fanEtiks, Jules and the Polar Bears on Columbia Records, J.C. Hyman.

Listening I saw an album by a new group called Jules and the Polar Bears. I dismissed it immediately, thinking it was another new wave effort by one of those bands with a trite "... and the Polar Bears" name — they would be the rage for a few weeks and sink into obscurity, never to be heard from again.

I was wrong. That album, Got No Breading, met with tremendous critical acclaim and virtually no airplay, which I thought would still guarantee them the aforementioned obscurity. Wrong again. Jules and the Polar Bears did disappear, but into a studio to produce their second album, which was released last month. Having learned my lesson, (don't judge an album by its cover), I borrowed a copy of the new release with the intent of giving it one listen and dismissing it again.

That one listen, however, was enough to change my mind about this band.

fanEtiks (phonetics) by Jules and the Polar Bears (phrasing and up pitched letters) contains some of the most original music to be released in years. Songwriter/lead singer guitarist Jules Shear takes standard rock idioms and twists them beyond all recognition, creating songs which at first seem overly familiar, but turn out to be surprisingly due to the unexpected changes he incorporates. Shear does no rock; what Nick Lowe does to pop — he takes old songs out and rewrites them, mixing them sound fresh and exciting. Like Lowe, however, Shear's music cannot be easily categorized — it is not new wave, nor straight rock. But a new mixture of all things. As Shear wrote, "What do you belong to?" It doesn't really matter; this music stands alone.

The Polar Bears are the perfect vehicle for Shear's activity — uptight backup for the vocal and song writing. The playing never fails — it is enough to highlight Shear's Jackson Browne-like voice, a voice that seems perfectly well suited to the tunes.

The opening cut, "Freedom Rocks," is a perfect example of how well the band works together. A variety of styles are explored, all successfully. "I Give Up" and "All Cashed Up" are a boon to the band's new wave roots, full of the hectic playing and choppy, frenzied type of rhythm. "The Small of Home" is an experiment with reggae rhythms highlighted by the keyboard player (I don't know his name, so don't list him on the cover)."

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