

Mar in Color - *Jesus Issues* Review

By: Nicholas James Thomasma

Mar in Color is a singer songwriter, vocalist and pianist based in Grand Rapids, MI. On the forthcoming debut release, *Jesus Issues*, the youthful pianist and vocalist covers a lot of territory both musically and lyrically. Often pain and sadness lead to great art and Mar in Color has managed to channel that energy in the most beautiful way. Having personally experienced the anger, sadness and grief of losing a cherished relationship more than once I can spot a break up album from miles away and this is a break up album if I've ever heard one. *Jesus Issues* is brutally honest and filled with heartbreak yet somehow maintains a positive feel. It's similar to the way many Motown songs seem happy until you listen to the lyrics and while there is a slight Motown element the album is far more reminiscent of 90's and early 2000's piano pop stars like Tori Amos, Sarah McLachlan, Dido or Adele. Piano, a wonderful string section with occasional French horn, unique and interesting percussion and absolutely gorgeous harmonies along with soaring lead vocals are the foundations of Mar's emerging sound. Everything is well done. Mar in Color has all the makings to be the next darling of the West Michigan music scene.

The rhythm heavy album opener features a quirky pop drum beat dancing around her delightful piano playing. Around the midway point the song soars into a gospel style choir with Mar's vocals front and center culminating in an astounding resolution of harmonies. Track two has a more sultry feel but utilizes more of the interesting percussion and signature keyboard maintaining a consistent pop feel. Mar leans into the pain and sadness of the subject matter of the song titled Quit Bein' So Good. The percussion drops midway to reveal a gorgeous string section. As the song builds the lead vocals shine as the choir joins in, then the horns, and then a chorus of angels to close on a particularly high note. I Can't Love You, song number three, is a little more laid back than the previous two but the percussion and gorgeous vocals once again stand out. The string section cuts like daggers at the breakdown in the midsection. What could be a plaintive ballad is made far more intriguing by the hip hop drum beat that guides the strings along. Track four, Missing, starts with a simple piano intro laid over a waltz beat. Just as you think you're about to settle into what might be a reflectively sad song you are swept away by the breathtaking vocal melody and harmony arrangement. The background vocals are particularly well done with a little 1950's doo-wop feel to them. Despite the sugar coated harmonies the subject matter still manages to shine through. It's quite an accomplishment to write a sad song that sounds happy but Mar manages with ease on this song. For the album's title track *Jesus Issues*, once again percussion is the foundation with Mar singing over a sparse drum beat and bass line. Showing off her vocal range she starts with a low and dusty growl that evolves into a

soaring chorus. Despite the somber tone of the lyrics the song ends with cackling and laughter, lightening the mood and reminding the listener that this is still a pop album, after all.

The highlight of the album for me comes at the seventh song titled Same God. It's the first song on the record that is built around a guitar instead of a piano but that's not what makes the song stand out. Vivid lyrical scenery places the listener directly into the story as the singer recounts memory after memory stored on "a shelf inside my mind." The oddly specific descriptions are somehow so relatable it made me weep for my most recent relationship. I burst into tears when the main character admits that "a little piece of me dies and I realize it's all that we're ever going to be. If only we had the same dreams. If only we prayed to the same god." Jeez I wish I had written that line. Scars From the River, track eight, is the perfect compliment to the previous song and completes the one, two punch combination as she cries out "I'm not ready, not ready, not ready to lose her." The mood and setting are in perfect harmony and the sparse arrangement allow the pain and sadness to shine. Mar's trademark harmonies along with a reverb heavy string arrangement create a perfect vessel as the vocalist delivers the overall message of the album "I'm not ready to move on." This song is also the first time we don't hear any percussion which is a nice touch at this point towards the end of the record. All of Mar in Color's talents are on full display on the albums closing song SMB. "I don't know what I want. I don't know what I need. I just want to lay on the floor with you." I've been there. I feel this.

With only 9 songs and clocking in at less than 40 minutes the album is a rollercoaster of emotion wrapped up in easily digestible bites of delicious melodies that left me hungry for more. Interesting and unique percussion choices, soaring harmonies, lush layers and exceptional writing make this album one I will listen to for many years to come. Watch out for Mar in Color. She may have Jesus issues, but you're going to want *Jesus Issues* too once you've heard it.