

Theme Magazine Cover



Full page photo



# “BENTO-BOX POP” IQU’S ALTERNATE UNIVERSE

text: JOHN LEE photo: DYLAN GRIFFIN

*I have a confession to make: When I first heard IQU’s album Sun-Q, I hated it. I dismissed them as another wannabe ’80s-themed synth-pop group.*

*But iTunes set on “random” has ideas of its own and just plays whatever it wants. So every once in a while, between Money Mark and Shawn Lee, I’d hear the strange whine of a theremin overlaid with crazy vocal wanderings and be like “What the fish is this? I don’t remember putting this in there...” It was IQU. Soon I was hooked.*

*We met Kento Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs, better known as IQU, when they were in New York for the CMJ music fest in October. For me they were one of the highlight acts of the whole festival. I don’t think a lot of people knew who they were but were bopping to the entire playlist anyway.*

**THEME:** *Your music is so eccentric that it must be an extension of your personalities. Do you agree?*

**KENTO OIWA:** I can't really say if I'm eccentric. I guess I could say that I am a nice person, and our music is nice. So there, you're right about the music being an extension.

**MICHIKO SWIGGS:** All music is an extension of one's personality and experiences. For some, music is an avenue for storytelling. For others, therapy, a mental exercise, a spiritual connection, a political tool, a sexual release; the inspiration for making music is endless.

With **IQU**, Kento and I have the same vision and similar experiences to draw from. We were both born and raised in Japan (I left when I was eleven, he at seventeen) with its rigid social structures. I grew up feeling like an outsider and I found my sanctuary in art.

I moved to Olympia to attend Evergreen and met Kento. Evergreen is a mecca for "eccentric" people; it fosters the idea that you can create a curriculum (and in turn, your life) to suit your individuality and that you do not have to conform yourself to existing paradigms. It attracts a lot of people who have felt like they didn't "fit in." When making music, I am trying to describe an alternate universe that exists in my mind. The cover of *Sun Q* is a visual representation of this world, depicted by Chuck Dong (a Seattle illustrator/designer and a close friend of mine). This place is my sanctuary and where I draw inspiration from.

*How would you describe your music to someone that's never heard it before?*

**KO:** Bento-box pop music.

**MS:** Japanese electropop.

*When people interview you, what sort of questions do they usually ask?*

**KO:** "How did you two meet?" "How long have you been playing together?" "What does **IQU** mean?" stuff like that.

*What questions do you wish they'd ask?*

**KO:** Questions more personal to the writer who's asking. With his own ideas and opinions about our music, rather than explaining to the general public. I like talking to an interviewer as a person and getting into his/her mind, as well as ours. I'd rather have a discussion than a Q&A.

*Michiko, what's up with your British-New Zealand descent?*

**MS:** My father and his family were born and raised in New Zealand. My great-great-grandfather started the first ferry system between the North and South Island. They moved to the US in 1966. My father joined the US Navy and moved to Japan, where he met my mother.

In all of my family, my father and I are the only ones who have become American citizens, but we also have dual New Zealand citizenships. When I was born in Japan, I was born on an American military base.

At the time, my father was not an American and my mother was Japanese. At that time in Japan, citizenship was passed on through the father, so Japan would not give me citizenship. Because I was not born on American soil, and neither of my parents were Americans, the US wouldn't give me citizenship.

So I had no citizenship until I was sixteen and went to court in Hawaii to finally get my US citizenship. On my visas and green card, my citizenship said "Stateless." That may have been the first incident to make me feel like I did not belong anywhere. Later I found out that I was entitled to a New Zealand citizenship because of my father.

*Have you ever been to New Zealand?*

**MS:** I have yet to visit. My father keeps promising to take me as he has not returned since he left in '66. I think it would be wonderful to be there with my father so he can show me where he spent time as a youth. He tells me that Western Washington is very similar to New Zealand in landscape. I feel like my alternate universe has many elements of my vision of New Zealand. I would love to go there by myself for six months and work on a personal music and video project.

*Kento, I've heard you spin regularly at different venues and are quite the badass on the turntables. Who's your favorite DJ?*

**KO:** Some of the best DJ sets I have seen are by Rainier Trio, Seiji, and locally, DJ MASA (of 1200 Records) and DJ Suspence, whom I used to do 2x4 set with.

*You toured with **Looper**, and a bunch of other bands. Do you guys ever go to concerts yourselves?*

**KO:** Yes. I go to a lot of shows. I like going to local shows more than hyped "hot band" shows. I like going to shows where people are there because they like the music, not because it is the place to be.

**MS:** I try to go see bands as much as possible. I do go through phases of not going out, but I try to see three to five shows a week. I buy mostly older music, '80s and earlier, and I never read music magazines—I really hate reading about music—so it's important for me to stay in touch with contemporary music by going to see bands who are performing and touring right now. And if I like their show, I'll buy their record directly from them.

*How did you two meet, and was it spontaneous combustion at first sight?*

**MS:** Kento thought I was a snob. We were neighbors. We became drinking buddies. (I really wasn't a snob.) We started working together when I asked him to help me record a soundtrack for an animated film that I was making for a school project. We had a lot of fun.

*Describe the progression of your musical styles from your first CD to the most recent one.*

**MS:** *Chotto Matte* was very spontaneously made. *Sun Q* was meticulously made.

*You began **IQU** out of Olympia, Washington around the same time as grunge. Were you inspired or turned off by the mainstream success of your fellow Washingtonians?*

**KO:** None of my friends ever really saw money back then. Some are starting now, like those Modest Mouse guys. There still was this anti-fame-but-acting-like-a-rockstar paradox going around in the local scene as some of the musicians started to get press attentions. We thought it was really stupid. It started attracting all these "square" kids who thought being underground was cool. Looking for a reason to feel "more oppressed than thou." But not really. Some of those people were the most judgmental people I ever met. Being in "Oly-Scene" then was being in fucking high school all over again. I hated my high school and did not wish to re-live that in a punk-rock community, which used to be a haven for me.

**MS:** It's great to see a lot my friends becoming extremely successful (like Modest Mouse). The

one success I'm particularly proud of is Miranda July. She decided to make a living as an artist. Her performance art is incredible, but not commercial or accessible. She was able to receive grants from city funds and the European Art Commission to do what she does. She performed at the Whitney and now she's making her own movie. To break into the "real" art world from the indie world can't be easy.

### *What was your first performance like?*

ko: I was six. Played "Mac The Knife" on the stage with a drummer. My parents were there. I remember that this kid who was better than me went right after me playing some George Winston song. I recently discovered the cassette recording of the recital. I still need to archive that.

### *What do you most like about each other? Hate?*

ko: You are asking me to make rather personal information public. It's easier to talk about what you like about your friend. Focus on the positive side. But yes, a relationship is like yin and yang. Night and day. Earth and water. She's a family member to me. A very respectable lady.

ms: Kento is driven like no one else I know. Just the fact that he moved away from Japan to America when he was seventeen to play music, and here he is now. It takes a lot to do that. I hate Kento's driving.

### *What would you do if you didn't play music?*

ko: I can't really imagine my life without music, but I would get more into cooking. I like to cook.

ms: If I wasn't playing music publicly? Maybe I'd go to grad school for multimedia art. Or maybe I'd move to Spain, or Costa Rica, and have a baby. Who knows?

### *What do you do in your spare time? How do you relax?*

ko: I like to eat good food. Sometimes I'll spend a whole Sunday afternoon cooking a bowl of curry. It's rather therapeutic, I think. I'm creating something that requires preparation, procedures and skills, yet I get to see the result and share it with people in a few hours. I think I enjoy that quick-fix feeling, especially when I have been spending too long of a time on one song and start getting lost in all these beats, melodies, sound-patches, tempos,

sequence-changes, etc.

ms: I like to cook and drink wine. I get organic vegetables delivered to my house every week. It's like a surprise box. Every week, it contains different seasonal vegetables and fruits and I have to figure out what meals I can make out of them. Washington is very fortunate to have a lot of small family-owned organic farms and the fish market, so the food here is very good.

I'm a member at the UW Art Museum, so I go to the museum a lot. Last winter/spring, they had a large exhibit by James Turrell (an American artist who works with light and space). I must have gone to that exhibit twice a week. He had one piece, *Danaë*, that reminded me of the alternate universe that I was speaking of earlier.

I also like to walk around the parks in the city; hang out with my boyfriend, take Valium, drink wine, and make a fire in my fireplace; drive around the city and listen to music. My priorities in life are food, music/art, sex, and sleep, in no particular order.

### *Why do you live in Washington—it rains all the time.*

ms: Seattle is the most beautiful city in America. But that's a secret.

### *Any thoughts about where you'd like to be by the time you're fifty?*

ko: Don't know yet. I ended up where I never expected when I turned twenty. I did not have a clue where I'd be when I became thirty. I like not to plan too much ahead. I try to focus on what I've got on my plate right now.

ms: Alive.

### *Janis Joplin or Yoko Ono?*

ko: I must borrow a line from a song by Kain for this one. He's the crazy guy who was the original member of The Last Poets and got kicked out after one or two albums. "Jaaaniiiss Joooh-plin! Queeeen of blues? What the fuck is that?"

ms: Totally Yoko. She is one of my favorite role models. Her and Björk. When John met Yoko, he was at her art opening. One of her art pieces was a ladder leaning against a wall. He climbed up the ladder and at the top of the ladder was a magnifying glass. He looked through the magnifying glass at a little speck on the wall.

Looking closely, he read the speck on the wall and what it said was "YES". That's when he fell in love with her. I like that.

### *Britney or Christina?*

ko: Christina? I can't even tell that it's her anymore.

ms: Britney. I love her story and this whole deal with Kevin Federline is so amusing! You can take the girl out of white trash but you can't take the white trash out of the girl. My boyfriend went to junior high school with Kevin and he said he was the cockiest jock dickhead. I love teen idols and the whole machine behind them.

Christina rubbed me the wrong way when she re-recorded one of her albums in Spanish (because she is Latina and she wanted to reach out to her people), but she didn't speak Spanish so she learned her lyrics *phonetically*. I think that is so rude. If she wants to align herself with (capitalize on) the Latino community, she should at least learn how to speak the language.

### *Roger Moore or Sean Connery?*

ko: Roger, definitely.

ms: That's a hard choice. I like them both.

### *DJ Krush or DJ Spooky?*

ko: Are you kidding? Krush! Very respectable man in his music and as the person himself. Please! Don't even bring the two to the same level.

ms: DJ Krush is an amazing person and producer.

