

FIVE FOR FIGHTING

American Town (Aware Records)

Five for Fighting isn't a band. In fact, it's a front for Los Angeles musician John Ondrasik.

That is the first hint that more than a little pretense might be involved in this debut album. Mr. Ondrasik does possess a first-rate voice, and he also has a talent for catchy and quirky songs that will serve him well in a promising career.

But first he needs to get over himself.

The album reeks of self-importance, deep thoughts and high concepts that echo Mr. Ondrasik's obvious vocal role model, Dave Matthews. His worst mistake is adding to the needlessly long list of songs about Superman, using the superhero as a metaphor for humanity. REM did it more than a decade ago, followed by everyone from the Spin Doctors to the Crash Test Dummies.

Been there, done that, John.

If he would let his hair down a bit, Mr. Ondrasik could really blossom as a major talent. He has an eye for the weird, such as his peculiar little meditation on hero-worship, "Michael Jordan." This album is a good start but, as an athlete like Mr. Jordan might say, Mr. Ondrasik needs to take it to the next level next time out.—Sean Scully

EVAN AND JARON

Self-titled (Columbia)

Evan and Jaron Lowenstein seem to have it all — handsome semipro baseball-playing brothers from Atlanta who just happen to have a contract with Columbia Records and can boast the legendary Mick Fleetwood and superproducer Glen Ballard as collaborators on their new album.

The story is almost too good to be true, and so is the brothers' new album. It is a solid pop collection that flirts with greatness. The brothers' "Crazy for This Girl" already has hit the modern rock circuit nationwide and a few other tracks seem destined to follow, particularly that emotional ballad "The Distance."

Evan and Jaron have the making of stars. The album offers catchy and simple lyrics, imaginative production and tack-sharp musicianship.

And yet, an elusive something is missing. It all sounds like the best album Matthew Sweet never recorded, and the tracks eventually begin to run together. If the brothers really want to break out of the alt-pop herd, they will develop a slightly more original sound.

—S.S.