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Local Music Review

Stand up and take note of Marion Grace debut, 'Lying Down Looking Up'

By MIKE OLCOTT

Marion Grace is built like a family. Ralph Marion, Clara Junken, Aaron Cloutier and Josh Prescott fight through tension like siblings, but coalesce like the Griswalds when called upon.



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MARION GRACE: "LYING DOWN LOOKING UP"

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On March 20, Marion Grace is going to drop 2010's first "wow" record to come from the Portland scene. "Lying Down Looking Up" features all kinds of spice and variety to add to the typical folk-rock arsenal, but has the antique musk of a haunted house throughout. The sound is big, sprawling sometimes, with organs, horns, spaghetti Western percussion, banjos and the kitchen sink in reserve. But whereas lesser writers might try to dilute a weak story with more sound, no element in this vast orchestra ever overpowers Ralph Marion's brawny song arcs.

Take "42 Cents," a driving ballad, with a buried electronic beat to give it thrust, Sgt. Peppers' pan flutes in the chorus, and a bone-dry vocal delivery. The group follows the fastball with a curve -- an ice-cold minor jam called "2 Car Garage" that's built on masterful reggae organs in the verse, and a feisty fist pumper of a chorus. With layers of popping banjo, dusty drums and a wandering sax solo, Marion Grace could easily stretch this tune into a festival-worthy 18-minute anthem.

As a nice palate cleanser for the soaring pop, Marion Grace serves up "Heart Attack," a sticky blues-funk shuffle that takes a moment to reveal itself. This middle-wiggler speaks to the richness of "Lying Down

Looking Up"; the band makes it sound so easy to nail any style they'd like.

At its strongest, Marion Grace reminds of one of the world's best bands, the Southwestern desert folk Calexico. This is especially true on slow burner "The Flame," where a patient arrangement keeps the players honest, allowing the song to gather its slow power and build to a brassy climax.

"Lying Down Looking Up" sure doesn't sound like a debut. Marion Grace's roots go deep, and you can hear it in the sublime way each performance stays inside the lines of the song. Like a good family, with a keen awareness of boundaries, this isn't a record for hot doggin' it. Marion Grace delivers a team performance reminiscent of the Counting Crows on their seminal debut, "August and Everything After." Portland can rejoice that such a force will grace her stages. If this is the beginning, how come it sounds like the band has been playing together for all time?

Mike Olcott is a freelance writer who lives in Portland.

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