### *Metallica or Rage Against the Machine?*

ko: Tough one. A few years ago, there was no question about it—I was all about Metallica. But lately I've acquired a whole new appreciation for the Rage, and the whole shit about Metallica and Napster. I must say it's a draw.

ms: Metallica, pre-*And Justice For All*. ■

SHORTWAVES

**IQU**  
SONIC SCHOLARS

TEXT JASON KIRK  
PHOTO ROBIN LAANANEN

Since Kento Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs first released *Chotto Matte a Moment!*—their first under the moniker 'IQU'—they've done some homework ... six years of homework. "We bought tons of records, sat at home, and listened to them," Oiwa retells, exuding a reminiscent fondness that omits the pair's frequent deejaying. "We find some song that just blows your mind, and we show it to each other," he muses of the duo's symbiotic digging, "and for a while we go into that direction." Where *Chotto Matte* dealt in "textures"—upright-bass-driven instrumental arrangements that developed slowly and barely for all their serious charisma—*Sun Q*, their long-awaited latest album, is both a more researched affair and a full-bore party.

On the new *Sun Q*, songs like "Dirty Boy" and "The Ninth Line" trade in IQU's formerly reined confidence for crassness, bona fide songcraft and a veneer of production savvy as carefully nurtured as it is unrestrained. "After a while, rather than listening to your peer group, you just start going back and looking into where it all came from," Oiwa details. But while Swiggs, "went more into the whole late '70s, early '80s, New York, black, gay bathhouse scene," Oiwa explains, "I listen for the production of things." Swiggs' coy vocal blasts and Oiwa's studied production assure that, even if you don't catch the steady diet of Motown that fed Oiwa while the album incubated, as the closing reprise hits its relentlessly anthemic dance-stride, you might not even care.

Though they resist the "encyclopedia" tag, IQU are no strangers to the loosely studious fervor of record junkies. "I think every musician should listen to as many records as they can," urges Oiwa. "If you have a genre that you don't like, I think you should even sometimes challenge yourself. Reach into it."



**Giant Robot**

IQU

*Sun Q*

The first track on the Seattle duo's long overdue new CD opens with an ominous electronic wash that gives way to new wave funkiness. The analog instrumental feel of the first album is long gone, and Michiko and K.O. sing more often, too. As a result, the cuts are more like pop songs and less like dance floor mixes. "The 9th Line" and "Dirty Boy" have an early '80s Prince feel to them, and the cover of "Loving You" is an amazing display of Theremin control. [iquiqu.com] mw

**the Stranger** Seattle, WA

**BLOCK PARTY BANDS**

**MAIN STAGE**

**THE TURN-ONS**

Swirly shoegazer sounds, fuzzy overdrive effects, and a tinge of the glam aesthetic give this local four-piece an impression of imminent international popularity. *Saturday, 12:15-1 pm.*

**IQU**

This duo, comprising Kento Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs, never fails to mesmerize audiences with its inventive mix of electronic textures. The two incorporate theremin with synchronized

beats and live instrumentation as well as lovely amounts of fuzz and wry vocals. *Saturday, 1:30-2:15 pm.*

**THE SPITS**

Between the thrift-store costumes and the band's obsession with lyrics about both the supernatural (witch hunts, space guitars) and the everyday (playing parties, taking back the alley), the Spits have risen in popularity to become one of the most talented and entertaining (if volatile) punk bands Seattle has to offer. *Saturday, 2:45-3:45 pm.*

MORE >>>>



# Dig on these indie gems

By Tyson Lex Wheatley  
 CNN Headline News  
 Monday, November 15, 2004 Posted: 4:27 PM EST (2127 GMT)

(CNN) -- Tired of the "alternative" mix on the radio? Looking for something a little more original? Or perhaps you just want to impress your hipster friends by busting out some cool tunes from the underground. Well, here are three indie gems just waiting to be dug up:

## IQU: 'Sun Q' (Sonic Boom Recordings)

Theremin (*n*) -- An electronic instrument played by moving the hands near its two antennas, often used for high tremolo effects.

The theremin takes a starring role in the sophomore album from electronic pop duo IQU. And founding father Kento Oiwa plays it with haunting grace. But the album's driving force comes from a solid supporting cast of animated keyboards, distorted guitar, fuzzy drums and assorted bleeps and blips.

But "Sun Q" is more than just weird science. The album is playful and bright in nature, and its Japanese influences blend seamlessly with scratch-happy beats, conversations overheard in a nightclub ladies' room and a certain eerily familiar cellphone ringtone.

The result: A surprisingly accessible electronic album full of charm and even humor. IQU formed in Olympia,



Washington, in 1997 by Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs, their first full-length, 1998's "Chotto Matte a Moment" resonated with critics across the country. The band cut their teeth on the road, playing the first Coachella Festival and touring with acts like Looper, Hovercraft and Mouse on Mars.

It took them four years to get enough material together for the next, but it was well worth the wait. The CD's diverse quality carries it from start to finish, with elements of disco "Dirty Boy," pop "Sun Q," and even rock "Hamachi." An instrumental cover of Minnie Riperton's "Loving You" adds a soothing touch. Add that to some of the most clever packaging art ever created -- and you've got yourself one brilliant pickup.

## Blender



IQU: "See? The mascara and lipstick look better on me."

**IQU**  
**SUN Q** ★★★★★  
 SONIC BOOM

Rump-shaking disco fun for cyborgs, Francophiles and sushi denizens

The second album by Seattle's IQU is a block party for robots and humans, the kind where everyone starts making out in the corners. Multi-instrumentalist beatmakers Kento Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs have replaced the standup bass of their not-quite-as-ambitious 1998 debut with floor-flexing Daft Punk-y

kaboom, but what drives these whomping club grooves over the top is their embrace of human imperfection. Every track's colored by distinctly unmechanical details: scratch-storms and electric guitar freak outs, Oiwa's awkwardly enthusiastic singing on an ode to his favorite sushi, an almost-on-key theremin that carries a twinkling instrumental cover of Minnie Riperton's '70s-soul aria "Loving You" and a hilarious break in "The 9th Line," where the sound seems to drift into the disco's bathroom, then come out zooming again.  
 DOUGLAS WOLK

## Magnet

**ICU**  
**Chotto Matte A Moment!**  
 Take all of your old-school hip-hop records, spin them on sparking circuit boards and let the bass rise above the digital house jams. Welcome to ICU's world. Combining synths with sped-up vocal samples and multiple effects, this Olympia, Wash., trio produces raw, analog sounds that reduce traditional electronica to a silicon-coated dust cloud. While K.O. tends to the turntables, samplers, drum machines and theremin, bassist A. Hartman and keyboardist Michiko Swiggs concoct ass-wagging rhythms with enough energy to start a riot. "Yopparai (A Drunkard Who Fell From Heaven)" begins with a calculated breakbeat that feeds violently into Hartman's thumping bass. "Can't You Even Remember That?" and "Done The Twist" cool the feverish palette with a slow-jam tribute. Substituting Middle Eastern harmonies for bludgeoning speed, "Aluet" feeds off the digital hype with ambient soundscapes and scratchy feedback. For ICU, categorization is an impossibility. Just when relaxation sets in, ICU sets its phasers to stun, leaving your body quivering while you emit electric shockwaves across the dancefloor.  
 [K, POB 7154, Olympla WA 98507]  
 —Jonah Brucker-Cohen



**IQU**  
**Sun Q**  
 ★★★★★  
**Wacky electronic-infused pop to make you swoon**

[Sonic Boom] With the departure of Pizzicato 5 and the relative inactivity of Cibo Matto, there's been a great void in the "Cute Japanese Funky Happy Pop" subgenre the past few years. Fortunately, there's IQU, who are actually Japanese-American, but let's not get bogged down in details.

Pronounced "ee-koo," these kids make some unclassifiable acts sound as predictable as Dubya staying on message. Don't mind their influences (Zapp, Giorgio Moroder, Brian Eno) since the sounds you'll hear, guitars, turntables, keyboards and Theremin co-mingled, are as fresh and experimental as they are comforting.

The great thing about *Sun Q* (and IQU in general) is that they won't clash sounds for the sake of unrestrained noise-fests, and they don't mine the usual repository of electronic/hip-hop-pop clichés. There's even a cover of Minnie Riperton's soulful classic "Loving You" which, for some reason, is known by every Japanese person on earth, only this one relies on the lovely Theremin of Michiko Swiggs. **Tony Bogdanovski**

## Vice

**IQU** 8



**Sun Q**  
 Sonic Boom

I am of the generation of Elvis and the Beatles and old jazz. My opinion of my daughter's record is, if you're a dancer, you will love this. You will dance all night like a cat. Kento is a good theremin player. Michiko and Kento are like brother and sister so they can never be lovers. I don't want to give them a 10. I'd like to but I don't think I should. If I give them a 10, they will sell one million records. Happy magic fingers, singing stories of Spring, dancing through the night.  
 MICHIKO'S MOM

# IQU

## Sampling the Sonic Bento Box

FROM THE EARLY DAYS OF Nirvana and Mudhoney through the Murder City Devils, Modest Mouse, Pretty Girls Make Graves and the Blood Brothers, the Northwest has been well stocked with highly energetic rock and punk stars brandishing loud guitars and fierce howls. But if that was the only spectrum of sound offered to its residents, living in Seattle would get as monotonous as the constant gray winter canopy and the fact that its main tourist attractions are a giant needle and a music museum the *New York Times* described as looking like “something that crawled out of the sea, rolled over, and died.”

There are increasingly more nationally noteworthy music ventures in non-rock genres lighting up the Emerald City. Local hip-hop heads Grayskul signed to the prestigious Rhymesayers label and hometown hip-hop label Under the Needle houses nationally hyped acts like Boom Bap Project and Onry Ozzborn. Seattle’s first international electronic music event, the Decibel Festival happens September 23-26 and the Fourthcity collective keeps the native laptop battles fiercely competitive, while artists of every ilk perform at art galleries, charter boats, loft spaces, flop houses and dive bars, making Seattle one of the most musically rich cities in the country from

nearly every vantage point. And it’s from this that IQU—the city’s premiere Japanese electro pop act—is preparing to rule the world, or at the very least, its dance floor, with an offering all their own.

