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## By the Grace of Ralph

A debut that is Lying Down Looking Up

By SAM PFEIFLE | March 17, 2010

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LOOKING VERY UP INDEED Marion Grace have a strong start.

As debut records go, it's rare to find one as textured and fully realized as what Marion Grace have put together in the 10-song *Lying Down Looking Up*, an arty, smart, folk-rock affair that shows songwriting creativity with some genuinely great ideas.

Fronted by Ralph Marion Graceffa, the band do seem to be as much his as the name implies. His vocals, which can be raspy and gravelly like Lou Reed or more reedy like the Violent Femmes' Gordon Gano, burrow their way into your ear, with an emotional rawness that makes him impossible to disbelieve. He can push you around, make you feel, and he's propped up and counterpointed by the backing vocals of Clarabelle Junken. The two have a real chemistry, which isn't the same as just singing harmonies with one another.

But the star of the band may be drummer/percussionist Aaron Cloutier, whose rhythms and feel define the record's sound,

for me. Right from the opening, "Tired" has this great shuffling hitch, ignoring the backbeat and creating a rippling energy that is juxtaposed by Graceffa's purposefully sleepwalking vocals. The spaghetti-western feel lent to "2 Car Garage" is excellent, too, the bass drum seemingly behind the beat as the vocals repeat, "can you feel it?"

Actually, I can.

There are times when ideas just don't seem to quite pan out, as in the contrapuntal piece of "42 Cents" that just comes off a bit ugly, and the 1:30 build-in of "Heart Attack" that just seems like a rough demo instead of raw and emotional, but most of the time they win. "Walking with You" has great interplay between Graceffa and Junken, as they take the song ultra-quiet and halt and then build back in so that you're never quite sure if they're going to finish the song or re-enter, loading anticipation into pauses that become like that moment when your heart seems to stop a bit as you consider that you might not get to live with that person forever.

"The Flame" might be the best tune here, with an achingly sweet chorus and verse lyrics that remind me of Neil Young: "For a second my world stopped turning/and I could feel it"; "Face the mirror/Search your eyes/Like an ocean full of lies." Mike Davidson, head engineer at Zippah Studios in Boston, has done an excellent job of creating a rich and textured sound out of mostly acoustic instruments, and he blends in guest horns parts and sections so that it feels completely organic.

I'm also a fan of "Fever," which has a Sonny and Cher feel to it, like playful gospel, the kind that can make you feel good even though you're singing along with lyrics like "your looks are gone and your luck's run out." The song has a shimmer, too, lent by Cloutier's ride of the splash cymbal.

As a whole, it's a great introduction to the scene for a relatively new group, and an indication there's an important new band to consider in Marion Grace.

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*LYING DOWN LOOKING UP | Released by Marion Grace | with Sly-Chi + Adam Ezra Group | at Port City Music Hall, in Portland | March 20 | [mariongracemusic.com](http://mariongracemusic.com)*

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