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REVIEWS

SHOVELS & ROPE **LITTLE SEEDS**



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(NEW WEST) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

"I KNOW EXACTLY who you think you are," sing Michael Trent and Cary Ann Hearst, the husband-and-wife vocalists of Shovels & Rope, at the beginning of *Little Seeds*, the South Carolina group's fourth album. "I Know" evolves into an ominous swirl of feedback and menace, but these opening words ring with a tinge of comfort. Indeed, Shovels & Rope know exactly who they are, and *Little Seeds* is an album-length celebration of their particular brand of Americana.

Even when the subject matter gets grim, Shovels & Ropes are a band focused on good vibes. They have a way of cramming words into each line so that their songwriting recalls both traditional folk music and tongue twisters. The duo also has a palpable delight in singing together and finishing each other's sentences. "You and I ..." sings Hearst in the refrain of the Jack White-esque "Buffalo Nickel," to which Trent responds, "Working around each other." It's an apt, if literal, approximation of their technique, even if the song itself might actually be about violently robbing a bank.

The combination of the macabre subject matter and the celebratory music feels akin to last spring's *Pile*, an album by Houston, Texas' A Giant Dog. But where that band explodes with party-friendly garage rock, Shovels & Rope let things sizzle a little bit longer. They also display a greater penchant for experimentation. Songs like the beatific "St. Anne's Parade" show that they can linger in their happiness just as well as they can in their morbid fantasies, and "BYWR" finds them adopting a topical, elegiac edge. Even so, the album's greatest moments are the ones that don't stray too far from Shovels & Rope's tried-and-true. "I know exactly where you got that sound," they sing in "I Know," "See you next year on your way back down." It's the kind of tough-love teasing that can only come from a band clearly on the way up.

— SAM SODOMSKY