

The New York Times

March 31, 2016

Lukas Graham

"Lukas Graham"
(Warner Bros.)

What a nice guy Lukas Graham Forchhammer is — respectful toward his parents, hard-working, grateful to be heard. He's the singer, lyricist and leader of a Danish band, Lukas Graham, that is releasing its American debut album with what's already an international hit, "7 Years." In that song, he cherishes his parents' advice about how to get through the decades of life, mourns his father's death and looks forward to children of his own.

It's the kind of growing-up-and-aging-gracefully song that's a country-music staple. But "7 Years" is placed instead where pop meets R&B. Its tune circles through a few notes, the lead vocal hints at Michael Jackson's tenor quaver, and there's a hip-hop undertow of sustained strings and a sparse backbeat.

Books of The Times:
Monday through Friday,
The New York Times

It's sweet earnestness in a shrewd, ambitious package.

The music, like much Scandinavian pop, ignores genre to draw on whatever works, current and vintage. It merges electronic dance music keyboards with Bee Gees falsettos in "Take the World by Storm," puts an R&B croon atop hints of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata in "Better Than Yourself (Criminal Mind Pt. 2)," and looks back to 1970s and 1980s R&B (more Hall & Oates than Stevie Wonder) in "Strip No More" and "Drunk in the Morning," two songs that admit to boys-will-be-boys misbehavior. "What Happened to Perfect," a fraying-romance song, places somber organ chords behind an increasingly desperate plea.

But through most of the album, filial loyalty merges with humble-bragging — not only in "7 Years" but also in "You're Not There," another elegy for his father, and in "Mama Said," a song about a non-affluent childhood that echoes (and credits) the chorus from "Annie" that Jay Z also used in "Hard Knock Life." In "Happy Home," the singer crows about the band's



media coverage and cash flow, but takes care to credit everything to the lessons of parents and grandparents.

Behind the modesty, though, is an equally determined sense of enterprise. "Don't You Worry 'Bout Me" starts with the piano and organ of an old-fashioned gospel song and turns into lilting, upbeat soul as Mr. Forchhammer sings about transcending sorrow via careerism. "A lot of people told me, when daddy passed away/Go take some time off, but I got no time to waste," he sings. That's a statement of priorities, a determined flash of candor.

JON PARELES