“Have you seen a Japanese Bento box?” asks Kento Oiwa, one half of the IQU (pronounced ee-koo) duo, on a recent afternoon. “It has a little rice in it, and a little chicken here, and a little vegetable fish cake there—everyone’s gonna find something they can eat. We’re like a Bento box.” He’s describing the band’s most recent record *Sun Q* (on Sonic Boom Recordings), a ray of euphoric electro sunshine-warm shimmery dance-floor funk, tranquil soundscapes, old school breakbeat experimentation and an ethereal theramin cover of Minnie Riperton’s “Loving You.” Each song has a distinct place in the sugary IQU spectrum, as cotton candy keyboard melodies spin around mid-tempo drum machine beats, samplers, turntables, occasional Vocoder vocals and languid guitar riffs. But the Bento description remains true—the record is pure pastiche. Witness the video-game noise freak outs of “Puka” along with the easy listening, dreamstate, war-of-the-sexes conversation between Oiwa and bandmate Michiko Swiggs on the title track and you’ll hear what he means.

by: **Jennifer Maerz** photography: **Steven Dewall**  
hair, make-up and styling: **Chandra Augé**  
paintings: **NKO**



Star sweater & scarf by Spring & Summer made by Charles Angel. Hat by John Downing. www.charlesangel.com. Sweater by Lisa Norwalk. www.lisnorwalk.com. red boots by Fred Perry available at 1219 1st Ave. Seattle, WA. phone: (206.441.1999). Blue jacket by David available at



Blue Maudslowi color dress by Paul Dand "Mid Season Collection" available at www.pauldand.com. Hat "Lips" by David available at www.david.com. shoes by boyish available at www.boyish.com. "Blue" sweater by Lisa Norwalk available at www.lisnorwalk.com



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You  
don't have to  
be a 'sex symbol.'  
You can be smart,  
pretty, young  
and fun.

Backing up a bit before the fully realized *Sun Q*, IQU originated as an Olympia, Washington basement project in 1996. "The whole idea was to use sample beats and drum machines and we'd play instruments on top of it," says Oiwa. "It's nothing new now, but back then there weren't too many people doing that."

A year later, he and fellow Oly resident Swiggs took a month-long trip to their native Japan that helped cement the genre-splicing sound they would later employ. In addition to attending giant "noise raves" headlined by seminal acts like Merzbow and Masonna, the friends sought to absorb as much aural stimuli as possible. "It was a great time for the Tokyo music scene, with all these crazy, mind-blowing bands, and there was nothing like that here," remembers Oiwa. "All different types of forms, mixing up of genres...the whole mixture of the DJ culture and punk rock, and everything just thrown in all together was a big inspiration for us."

Adds Swiggs, "When I was in Tokyo, I realized that every place you walk by plays songs or sounds just to grab people's attention—so the amount of noise you hear is just a sensory overload. It made sense to me that these Japanese noise bands came out of that because it was just regurgitating that into the music."

They arrived back in Olympia at a time when indie rock kids were starting to clue into the Warp and Ninja Tune catalogs, so IQU's lo-fi, genre-swapping sound started to catch on in the Northwest and beyond.

They released their debut, *Chotto Matte a Moment*, on K Records in 1998 and went on to release two EPs, *Girls on Dates* and *Teenage Dream* in 1999 and 2000, respectively.

IQU toured with Chicks on Speed,

Mouse on Mars, Looper and the Flaming Lips (who hand picked the band to play their "Music Against Brain Degeneration" tour after seeing IQU open for Fugazi in Okalahoma City), and played the first Coachella festival in 1999. By 2001—two years after they moved to Seattle—the duo reevaluated their situation together, as working so intensely for so long had taken its toll on the pair. "Basically we hit the bottom," says Swiggs.

The time between records wasn't time off, though, as the duo learned how to use ProTools, Swiggs became more involved in the visual art community, and Oiwa spent his time DJing (he recently DJed at the Siren Festival in New York) as well as touring with Nobukazu Takemura and Jim O'Rourke. "We were always working on music," says Oiwa. "But then after two and a half years, we had a breakthrough and felt like doing it as a band."

With *Sun Q*, IQU have resurfaced even stronger—arriving at an enchanting sound that's both technically complex and melodically playful. They have become what many Seattle residents believe to be the Northwest's next breakout act. With a sound Oiwa describes as the compliment to electroclash's bratty, trashy, rude attitude, IQU make style-conscious music that includes everyone within the fun. "There's a definite aesthetic that I'm going for, which is retro but contemporary, and also Asian-influenced because I'm Japanese," says Swiggs, who doubles as a clothing and graphic designer. "I want to be very feminine in the band, but be strong and feminine. You can be an Asian woman and be strong without being a dragon lady," she adds, laughing. "You don't have to be a 'sex symbol.' You can be smart, pretty, young and fun." **F**



## | NIGHTWATCH

## Drumzilla: breathing fire into IQU

Tom Scanlon /  
Seattle Times staff reporter

**W**ho needs a drum machine — when you can get William Goldsmith?

IQU started out in Olympia seven years ago, drifted north and became a top-shelf Seattle electro-rock band. Now it has become truly something extraordinary with the addition of Goldsmith, who previously played with Sunny Day Real Estate and (briefly) the Foo Fighters.

The addition may be temporary, as Goldsmith is busy with other projects, namely SDRE-spinoff **the Fire Theft** and **Sivestyle**; while it lasts, this might be the best show in town.

Last week at the Showbox, Goldsmith sat behind his drum kit stage right, with Kento “K.O.” Oiwa playing guitar (and, occasionally, theremin) center stage, and Michiko Swiggs playing keyboards to his left. Since its inception, IQU — pronounced ee-koo — has been a duo, often experimental, more lately leaning toward Japanese pop as the two Japanese Americans explored their roots.

Adding Goldsmith is like throwing a stick of dynamite into a fireworks warehouse.

Watching him play, all you see is a whirl of arms, his face fairly expressionless. He’s as cool and automatic (seemingly flawless) as a robo-drummer; then again, he has that explosive creativity that is all too human.

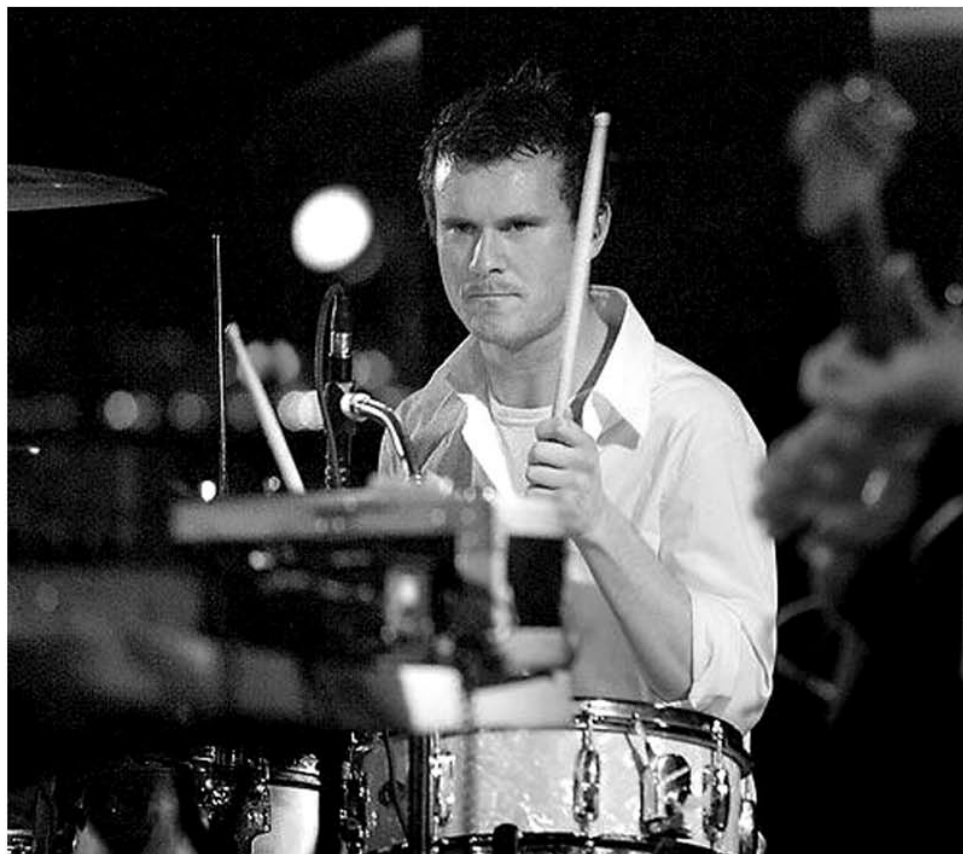
With Goldsmith, IQU has become a shape-shifter, the musical equivalent of those horror movie villains. Some of their songs incorporate recorded beats, and the three shift gears three or four times per song, back and forth between electro-grooves and rock-jams.

It’s a wild, occasionally spine-tingling mixture of technical gadgetry and sheer instrumental virtuosity.

On “Aluet” (from the first IQU album), Goldsmith on every eighth beat would crash down on the cymbals, an exhilarating accent. Other times, he simply adds rock muscle to IQU’s body of work, in turn leading Oiwa to unleash his guitar-warrior side — his talents as a guitarist are deep and varied, but he usually chooses to play in a restrained, laid-back fashion.

The new project came about when Oiwa became one of Goldsmith’s housemates in Kirkland. The two have been friends for more than a decade, back when Goldsmith was starting out Sunny Day Real Estate.

Oiwa stresses the IQU “is not just music — it’s about relationships. Michiko and I have been such good friends for so long, the same with William. We all feel like we are siblings



ROD MAR / THE SEATTLE TIMES

William Goldsmith, formerly of Sunny Day Real Estate, is currently performing with IQU, adding rock muscle to the duo’s musical experimentation, most recently Japanese pop.

— he just blended in even though our original music styles are so different.”

Together, it’s a dynamic combination, this new, intensely ramped-up IQU. “It’s a whole new boundary, huh?” says Oiwa, with an almost boyish gleefulness. “Playing [with Goldsmith] on the stage I get goose bumps . . . His drumming is so explosive — he’s the John Bonham of our generation.”

IQU-plus-Goldsmith headlines a spectacular “Aquarian Birthday Bash” put on by publicist Frank Nieto at the Crocodile on Saturday (10 p.m., \$5 for Aquarians, \$7 for non-Aquarians). Nieto is the former booker of the Crocodile and Chop Suey, and he has lined up a show that makes him seem like the Ed Sullivan of Seattle indie rock. The lineup includes: **Sivestyle**, the Billy Dolan band that Goldsmith has joined; the **Lights**, an experimental-leaning trio somewhere in that gray area between garage and punk; **Ape Shape**, a Portland reggae-punk band; and the **Slo Asions**, a new Turn-ons side project.

The latter act has Turn-ons guitarist Erik Blood — also a talented producer and DJ — and bass player Corey Gutch, with sample-

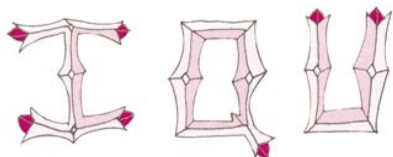
master DJ **Tactile**. They do some wonderful psychedelic re-washes of the likes of the Pixies’ “Where Is My Mind?” and Elton John’s “Rocket Man.”

Nieto promises “a lot of dancing, which is rare at the Crocodile.”

