

A musical Rubik's Cube

Jules Shear tackles life's Great Puzzle

by Robb Frederick
The Collegian

The comparisons are inevitable, so let's just get them out of the way.

Jules Shear, with his limited vocal range and his lyrical, acoustic-flavored blend of folk rock, sounds a lot like Bob Dylan. Or maybe like Jackson Browne singing a Bob Dylan tune. Or even -- stay with me, now -- Jackson Browne doing a Dylan-esque cover of any of the songs from Tom Petty's *Into the Great Wide Open*.

That may sound deep, but it hardly breaks the surface of Shear's introspective -- and often bitter -- new release, *The Great Puzzle*.

The disc, a collection of smart, poignant narratives, revives the spirit of the singer/songwriter, the fallible vocalist with a gifted sense of perception.

These are familiar waters for Shear, who picked up some name recognition awhile back as an early host for MTV's "Unplugged" series. This time around, he plots a course through the relationship game, dwelling primarily on the petty mind games that muddle almost all new loves.

The ride begins with "The Trap Door," which tackles the unpredictable break-ups that cut so many relationships short.

"But the trap door gives in / Under the wicked weight of sin / You fall down down down / Farther than you've ever been," sings Shear over a jangling guitar melody. The frank lines cut pretty deep, but Shear never points a finger or places blame; he's been here before, and he knows we have too.

He's caught off guard again during the title track, keeping the elaborate arrangement in check with his hushed vocals and strained choruses.

The number is a lyrical gem, a string of intricately woven metaphors brought into focus with the representative details of "coal miners who hate coal" and "thieves who hate what they stole."

"The Sad Sound of the Wind" wistfully slips Shear into the dull ache of loneliness, while "We Were Only Making Love" sets a past flame into perspective.

"What feels so good at bedtime / Doesn't always make it through the day," he warns,



going on to explain the blinders we voluntarily don when the moment feels right.

"I couldn't see it happening / The change that comes upon us slow / And changes us before we know / Into a different same old thing."

The high point of Shear's stripped-down performance comes with "Something Else to Me," a complex account that eulogizes the death of a former girlfriend.

Again benefiting from hindsight, Shear weaves a dark, twisting tale, finally admitting that, even now, he still isn't sure what the fling meant.

Shear's strengths obviously lie in his songwriting skills, but even his weaknesses -- most notably a warbled voice that downright refuses the high end - complement the thematic premise behind *The Great Puzzle*.

Like Dylan, Shear recognizes that an insightful lyric can create intense bonds with an audience, no matter what channels the delivery takes.

His relaxed voice is an acquired taste; Shear may not be a smooth crooner, but he is a regular guy trying to wade through some of life's more perplexing moments. So of course he has his rough spots. In some cases, Shear's sedated voice actually improves the material, demonstrating the angst and befuddlement he is singing about.

This is also the case on the sardonic "Jewel in a Cobweb," and the catchy "Dreams Dissolve in Tears." The former hurls a frustrated barrage of insults toward a former girlfriend's latest beau, while the latter, an offbeat duet with Pal Shazar (who draws heavily from Kate Pierson of the B-52's), documents the erosion of a doomed tryst.

In spite of its melancholy subject matter, *The Great Puzzle* manages to remain positive. Shear's arrangements are stripped-down to their acoustic essentials, but they never bog down into depression.

On the disc's closing number, "Bark," Shear pulls out his most humbling observation to date.

"You kill me with kindness / And it's all uncontrived / But you barely know me / When I'm really alive / 'Cause you don't know how I feel," he sings, again placing matters under the lens of his unpretentious eye.

Shear knows his place in popular music, and he's certainly adjusted to the role of a struggling artist flirting outside the mainstream. He may never find himself straddling the *Billboard* top spot, but as long as he produces literary works like *The Great Puzzle*, he's also in no danger of disappearing from the forefront of the folk rock scene.

Maybe now he can stop worrying and enjoy himself.

Oscar Nominations

Here are the experts' picks for the 1992 Oscar Awards which will be aired on March 30. Watch *The Collegian* for an upcoming contest in which you'll be able to pick the winners in each one of these categories.

Best Picture

- *Beauty and the Beast*
- *JFK*
- *Prince of Tides*
- *Bugsy*
- *Silence of Lambs*

Best Actor

- Warren Beatty in *Bugsy*
- Robert DeNiro in *Cape Fear*
- Anthony Hopkins in *Silence of the Lambs*
- Nick Nolte in *Prince of Tides*
- Robin Williams in *Fisher King*

Best Actress

- Susan Sarandon in *Thelma and Louise*
- Geena Davis in *Thelma and Louise*
- Laura Dern in *Rambling Rose*
- Jodie Foster in *Silence of the Lambs*
- Bette Midler in *For the Boys*

Best Supporting Actor

- Harvey Keitel in *Bugsy*
- Ben Kingsley in *Bugsy*
- Tommy Lee Jones in *JFK*
- Michael Lerner in *Barton Fink*
- Jack Palance in *City Slickers*

Best Supporting Actress

- Diane Ladd in *Rambling Rose*
- Juliette Lewis in *Cape Fear*
- Kate Nelligan in *The Prince of Tides*
- Mercedes Ruehl in *The Fisher King*
- Jessica Tandy in *Fried Green Tomatoes*

Best Director

- Oliver Stone for *JFK*
- Barry Levinson for *Bugsy*
- Jonathon Demme for *Silence of the Lambs*
- Ridley Scott for *Thelma and Louise*
- John Singleton for *Boyz 'n the Hood*

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