the country.

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