### Cover of Calendar Section



## MUSIC



The Seattle duo explains how they're not giving you a song. They're giving you an experience



As an Asian American frontwoman in the indie rock scene, IQU's Michiko Swiggs gets a disproportionate amount of attention on account of her looks. But she doesn't seem upset about it. In fact, she and her bandmate Kento Oiwa have countered fans' tendencies to exoticize them by coming up with a nickname for the most obsessive ones: "Japan-o-philes."

"Nerdy white guys come up to me and try to speak Japanese," she says as she sips espresso in the trendy Seattle bar where she also works part time. "But it's funny to me. I don't work it, but I'm definitely aware of it. I'm not your stereotypical Japanese girl."

Waving his beer, Oiwa chimes in from his perch on the wide couch: "She has a song with a talk box, with the tube going down her mouth. She gets [attention] then."

Swiggs counters, "But when we're on tour, Kento gets the girls in little Hondas with the Sanrio stickers all over them. It's like we're the Superflat of indie rock."

The Superflat art movement — a recent Japanese trend that celebrates the surreal alternate universes of manga or comic art — is a perfect metaphor for IQU. Like Superflat, Swiggs and Oiwa possess a tongue-in-cheek approach to ethnicity that appears in everything they do as IQU. The pair

met at Olympia's Evergreen State College, and since bursting on the scene in 1998 with their critically lauded debut, *Chotto Matte a Moment!* (K), they've worked to perfect an image that pokes fun at stereotypical Asian quirkiness and cuteness, all while embracing it. The expertly crafted disco electronic fusion of the band's latest, *Sun Q* (Sonic Boom), is just one part of their conceptual package.

Oiwa explains, "I think people love us because of our music. But it's also because of how we look onstage. We've got this crazy equipment, my Theremin, this cool little Asian couple. That's a part of the band too."

"We're arty party music," Swiggs says.

With *Sun Q*, the music steps up its importance. Unlike the band's last two recordings (1999's *Girls On Dates* EP and 2000's *Teenage Dream*), it focuses on a more straightforward juxtaposition of disco, indie rock, and mid-1990s electronica. Chunky vintage synths whistle and click, fat bass lines linger in the groove, and guitar samples dance like little tongues of fire, all while a piercing Theremin wails a melody. For the first time, Swiggs and Oiwa sing rather than use vocal samples. Yes, the lyrics are occasionally in Japanese.

Oiwa explains, "We want a more playful, anything-goes attitude rather than pinpointing a genre

and then that becomes your thing. Retro, electro-clash, etc. — we love all of it."

Swiggs adds, "It's about timbre and texture because with electronic music you can get so many different sounds."

Both Oiwa and Swiggs do DJ sets during their off hours, and it shows in the record's flow. A cover of Minnie Riperton's classic "Loving You" — which contains what may be one of the only successful attempts at sexy Theremin-playing — moves easily into the disco-kitsch groove of the title track. "Puka" follows, with a drum'n'bass beat that dissolves smoothly into a breakdown of wacky noise. It's simultaneously danceable and laughable.

The same could be said for the packaging for *Sun Q*. Caricatures of the band — by artist Chuck Dong — smile out from a digitally altered photo in that it's meant to represent the real world, as opposed to the fantasy world that Oiwa and Swiggs often feel like they inhabit while working on IQU. The first 2,200 pressings include an elaborate booklet and vellum package.

"We're not giving you a song," Swiggs concludes. "We're giving you an experience. [I love] being out there and presenting myself and this world that Kento and I have created."

— Tizzy Asher

# Bright spots in accessible electronica

7882

By JIM ABBOTT  
SENTINEL POP MUSIC CRITIC

★★★★ **IQU, *Sun Q*** (Sonic Boom): When a band counts a theremin as a lead instrument, there's bound to be plenty of ambient noodling, which there is on this sophomore full-length album from Seattle-based indie-electronic popsters IQU.

Still, *Sun Q*, which duo Kento Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs will showcase Wednesday at Will's Pub in Orlando, is about as accessible as it gets for electronica exercises that often extend beyond the 6-minute mark. IQU (pronounced EE-KOO) lends a distinctive Eastern quality to the songs that is most noticeable in the duo's delicate vocals, but also in the clean melodies that often characterize more high-energy guitar-driven Japanese rock.

The opening "Under the Cherry Blossom," one



of the longer instrumentals, unfolds as a combination of staccato computer blips layered into a blend of majestic, haunting keyboards. Just when

the mood threatens to become somnambulist, the tempo is hijacked into a double-time sprint that yields to a final energetic solo.

It won't make your feet move, but there's plenty here that will. An insistent dance beat underpins the turntable scratches, muscular guitars and disembodied voices on "The 9th Line," which manages to make the clinical-sounding keyboards sound funky in a majestic chorus.

While the rhythms on that song are subdued, the stairstep chord progression on "Dirty Boy" is positively disco. Though the vocals filtered through a talk-box effect is interesting, it's again the infectious combination of instruments that makes the track: wah-wah guitar, more turntable scratches and a wash of voices and synthesized sounds in a chorus that sounds surprisingly warm and melodic.

Equally beautiful is an instrumental cover of Minnie Riperton's "Loving You," which showcases Oiwa's theremin against understated poly-rhythms and pulsating keyboards that threaten to overwhelm the trembling final note.

Despite the pretty playing, there's a sameness that comes from the continuous mid-tempo grooves on songs such as the title track and "Puka."

That makes it a welcome relief when the duo builds the pleasing grooves into exuberant rock-flavored excursion such as "Hamachi" and the closing "A Pile of Cherries."

In such moments, *Sun Q* shine brightly indeed.

Reviewing key: ★★★★★ excellent; ★★★★ good; ★★★ average; ★★ poor; ★ awful.

Go to [OrlandoSentinel.com/music](http://OrlandoSentinel.com/music) to hear an excerpt from this album and read other recent reviews.

## Baltimore Weekly

### SOUND TRACKS

**IQU**  
SUN Q

SONIC BOOM RECORDINGS

**IN JAPANESE CULTURE THE CHERRY blossom represents rebirth.** And tattooed on the inner forearm of musician/DJ K.O.—as well as emblazoned in the title of "Under the Cherry Blossom," the opening song of Seattle duo IQU's second full-length, *Sun Q*—the cherry blossom is the wholly appropriate emblem. IQU (pronounced ee-koo) is the project of Kento "K.O." Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs, and *Sun Q* is the project's rebirth following a nearly three-year hiatus during which the duo explored other avenues while simultaneously honing its wide and winding dynamic.

Like its creators, *Q* is a fanciful bright-eyed sprite, shown in tracks such as the puckish "Puka" and plucky "Crazy," the first peppered with wobbly tremolo guitar, burble bass, and lurching percussive swarms, and the second with tiptoeing pizzicato tickles. IQU pairs demurely melodic measures with careening Krautrock breakbeat, its overall sound evolved from the lo-fi fiddling dubbed "drum 'n' haze" of its 1998 debut.

All this swerving comes meticulously measured. The pacing is obviously detailed, as it must be for a group with a consummate command of beat machines and FX modules, as well as virtual analog synths, texturally treated guitars, and an operatic theremin. However, for every placid arrangement—the Asian motif overlaid "Under the Cherry Blossom," the title track, and a cover of Minnie Riperton's "Loving You"—there are robofunk counterparts including "Dirty Boy" and "A Pile of Cherries." Indeed, *Sun Q* is an album of digital precision and analog flits of whimsy, from the syrupy to the bitersweet with a cherry on top. (Tony Ware)

IQU plays Towson's Recher Theatre Oct. 19 with ... And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead.

## Boston Phoenix

### ★★★ **IQU, *SUN Q*** (Sonic Boom).

The Seattle electronic duo IQU (pronounced ee-koo) make the old sound new again. On this, the second full-length from Japanese-American multi-instrumentalists Kento Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs, the duo jettison the improvisational vibe (and prominent stand-up bass) of their rough-hewn 1998 K Records debut, *Chotto Matte a Moment!*, in favor of tighter song structures, administering juicy timbres and melodic hooks in doses generous enough to captivate even chronic ADD sufferers. The squealing synths, fuzzed-out guitar effects, and more-bounce-to-the-ounce bass riffs of "The Ninth Line" easily offset the ditty's half-baked, drug-referencing lyric and sampled ladies'-room chatter. The flirtatious electro-disco single "Dirty Boy" makes the catchiest use of a guitar talkbox since *Frampton Comes Alive!*—think Daft Punk covering Diana Ross's "Love Hangover" with rapid-fire scratching by guest DJ Suspence and goofy children's-record samples sprinkled on top. And in Oiwa's hands, the theremin sounds less like a holdover from '50s sci-fi films and more like a wailing, operatic diva; he uses it to great effect on an instrumental interpretation of Minnie Riperton's 1974 R&B hit "Loving You." For those who cherished the globetrotting, cartoon club pop of Deee-Lite and enjoyed the abstractions of German electronica innovators Mouse on Mars, *Sun Q* offers the perfect marriage between the two.

— Kurt B. Reinhley

(IQU open for ... And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead next Thursday, October 21, downstairs at the Middle East, 480 Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square; call 617-864-EAST.)

## XLR8R

### **IQU SUN Q** Sonic Boom/US/CD

IQU's first proper album since 1998's *Chotto Matte A Moment!* is a glossy party opus brimming with Asian-American soul, lubricated disco-funk and mellifluous melodies. *Sun Q*'s production (by IQU's Michiko Swiggs and Kento Oiwa, along with Brian Weber) is phenomenally vibrant and full-bodied. IQU's multi-instrumentalists are hedonists with masterly chops and ears keenly attuned to the cheeky and the weird. From the heart-stoppingly beautiful, Theremin-dominated cover of Minnie Riperton's 1974 hit "Loving You" to the punchy, staccato funk (with distorted guitar and psychedelic keyboard whorls) of "Hamachi," IQU proves that passion for the past can manifest magnificently timeless music. *Dave Segal*

## Village Voice

### CLUB CRAWL

by Tricia Romano

**H**ave you ever heard a theremin sing? It's a beautiful, thrilling sound, and you'll hear it wail like an opera singer courtesy of Seattle-lites IQU. Kento Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs make luxurious ambient paintings but slash them up too, nicking the centers with vicious bursts of jarring noises to unsettle you when you are getting too comfy. This description makes IQU seem all ethereal and heady, but their live shows are a truly physical experience, with Kento thrashing between his musical toys like a deranged lunatic. With *Pleaseeasaurus* and *No More Dolls*.

Sunday @ 9:30, Pianos, 158 Ludlow, 212.505.3733



Photograph by David Bellisio

Very bunny, asshole: We are IQU!

### IQU [SUN Q] -Sonic Boom-

When dance music wasn't all the rave, there was ICU piecing together a mélange of disco dance rhythms to punk. That was back in '98, they've since changed their name to IQU (pronounced ee-koo) and continue to stupefy with an unclassifiable sound. They've since stripped down the band to a duo with K.O. still handling guitars, turntables and Theremin and vocalist Michiko Swiggs flipping her keyboard on and off.

