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JAZZ

Polar Bear

Held On the Tips of Fingers
Babel, £11.99

Those with hipper credentials than me are calling it skronk music, a combination of free-improvising jazz with the energy of punk rock. Other skronkers are coming up fast with names such as Hypnotoad and the Bad Plus, but Polar Bear are out in front, and deservedly so on the evidence of this groundbreaking album.

As their name suggests, they are cool and cuddly on the surface but dangerous if you get too close. Drummer and leader Seb Roachford is technically the best young drummer in the country, but he combines his ability with a real widescreen musical vision, hitting up hypnotic grooves with bassist Tom Herbert.

There are elements of the biscuit-tin-thrown-downstairs skitteriness of drum and bass, but also everything from Thelonius Monk to Björk and Kurt Weill.

The band uses two tenor saxes cleverly, the more extrovert Pete Wareham and the more thoughtful playing of Mark Lockhart often combining to make a big filmic sound. Adding to the noirish feel, "electronica

artist" Leafcutter John adds depth and modernity to the soundscape. Hipster labels such as skronk notwithstanding, with its melodic inventiveness and rhythmic drive, this represents a great leap forward for British jazz.

Peter Culshaw

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