



**Pennywise  
Straight Ahead  
(Epitaph)**

Hop onto Sega's videogame Top Skater, and while you're virtually ollying, rail sliding, slamming and pulling 360s, you'll also find yourself rocking hard to some fast and furious punk-rock tunes. Meet Pennywise, one of SoCal's best contributions to the hardcore party. Mixing new-school energy with an old-school sensibility, the band has a distinctly West Coast, Bad Religion-meets-Black Flag sound, but less arcane and more melodic. Practically a permanent fixture on Vans Warped Tour, Pennywise has become required listening for all things extreme, and with good reason. Pointing out the problems, calling for action and refusing to back down, the band's in-your-face attitude and aggressive musical approach are a perfect match for its push-the-limits lifestyle.

On its fifth full-length release, *Straight Ahead*, the darkness that marked the previous albums seems to have subsided. Still, traces of pain following the 1996 suicide of original bassist Jason Thirsk can still be sensed within larger sociopolitical messages. In "Greed," the album opener, Jim Lindberg sings, "The mighty dollar is your only care / You're moving up, but you're going nowhere." These guys have definitely not betrayed their balls-out beliefs; the difference is a subtly more positive, proactive vibe than before. The radio-ready "Alien," for example, is far from a sellout, but as the first single, it's positioned to be a powerful mainstream crossover. Lindberg's careful vocal delivery provides an easy intro to the harder, harsher stuff and the meaningful messages within.

They're pushing their own limits with this new group of tunes—adding harmonies and slowing the melodies—while maintaining the lickety-split tempos, driving guitar and impenetrable bass that fans love. The result is an enjoyable, inspiring and empowering ride along the edge. Whatever you do, don't bail.—

**Robin A. Rothman**  
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