They've taken many samples and shed an entire new light on them, incorporating them into the music. There are cell phone ring tones ("Dirty Boy") that are made an integral part of choruses, as is the Theremin on occasion (like on the group's cover of "Loving You"). It's used to its full extent.

I'm having a hard time attempting to dissect the sounds on *Sun Q* because everything is just so delectable. There's a lot of old school that goes into their new school but whichever educational system they take, it's well worth it.



## SF Bay Guardian

### IQU *Sun Q* (Sonic Boom)

When IQU first bloomed out of the Northwest six or so years ago, they confounded many people. The trio's club beats and colorful gloss couldn't have been further from Melvins-y sludge and the chord-crunching of Sleater-Kinney's fellow — if fellow can apply — Olympians. Likewise, their analog elements, buoyed by Aaron Hartman's frenetic stand-up bass lines, came across as decidedly wacky to those dance music maniacs who mistaken thought nonturntable instrumentation was soooo 10 or 20 years ago.

It's been more than a moment since 1998's *Chotto Matte a Moment!*, and IQU have slimmed to a duo now, with Hartman leaving Kento Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs. *Sun Q* doesn't have the same quirks found on the group's debut album; but it more than makes up for their absence with brash, speaker-leaping pop sheen. The odd-ball bass is gone, replaced by vocals that are often catchy. One tune takes the ladies' room-break idea of Bjork's "There's More to Life Than This" and does it one better. And a cover of Minnie Riperton's "Loving You" is terrific: it hits that song's proto-Mariah heights better than the Orb's ever growing, pulsating Riperton sampling, not to mention the terrible version recorded by R. Kelly protégé Sparkle. When Oiwa's theremin does a drunken mosquito's impression of the late Riperton's soprano, the sound is sweet, funny, and a little bit sad. Brava and bravo. *IQU play Fri/17, Hotel Utah Saloon, S.F. (415) 546-6300.* (Johnny Ray Huston)

## Splendidezine.com

### IQU *Sun Q* (Sonic Boom)

This crafty Japanese-American duo from Olympia, WA open their second full-length with "Under The Cherry Blossom", a gentle electronic set piece built around an oriental melodic riff and a sweetly swooping theremin. Typically consigned to creepy sci-fi soundtracks, this much-misunderstood instrument exudes uncommon warmth and grace here, as if it were the principal creature in a harmonious forest. Later it returns, both as a lithe counterpart to the swaggering funk groove of another instrumental, "Dr. Caligari", and as the lead "vocalist" for a simmering, serene cover of "Loving You", hitting the same impossibly high notes Minnie Riperton once did, and seemingly more naturally at that.

Those tracks alone give you a sense of IQU's penchant for the eclectic and the nearly unclassifiable. The rest of *Sun Q* doesn't disappoint; it impulsively branches off in various directions, most enticingly straight for the dance floor. Boasting an infectious synth line, "The 9th Line" makes like a playful, straight-out-of-Paisley-Park, indie-dance recasting of Pink's "Get the Party Started". "Dirty Boy", however, is a truer successor to a classic anthem like "Groove Is in the Heart"; taking the booty-shaking vocoder funk/rock route, it features a simple, insistent

chorus ("I will love you today / if you'll love me tomorrow") powered by Michiko Swiggs's thoroughly teasing vocal. Add occasional turntable scratching of voices shouting out "Surprise!" and you've got some of the most immediate, enjoyable dance music conceived in years.

"Hamachi" threatens to head into darker territories with its slamming pulse and Kento Oiwa's fuzz-distorted raps, but it's really just a fun ode to some sort of sushi, with cheery organ on the chorus and goofy laughter at the outro. "Crazy" breezily strings together an assortment of beats and vocal samples, all of which seem a little off until they're eventually grounded by a jazzy guitar riff that's catchy enough to sell laundry detergent. The title track comes close to Pizzicato Five's mid-tempo lounge-pop, right down to the horn samples and the half-English, half-Japanese vocals. Inspiration wanes a little on the repetitive "Puka" -- but notice how expertly Oiwa and Swiggs interject random noisy outbursts into their robotic groove. Closer "A Pile of Cherries" fades in with a secondary riff from "Under the Cherry Blossom" and then builds it up, piling samples and motifs from the album's other songs into a grandiose wall of sound. It skillfully brings *Sun Q* full circle -- and yes, even the beloved theremin reappears.

-- Chris Kriofske

## IQU

### Sun Q

(Sonic Boom Recordings)

US release date: 7 September 2004

UK release date: Available as import

by Emily Sogn

The latest record from Seattle duo IQU opens up with sunny brilliance. It is fitting that the first song is entitled "Under the Cherry Blossom", because the song itself opens like a flower, wooing the ear with an intricate soundscape of shimmering beeps and blips, then emerging full bloom with a haunting theremin melody whose repetition grows in intensity until the song's graceful finish. It's the kind of sweet instrumental concoction so pretty as to be almost cloying to the ear, but the combination of disparate elements is so expert and so unique that there is simply no choice but to be drawn into the song's dreamy atmosphere. But IQU has always been a band that has known how to lay on the charm. By consistently churning out smart electronic melodies, band members Michiko Swiggs and Kento Oiwa cleverly managed to avoid the trap of predictability that can potentially ensnare similarly outfitted acts.

The band (which originally went by the moniker ICU) built a reputation for themselves in the Northwest scene by playing fun, inventive, and sometimes kitschy electronic music with a notable Japanese twist, a few years before the dominance of electroclash caused everyone and their grandmother to turn their music dials to digitized pop. The band was a three-piece in its inception, with bassist Aaron Hartman rounding out Oiwa's turntable, guitar and virtuoso theremin skills and Swigg's keyboards and vocals. Playing live parties and shows billed with similarly-minded northwest acts like FCS North, and Mouse on Mars, the band built their popularity playing live before making their full-length debut with 1998's *Chotto Matte a Moment!*, released by K Records. Produced with care by the venerable Calvin Johnson, the record was a lo-fi masterpiece that brought in the band's music to a new audience. Despite the odd distraction of an off-putting collaboration with quirky experimental artist Miranda July, IQU seemed to build steadily in skill and imagination. Their second full-length record, *Teenage Dream*, released in 2000, deviated from their original formula by inviting a number of bands such as Stuart Townsend's *Looper* project and Lexaundculpt to remix their song "Teenage Dream" in individual ways. Though it did not feature original material, *Teenage Dream* had moments of

brilliance, blending stand-up bass, whimsical Japanese samples, machine beats, and droning guitars to good effect.

After *Teenage Dream* however, the band seemed to recede into the background for a couple of years. Hartman left the group to play with fellow Olympia band *Old Time Relijun*, and Oiwa and Swiggs put the band aside for a while in order to pursue their respective individual interests and side projects. Though it took them nearly four years to get together enough material to release a full-length, it seems that this time was well-spent. *Sun Q* reveals a pop sensibility that the band has shown in the past, but never exploited to the extent that they do on this record. Elements of disco, funk, electro-pop, and rock all combine to make this one of the most interesting electronic dance efforts to come out in quite a while. Indeed, for all of its overt gorgeousness, opener "Under the Cherry Blossom" is the only track on the record that does not beg you to shake your ass. Songs like the "Dirty Boy" (also recently released on its own as 12-inch single by Sonic Boom) are unabashedly user-friendly, held down by catchy electronic beats interspersed with energetic samples and rhythmic vocal repetitions.

But like fellow indie / electro act *Enon*, the band manages to make even their most sugary pop confections sound somehow refined, tempering the flirty "party-time" opening samples with hyper-distorted guitar riffs. As with songs on their previous albums, the lyrics are firmly rooted in the sweet and simple, occasionally giving away to the cutesy. But put in the context of such simple yet undeniably danceable packaging, Swigg's layered refrain of "I will love you today / If you will love you tomorrow" seems perfectly sweet, if not profound. The more insistent keyboard beats of "Hamachi" are equally engaging, veering almost into something like a rock song, and the distorted sushi-themed lyrics reveal that the band privileges sense of humor right up there with booty-shaking in the order of priority.

— 29 October 2004

## IQU

### Sun Q

[Sonic Boom; 2004]

Rating: 7.6

Iqu, a so-called "lo-fi electronica" act from Olympia, WA, started building steam in the late 90s. They played throughout the Pacific Northwest, opening for venerable bands such as *The Flaming Lips*, *Built to Spill*, and *Mouse on Mars*. Besides an acclaimed debut on K records, *Chotto Matte a Moment!*, they had a great live show going for them-- a stand-up acoustic bassist, a computer music student jamming on her analog synths, and (their secret weapon) a theremin player who could do more than make good-looking noise. The band was riding high on their cerebrum-to-booty connection, getting cross-armed audiences across the land to bob their heads, and many considered them poised for an aural coup of the underground electronic scene. But after a few remixes and EPs in the year 2000, they went silent.

Four years later, they've returned minus the bass and on a new label, with the album *Sun Q*. Official reasons for the long break include independent projects and reconceptualizing their sound, but *Sun Q* seems as though bandmates K.O. and Michiko Swiggs have simply been waiting in suspended animation. Make no mistake-- Iqu's sound is highly transformed, turning up the sequenced DIY disco and leaving behind most of the experimental sampling. But *Sun Q* heavily traverses the landscapes of late 90s Japanese-influenced electronic pop-- the Tokyo-overdrive of *Cornelius' Fantasma* or the sugary funk of *Cibo Matto's Stereotype A*. It sounds of the years just prior to the omnipresence of laptop performers and glitchy breaks, when drum tones still had a bass-end and electronics could be as much toys as instruments. The album's lightness is refreshing in a musical sphere that has, across the

board, come to take itself far too seriously; when it gets overly cutesy, however, it becomes easily dismissible as derivative.

It feels odd to dub an album hearkening back just half-a-decade "dated," but *Sun Q's* combination of turntable scratches, vocoders, and bubbly vibe would have held more appeal a few years ago. The album is a mash of styles that can be generally categorized as "alien pop"-- mutated top 40, broken disco, and hyperactive glam instrumentals that flow along at a stream-of-consciousness pace. It's most successful and original on its theremin-centered pieces, such as the catchy, warm opener "Under the Cherry Blossom". K.O.'s masterful hand-waving reappears throughout-- notably on an excellent, hilariously long-winded instrumental cover of *Minnie Riperton's "Lovin' You"*. The album's title track is a duet over some Pizzicato Five smoothness, and the rest of the vocal-driven songs are hooked upon deep, syncopated moog basslines that maintain a positive if sometimes cloying ass-shaking vibe.

