

Free-for-All
Michael Penn
(BMG)

Copper Blue
Sugar
(Ryko)

Greatest Misses
Public Enemy
(Sony)

III Sides to Every Story
Extreme
(A&M)

Dirt
Alice in Chains
(Sony)

Fear
Toad the Wet Sprocket
(Sony)

The follow-up to Michael Penn's debut, *March*, his latest, *Free-for-All* (8), is a highly enjoyable, tidy little pop album. An expertly crafted set, *Free-for-All* is a must for fans of dextrous Beatle pop. The album's one weakness is Penn's boyish and less than soulful vocals, especially unsuitable when trying to get across the attempted toughness of songs like "Seen the Doctor." Ultimately, *Free-for-All* comes across as lacking soul and true inspiration (save maybe the brooding but beautiful "Long Way Down"), instead substituting clever craftsmanship. Still, albums this varied, imaginative and compact are a find nowadays. Upped a notch for releasing a forty minute pop album. *Recommended for fans of: The Beatles, Elvis Costello, Crowded House, Squeeze.*

Sugar (currently number one on the U.S. college charts) is the latest project of former Hüsker Dü member, Bob Mould, who was last heard from with the ferocious guitar hurricane *Black Sheets of Rain*. *Copper Blue* (8) combines the restraint of *Workbook*, his solo debut, with the fuzzy guitar of *Black Sheets*. The album grabs you from the first note with its melodic yet aggressive songs and never lets go, hitting its peak on track number two with the melodic complexity of "A Good Idea." If you dug *Nevermind*, *Copper Blue* is thereal thing. *Recommended for fans of: Hüsker Dü, Nirvana, the Replacements, the Pixies.*

Public Enemy's latest, *Greatest Misses* (4), a half new, half remixed collection, is more of the same old sonic buzzsaw stuff, sounding especially numbing and unmusical this time around. *Greatest Misses* is interesting if only as a collection of samples, but unlike the band's best work, they don't convey songs. *Recommended for fans of: rap.*

After the last two promising singles ("More Than Words" and "Hole Hearted") from the otherwise lame *Pornografitti*, I expected Extreme to possibly abandon metal and go rock 'n' roll. Instead, the guys have taken a step further with that still-born mutant known as progressive rock, releasing *III Sides to Every Story* (III), a simple-minded, eighty minute concept album divided into three sections, through which the band starts out sounding like Van Halen then slowly mutates into Queen, a transformation about as rewarding as watching shit decompose. By metal standards this is a tour de force, spiced up with funk guitar, horns, strings and relatively imaginative arrangements. So if you're a metal fan you can stop getting pissed reading this and go buy it. And there are listenable moments, like "Tragic Comic," an acoustic pop ditty. But otherwise we get loads of big, stupid guitar, flawless, faceless vocal arrangements and operatic melodrama laid on without restraint. Evidently Extreme's ambitions dwarf their brains. *Recommended for fans of: Queen, Van Halen, Extreme.*

The follow-up to 1990's *Facelift*, Alice in Chains' new effort, *Dirt* (5), is pretty one-dimensional stuff compared to the likes of Pearl Jam or Soundgarden. *Dirt* is essentially modernized Sabbath, featuring lots of slowly descending guitar drones, predictable power-chords and songs that move like dinosaurs. *Dirt's* saving grace is the band's ability to pile the intensity onto their riffs with overloaded guitar and angry vocals. And the albums last track, "Would?," (also contained on the *Singles* soundtrack and best experienced there) is one of the year's best songs. *Recommended for fans of: anything from Seattle.*

In the better late than never category I'm reviewing Toad the Wet Sprocket's *Fear* (4), originally released in 1991, but only becoming widely available with the recent success of "All I Want," a truly transcendent pop song. But the rest of *Fear* is pretty forgettable; "All I Want" may very well have been a complete fluke. *Not recommended to anyone.*