Layers of embedded surprises make *Sun Q* worth a close listen; ultimately, however, its ceaseless pulse, quick stylistic changes, and production are aiming at a very certain sort of party in a box-- a balance of funky and cute. It's a well-constructed album, but it does feel made for a party that happened a few years ago. Still, this duo's got the skillz and the visionz, and in case you hadn't heard, everyone digs thereminz. Hopefully, it won't be another four years before they're heard from again.

-Liam Singer, October 27th, 2004

# Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!

IQU party on the dance floor—and onstage.

by Douglas Wolk

IQU's *Sun Q* (Sonic Boom) is the year's cleverest and most varied groove album, a reassurance that once the cyborgs take over the world, there'll still be walloping blurts of disco to dance to. The Seattle duo is also a roof-raising live act, which is how they ended up opening for . . . And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead on a recent tour. And they're known for turning their shows into performance-art events. "Last New Year's Eve," keyboardist-singer Michiko Swiggs recalls, "we had a trapeze artist who choreographed this whole aerial performance with our set. We have a really big thing about cherry blossoms—I made these felt cherry blossoms that covered her hair, and we had balloons with confetti in them that we broke so it'd be like cherry blossoms falling over the crowd."

The cherry-blossom image turns up again on the cover of *Sun Q* (a gorgeous package designed by the band with artist Chuck Dong and printed by Seattle's Thingmakers) and on its opening track, "Under the Cherry Blossom," a fluttering instrumental that breaks IQU's long silence. Their debut, 1998's *Chotto Matte a Moment!*, was largely based on their live performances, which then also featured stand-up bassist Aaron Hartman of Old Time Relijun. (In those days, they were known as *icu*; that changed after a tussle with another band with a similar name.) After Hartman left, there were two slightly distracted EPs, *Girls on Dates* and *Teenage Dream*, and then an extended break while they worked up the dance floor blast of *Sun Q*. (The album is named after multi-instrumentalist Kento Oiwa's pronunciation of "thank you" on its title track.)

The neatest thing about IQU is their contrast of perfection and imperfection, the cherry blossoms they drop onto their digital grids. Both Swiggs' and Oiwa's singing voices are as winningly flawed as the voices that avant-disco genius Arthur Russell (a favorite of theirs) used on his records. Their songs run on sequencers' perfectly aligned beats, but their favorite lead instrument is a theremin, the swooping electronic gizmo that approximates notes instead of hitting them. Oiwa's most impressive theremin solo on *Sun Q* is a sparkling cover of the late Minnie Riperton's virtuosic ballad "Loving You." Swiggs is a big fan of Riperton's early band Rotary Connection, but IQU actually got "Loving You"—or rather a fragment of it—in their heads when they toured with the Flaming Lips a few years ago.

"Wayne Coyne had these cassette tapes where he'd recorded the best one-minute segment of every song he loved," Swiggs explains. "A guitar solo from Led Zep, that sort of thing. He had 'Loving You' on there, and we heard it every single day. A couple of years later, we started trying to work on covers that would use the theremin—we also do [the Beatles'] 'Across the Universe' live—and we were trying to think of a song that the theremin would be a good lead



David Belisle

vocalist for, and we thought: 'Loving You!' Her voice is so amazing and so high, and it's so hard to sing. . . ."

Surprisingly, Oiwa and Swiggs mostly recorded *Sun Q* separately, trading a hard drive with ProTools files back and forth. "Kento might have spent a week or so just on a theremin part, at his house," Swiggs says. "And then there are certain things we worked on together, where we needed each other's energy, like 'Puka,'" which presents the IQU aesthetic in miniature. The foursquare digital march that opens the song is punctuated by Oiwa's turntable scratches, then gives way to a double-time Kraftwerkish synthesizer melody (with electric guitar drifting in on its margins) that alternates with a howling breakbeat-and-noise conflagration. IQU are an electronic dance band at their core, but a lot of their ideas about song structure and texture come from rock. And their onstage identity is very much about letting the audience watch the music being made—Oiwa is the only performer I've ever seen play guitar, turntables, and theremin simultaneously, while smoking a cigarette.

Swiggs notes that it's been tough to reconfigure some of the album into pieces they can perform live—notably "Hamachi," an ode that Oiwa sings to his favorite sushi ("Hey, hey, hey! Put it in your mouth!"), built on a rattling hook-and-swing percussion loop. But most of *Sun Q*'s highlights come across just fine onstage. "The 9th Line," Swiggs' salute to coked-up fashionistas at the Baltic Room (where both members of IQU have worked), features a strutting Teena-Marie-at-Paisley-Park groove driven by Oiwa's twitchy funk guitar and a greasy synth bass, as well as a couple of energetic scratching interludes; on the record, it also includes a break recorded in the ladies' room by Swiggs and her best friend during a performance by Avenue D (of "Do I Look Like a Slut?" fame). And "Dirty Boy" is the great lost Daft Punk song, a wah-wah disco stomp with jazz-funk keyboards, Swiggs grinning ear-to-ear as she sings "my love for you is free-ee-ee-eaky" into a vocoder, and Oiwa cutting up a children's record about a birthday party: "Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!" Like the rest of the record, it feels like an unexpected present itself.

info@seattleweekly.com

IQU play the Showbox with Blonde Redhead and the Helio Sequence at 8 p.m. Fri., Nov. 12, \$15 adv.; and the Paradox Theater with the Lights and Anna Oxygen at 8 p.m. Sat., Nov. 13, free.

## POWER OF TWO

Seattle duo IQU gets its groove back

BY TONY WARE

Kento "KO" Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs -- the Seattle-based recording duo known as IQU (pronounced EE-koo) -- are not brother and sister, man and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend; not even in a Jack and Meg White vaguely incestuous way. Since randomly moving across the street from one another in Olympia, Wash. and bonding over their love of fringe arts and endeavors, they have become an intimate union of sensibilities. Think solids and stripes or plaids and paisleys.

When the group emerged in 1997 (as a trio spelled "ICU"), the band immediately garnered attention with a fresh-faced sound it called as "drum 'n' haze." Early material was beguiling because of its lo-fi analog melodicism imbued with a child-like giddiness. It mixed gritty guitars with squelchy synths, all thrown over a roughly hewn breakbeat. The group represented the eclectic crossbreeding within the semi-isolated Northwest indie scene.

Now releasing *Sun Q*, after a nearly four-year hiatus, Oiwa and Swiggs have created a work of bricolage pop. The album is textured by the duo's keen ear for stitching disparate sounds, a reflection of their finely nuanced collaborative relationship. But the process of making the album was more involved than either of them thought it would be. It involved not only fine-tuning the music but also strengthening the bond between them.

"Part of the reason this album took so long to make was that the relationship between Michiko and myself needed to become more advanced," says Oiwa by phone from Seattle. "It's not that we weren't working on music in the last few years, it was just that the melodies and beats were like scraps of paper, half-finished ideas, because they were each coming from only one of us."

Since their collaborations were becoming stagnant, the two turned to other projects. Oiwa did some solo recording and DJ stints, and Swiggs logged hours working with computer graphics and flash animation.

What got them working on IQU again was something rather unexpected. Oiwa and Swiggs were scheduled to take a trip to

Japan together. (Oiwa was raised there, and Swiggs -- who is of New Zealand and Japanese descent but grew up in port cities around the Pacific -- wanted to learn more about the culture.) Before they were scheduled to head off, however, Oiwa was unable to go because of some work commitments. Swiggs went alone and ended up spending a great deal of time with Oiwa's mother. Once Swiggs returned, the two quickly slipped back into a groove, thanks largely to her new insight into Oiwa's background.

"It sounds trite, but we needed that natural progress, because as soon as we started working together again on Michiko's return ... the newer material flowed more freely," says Oiwa, who admitted that he had been a control freak in the early years. "Now it's a more collective effort, but it feels like it comes from one mind."

The resulting album marks a



maturing step from the twosome. The first album, *Chotto Matte a Moment!*, was accomplished, yet seemed a little shortsighted, mesmerized by swerving flits of fancy. *Sun Q* is more measured, still unabashedly pop, but with a greater steadiness and polish. Tone and texture remain paramount with synth squeals and squiggles, breakbeat-influenced percussion and wispy vocals.

"This album contains a much more personal statement about where we are together," says Oiwa, referring to how *Sun Q* is a 50/50 effort to the point that some songs are actual call-and-response conversations between the two. Oiwa thinks that their earlier estrangement helped them both become rededicated to the group. "Michiko and I got to that point, looked to each other and decided to keep doing it," he states. "And now we have made an album that says, 'This is what we do.'"

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If you're wondering who's currently making some of the most exciting music in Seattle, then my friends, you aren't getting out enough. Case in point: local duo IQU's CD release party at Chop Suey on September 3rd. While your lazy ass stayed home, you missed one of the most high-spirited shows I can remember—complete with a sweaty crowd dancing, spilling cheap swill on my shoes and screaming, incorrectly, "Eeeee-Q!" in my ear. More importantly, you missed the latest sonic offerings of Kento Oiwa and Michiko Swiggs, AKA electro-rock innovators IQU. The show opened up as friend and collaborator DJ Collage readied the crowd with a bit of dancehall, which he segued into IQU's stage introduction and the first single from their new album "Sun Q." Kento appeared dapper in white, with Michiko radiant in an aquamarine gown and matching feathered headdress. As DJ

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searching for perfect harmony with

Collage's interjections spiced her coy talkbox-treated vocals, Kento's guitar and turntable manipulations expertly built on a sound to which you couldn't help but dance.

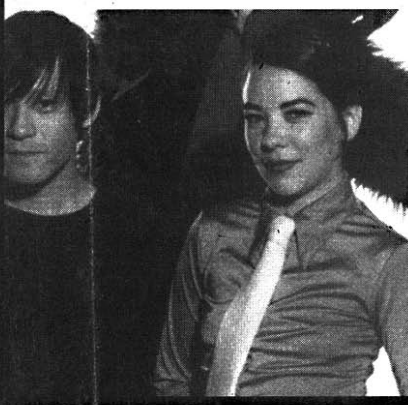
While receiving help from their new label, Seattle-based Sonic Boom Recordings, and their manager Frank Nieto, IQU acknowledge that they're still very much tied to the DIY model they began working under as classmates at Olympia's Evergreen State College back in 1996. While Kento notes that the term "indie" has come to represent an entire genre—perhaps for the worse—Michiko clarifies that, "we're an indie band in the sense that we do everything ourselves."

A national tour with seminal Northwest group Unwound in support of 1998's "chotto matte A MOMENT!" (K Records) and touring gigs with the Flaming Lips, Chicks on Speed and Mouse on Mars have earned IQU attentive audiences across the land. They'll reach them again this fall as they touch down in all four corners of the states, playing 37 shows in 45 days with ...And You Will Know Us By the Trail of Dead, Japanese band Mono and Six Parts Seven. The tour includes three appearances at October's CMJ music festival in New York City, arguably one of the most effective places in which to showcase new work and gain momentum with fans.

When asked about the most important change or event to occur in the time between their last release, 2000's "Teenage Dream" EP and "Sun Q," Michiko cites finding ProTools, a break-up and a trip to Tokyo. "Going

to Japan and hanging out with Kento's parents... without Kento," she laughs. "Going to the cherry blossom festival with Kento's parents, and sitting under the cherry blossom tree [with them] was definitely a monumental moment of the past three years, for myself." Kento is unable to think of a defining moment. When Michiko offers that he had a slight breakdown he asks, "Did I?" "You kinda had a breakdown," she maintains.

It's hardly evident in the final product that is the shimmery, undeniably upbeat "Sun Q." The album is resplendent with contrast, from the prime dance track "Dirty Boy" (also released as a 12" with DJ Collage's



words: rachel shimp

mix and an IQU remix of Heather Duby's "Providence") to operatic turns with the theremin, whose voice swims through the Tommy Guerrero-style bounce of "Dr. Caligari" and narrates an eerie cover of Minnie Riperton's "Loving You." A friend at the recent show likened Kento to a "sorcerer, conjuring sounds with his theremin," and another was impressed by his use of a guitar neck to activate it. Unlike the possible three other bands in existence that use the device—as a noise-maker—IQU employ it masterfully as a voice, "Singing the notes we can't," concedes Michiko. The album's title track features a gentle, breezy duet and the following song, "Puka," takes the collected warmth of fuzzy melodies before it and degenerates into an Alec Empire-ish party crasher, splattering beats every which way like light from a runaway disco ball.

Although they once bonded at a rave in Osaka, times have changed and Michiko's last raving experience was quite different. "I went to one a couple of years ago at the exhibition center," she begins. "There were DJs I wanted to see and a whole bunch of us went after work. [At the gate] they were

like 'You can't bring your lipstick in, you might hide drugs in them.' And I was like 'Lipstick? Are you fucking kidding me?' [Inside] they had this bouncy room, and a rock-climbing wall, and the whole place was filled with 14-year old kids on ecstasy. And I was like 'They're babies and they're all on ecstasy! I can't deal with this!' It was kind of crazy. Those huge sanctioned raves are just a cash cow anyway. It feels like a Puyallup Fair on ecstasy."

Though the fervor for live performances may have died down, the hunger for drugs in the music world never seems to let up. "The 9th Line" on "Sun Q" is an ode to cocaine, inspired by Michiko's former job at the Baltic Room. "I worked [there] on Tuesday nights for two and a half years, and that song was written because of all the activity I would witness upstairs and in the bathroom," she says. The muffled four-four thumps of dirty girls Avenue D can be heard behind the bathroom shit-talking on the track, which Michiko recorded with her best friend as they pretended to cut lines on the back of the toilet, "the way professionals do it." When I ask what vice they'd recommend for listening to "Sun Q," Michiko suggests "sex." And at the shows? "Making out," she says. "Hooking up," Kento agrees. "I heard from a group of people who just listened to the record and they were high on ecstasy, and they said it was just phenomenal," he says. "They thought everyone should listen to 'Sun Q' while on ecstasy, but I don't even know how it feels like..."

In the book "Hokkaido Highway Blues: Hitchhiking Japan," Will Ferguson writes that, "In Japan, people who are perfectly in tune with each other, such as a pianist and a violinist playing in duet, are called ah/un-nokoku. Kokyu means 'breathing,' and the phrase has the essence of perfect, exquisite harmony, as 'two or more breathing as one.'" Kento corrects this statement. "I don't think he's quite got it. Picture an old couple who've been married for 60 years, right? When the husband says 'ah,' meaning 'hey', the woman's 'un' is 'yes,'" he explains. "They know each other so well, they don't need to talk. That's sort of the whole concept of 'ah/un'. It's right as 'perfect harmony,' but more like 'perfect understanding.'" While not romantically linked, I ask if Kento and Michiko feel closer as musicians to this ideal than in the past. "I think it takes, you know, decades to get to that point," observes Michiko, though they both admit that personally, they grow a few steps closer to that harmony with each release.

For more information on IQU, check out [iquiqu.com](http://iquiqu.com)

## NICE BANDS FINISH FIRST

### IQU Will Turn Your Party Out

by Dave Segal

The Heaven and Hell Ball w/ Lifesavas, the Long Winters, the Decemberists, guests Wed Dec 31, Consolidated Works, 8 pm, \$20 adv/\$25 DOS (\$5 off for members).

IQU's Michiko Swiggs and Kento Oiwa bonded at a noise rave in Osaka, Japan. If you know IQU's music--quirkily melodic, feel-good sampadellia--you'll find the image of these amiable pop lovers digging Merzbow and Masonna's sonic hellstorms to be bizarre. But this anecdote demonstrates the band's eclectic tastes and open-mindedness. It was the unlikely start of a lovely musical relationship.

Back in 1998 when they were called ICU, guitarist/turntablist/theremin player Kento and keyboardist/vocalist Michiko (along with departed bassist Aaron Hartman) issued one of those rare debuts that you could call fresh without sounding like a hyperbolic fool. Chotto Matte a Moment! (one of the best releases in K Records' catalog) made raw, lo-fi rock and primitive breakbeat-fueled electronica sound much more exotic and dynamic than those humble styles have a right to sound. The Calvin Johnson-produced album garnered rave reviews and IQU triumphantly toured America with the awesome Hovercraft--and held their own.

The world could've been theirs if they'd built on the momentum gained from Chotto and subsequent tours with Mouse on Mars, Chicks on Speed, and FCS North. But, alas, IQU (pronounced ee-koo) floundered with the annoying musical drama EP Girls on Dates (K, 1999) with Miranda July. Teenage Dream (K, 2000) was better, as a bunch of talented remixers toyed with IQU's odd, Japanese-kitsch-pop/disco jam with power-chording guitar eruptions. But a disc of variations on two songs is never going to match the alien-pop thrills Chotto provided in spades.

After Hartman split for Old Time Relijun in 2000, Kento and Michiko put IQU on hiatus. Kento scored a commissioned soundtrack for The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and launched a busy DJ career while Michiko got involved with the visual-art community, especially New York-based flash animator Mumbleboy and Seattleite Chuck Dong.

Fast-forward to fall 2003, and IQU are bursting with pride over their new sonic baby, Sun Q, even as they field offers from labels and try to determine which one can best market their darling offspring. IQU's fans surely want to know why there's been such a long wait between releases.

"We were trying to figure out our new relationship, as more of a collaboration than a band," Michiko explains in Kento's record-strewn Capitol Hill apartment. "It took us a long time to work through that." The duo tried to enlist other musicians, but concluded that IQU functioned best as a twosome, though Kento claims they benefited from Seattle's "good creative force."

"Before we moved to Seattle [IQU left Olympia in 2000]," Kento says, "IQU used to be my thing. The past three years it's become more equal. It's become a concept, a product--which is 50 percent [Michiko], if not more now," he says with a laugh.

"I think [IQU] has finally become a product of our relationship," says Michiko. "It was bumpy at times." Like any romantic relationship, right? Uh, no. I--and many others, apparently--mistakenly thought Kento and Michiko were not only band partners, but also lovers, as they seem so compatible onstage and while out in public together. However, Michiko does admit IQU is "almost like a marriage." Kento counters, "We're surrogate siblings, but I don't want to play it off like the White Stripes do." He pauses. "I hope this isn't decreasing my chances of getting dates."

There's no doubting these Japanese Americans are still making beautiful music together in the studio, as immersion in Sun Q proves. Mixed by lauded Portland knob twiddler Tony Lash (Dandy Warhols, Quasi), the new disc flaunts a glittery patina over its Leftfield disco and Paisley Park funk. (Kento and Michiko praise Lash's "crazy stereo placements.") IQU may have traded their chintzy analog gear for ProTools, but they've not muted their playful pop instincts at all: A sing-along euphoria deluges Sun Q. Besides adding more keyboards, Michiko and Kento decided to sing like an Asian Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazlewood this time rather than sample voices from their vast record collection. Kento's theremin figures more heavily here, too, particularly on the ethereal cover of Minnie Riperton's stunningly gorgeous "Loving You."

"I just wanted to make a pretty, fun record," Kento states.

But is that what the kids want?

"I don't know," he says. "I don't care what the kids think. The guy who runs Vice Records said our album was 'nice, but too sugary.' I like Vice's aesthetics, but we're nice people making nice music. Maybe being nice will be hip."



David Belisle

### IQU Euphoric electronica.

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PREVIEW

## While We Were Gone

IQU returns to the stage after three years with aerial stunts, hijackings and a new CD in tow.

BY GODFRE LEUNG  
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**PORTLAND LAST HEARD** from IQU in 2001 when the band toured with dance-pop/performance art group Chicks on Speed. The band had just released its remix EP Teenage Dream and seemed on the cusp of an exciting new direction when remaining members DJ Kento Oiwa and keyboardist Michiko Swiggs moved from Olympia to Seattle and the band suddenly disappeared.

Finally, IQU (pronounced ee-koo) has made good on the promise of Teenage Dream, shopping a completed album (entitled Sun Q) to record labels and playing a handful of shows in Seattle. So how will 2004 IQU compare to 2001 IQU?

"We do not have any performance art planned for the upcoming Portland show," says Oiwa. An innocent enough statement, to be sure, but difficult to believe. Consider that, in addition to the planned aerial choreography, IQU used its New Year's Eve show in Seattle to stage a hijacking with the help of DJs on Strike. If the band's recent show at the Seattle Art Museum and collaboration with installation artist the Groovetube in the last month are any indication, it's completely reasonable to expect a little something extra from an IQU show.

During the group's three-year downtime, Swiggs dove headfirst into her graphic-design career and Oiwa honed his chops as DJ K.O., hitting the clubs and soundtracking the classic silent film The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari for the Seattle International Film Festival. His mix tape For Wearing a Phone w/Q displayed Oiwa's growing musical range as much as it did his extensive record collection, exploring a variety of moods that were foreign to IQU's trademark laid-back lounge timbres.

IQU's debut album, 1998's Chotto Matte, A Moment!, built danceable sampltronica around since-departed Aaron Hartman's stand-up bass, dragging jazz, kicking and screaming, into the 21st century. The album stripped away the atmospheric impressionism of the trip-hop of the day (i.e., Massive Attack or Portishead) and let the basslines and beats do the talking. The band stayed the course on its follow-up, Girls on Dates, a collaborative EP with performance artist Miranda July. IQU's spare sounds and July's psychodramatic mini-play made sweet music together and flaunted the flexibility of the band's repertoire.

In 2000, IQU recruited a host of electronic artists to help rethink and further its sound. In the hands of full-time laptoppers, IQU's free-form electronic jams became more fully realized and ordered compositions. Then Hartman split the band to join Old Time Relijun, while Oiwa and Swiggs just sort of split.

Musically, the band is picking up where it left off three years ago. Oiwa describes Sun Q as "a lot more song-oriented, less noodling and more composed. It definitely reflects what we've been into musically the last few years." Gone is the jazzy improvisation of Chotto Matte and Girls on Dates (of which Hartman's bass was the crux) in favor of the more intricately composed DJ-oriented work hinted at on Teenage Dream.

In the wake of Hartman's departure, IQU has brought Oiwa's theremin to the forefront. "It is almost another singer for us," says Oiwa. "Its sound is so like nothing else and I am so in love with [it]." While Oiwa's front-and-center theremin upsets the band's previously careful balance between analog and digital, IQU has taken proper steps to ensure that a more computerized sound doesn't mean a less swinging sound. The band enlisted Dub Narcotic Sound System's Brian Weber to play Rhodes organ and, as a result, Sun Q takes on a Gainbourgian flavor. Oiwa and Swiggs' boy-girl vocal performance adds to the '60s French film feel, with Swiggs playing the coy and provocative Ye-Ye girl to Oiwa's sophisticated chanteur. Drawing from the emotional range of the DJ K.O. mix tape, IQU more than ever shows Oiwa and Swiggs' individual personalities and the force of its music draws from their interplay.

IQU's 2004 model takes on myriad new directions: artful and unpredictable, meticulous and composed, emotional and dramatic, at once cutting-edge and electronic and throw-back pop. After three years of IQU withdrawal, it's almost too much to handle. Almost.

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Find this story at [www.wweek.com/story.php?story=4741](http://www.wweek.com/story.php?story=4741)



# Bumbershoot

## Genre jump!

Rising stars IQU crossbreed pop and electronics to relieve rock's boredom. **BY RICHARD A. MARTIN**

**PUFF DADDY TAUGHT US** that "It's all about the Benjamins." But how does a musician keep those Benjamins flowing into the bank? It's all about the crossover, baby. In Puffy's case, this involved mainstream pop fans embracing his watered-down version of street

**IQU**  
Sunday 2:45-3:30pm. Rock Arena.

music, hip-hop. The members of Olympia's IQU—it's pronounced "ee-koo"—favor artistic goals over financial planning, but they also realize the benefits of stylistic malleability as they find success as a techno/indie-rock hybrid.

The band's 1998 debut, *Chotto Matte a Moment!* (on K Records), merged the type of steady, pulsing beats indigenous to electronic dance music with jazzy acoustic bass, the occasional rock guitar, and lots of genre-straddling samples and keyboard parts. Group founder, DJ, and multi-instrumentalist Kento Oiwa testifies to the importance of such crossover efforts.

"The lines between genres of music are becoming more and more blurry," he says from a tour stop in New York. "People want to try new things."

And they've been trying out IQU's panoramic musical offerings in increasing numbers. The rise in popularity of electronic dance music in the United States signaled a growing restlessness with the standard rock formula, and that made this unorthodox Olympia band ripe for discovery. Walking into an IQU show cold, it's hard not to have one's interest piqued: Oiwa earnestly shuffles between turntables, breaking away to toy with a theremin or a guitar; Michiko Swiggs hovers over a bank of keyboards, gazing at the keys like a stern seductress; Aaron Hartman (who has just left the band, but more about that in a minute) twirls his double-bass, massaging a subtle rhythm from the instrument.

If it sounds coyly postmodern (read: pretentious), check out a song like "Flower and Moon," which propels forward on a wave of thumping beats, stitched through with a melody that's breezy enough to transport dandelion seeds. Or check out IQU's just-released *Girls on Dates*, another crossover effort that finds the band providing a whimsical backdrop for personality-hopping Portland performance artist Miranda July. The EP playfully fuses electronic pop and spoken word narrative, making it a younger cousin to Laurie Anderson's 1982 breakthrough, *Big Science*.

**IQU'S GENIAL MUSIC** seems to come naturally to them, but the band's development has included some unexpected and unwelcome twists.

Oiwa started experimenting with a more open-minded musical format after churning out riffs as a guitarist, a job he tired of quickly.

"Being in a rock band in Olympia never felt like what I wanted to do," he says. "It didn't feel comfortable. Then I got into DJing and started doing the IQU thing with different people, playing pop music with an electronic beat."

Eventually he settled on Swiggs and Hartman as band mates, and the trio began playing out as iqu. During their most critically lauded show to date, a high-profile festival appearance in New York City last winter, another band with the same name served Oiwa with papers demanding that he find another tag. The trio changed the *c* to a *q*, opted to abandon the lowercase syntax, and carried on.

Things looked up for the trio when the Flaming Lips' Wayne Coyne chose IQU as opener on a six-week nationwide tour featuring some of the biggest draws in offbeat rock, including the Lips, Sebadoh, and Robyn Hitchcock. Playing to upwards of a thousand people each night has brought IQU not only exposure but the assurance that their peculiar creation appeals to an audience that comes to hear rock.

But in another setback, Oiwa and Swiggs had to part ways with Hartman, citing "musical and personal differences." For their Bumbershoot appearance and the month-long headlining tour that follows, they've managed to secure a jazz bassist who also happens to be adept at electronics, Sheri Ozeki. Swiggs points out that Ozeki turns IQU into an entire band of first-generation Japanese Americans.

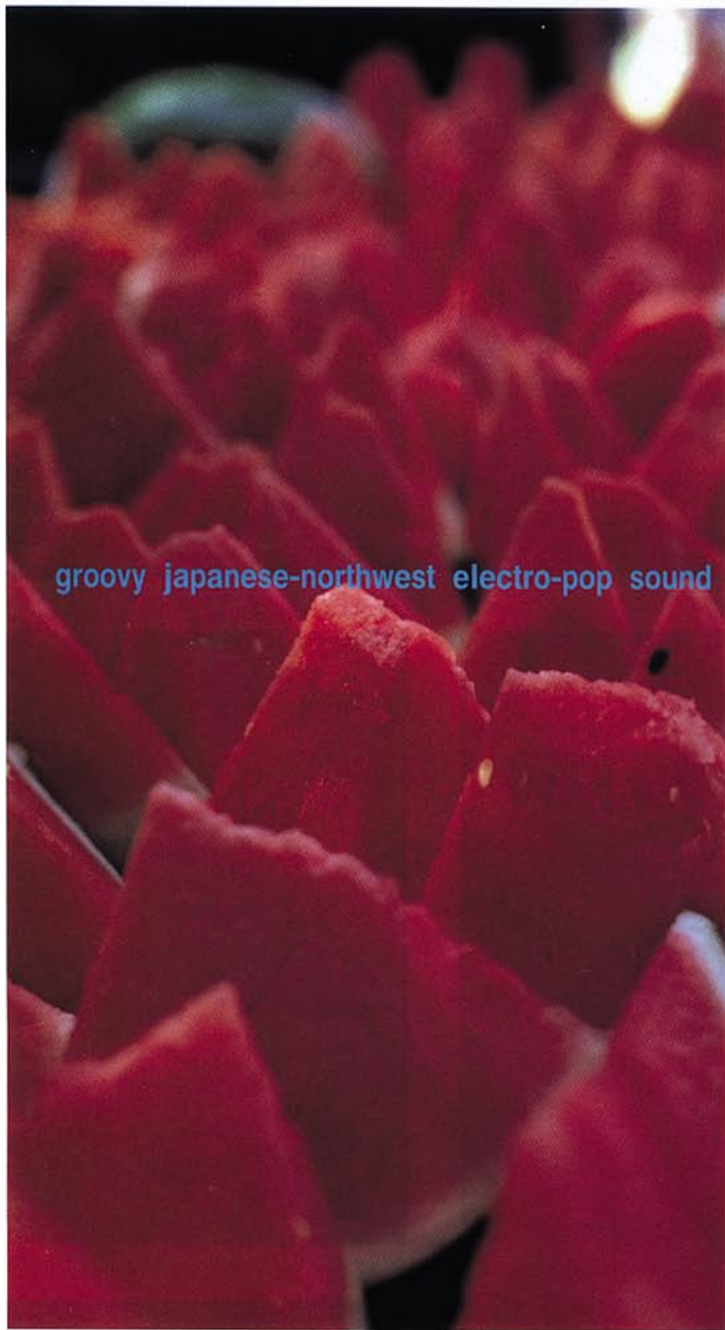
Such uniformity won't deter IQU from its quest to craft dance music that's applicable to the tastes of the average rock fan. Oiwa insists that such a crossover is entirely feasible, even necessary.

"Ultimately, we want to write a song," he says. "Whether it's electronic or rock or experimental, we believe in starting out with the song rather than a lot of techno beats."

By doing so, IQU can attract the DJ while helping sustain the other source of their influences. "I don't think indie-rock is dead," Oiwa says.

"That's media hype. Kids like good music." Coincidentally, the "kids" are starting to like IQU. ■





## IQU

PHOTOGRAPHY Alia Malley

ついに来た。珍しく、大真面目ではないエレクトロニック・アーティストの誕生に、心はウキウキ。しかも、オリンピア出身。というか、オリンピア在住。“K”や“Kill RockStars”といった「真面目な」レーベルの本拠地として知られるワシントン州のオリンピアに、日本人の元pat K.O.のメンバーがフリー・エレクトロニック・ジャズのプロジェクトのようなIQUを、このほどスタートさせた。これまで友人たちは、オリンピアで行われるライブに僕を誘っていくことに少々ためらっているようだった。それは多分、うぬぼればかりの子供じみたカレッジ・ライオット・ガール・シーン（率直で申し訳ないが、本当にそんな感じであった）を見て僕が怒り狂うだろう、と恐れていたからに違いない。しかしなぜ僕はそんなIQUに巡り会うことになってしまった。彼らはすでにDub Narcotic Sound Systemとともに、アメリカ北西部のパーティー/コーヒー・ハウス/クラブのシーンにすっかり溶け込んでしまっていたのだが、最近、心優しくおとなしい雰囲気ミュージック・シーンをオリンピアに形成し始めたのだ。IQUはこれまでにグループ名の変更（以前はIKU、日本語の「行く」）、度々のメンバー・チェンジ、さらに音楽性の転換を繰り返してきたが、ようやく現在の形におさまったようだ。今ではK.OとMichiko Swiggsの二人がベース、ドラム・マシン、サンプラー、キーボード、それに味付けを最終的に整えるセラミンまでも駆使している。彼らのLP『chotto Matte A Moment』、ライブ・ツアーなどを是非是非チェックしてもらいたい。さらにLooperやDJ MasaYouなど、同じ太平洋側の北西部音楽軍団の仲間をもゲストに迎えたりミックス・アルバムも、間もなくリリースされるようだ。行け、IQU!

Friggin finally: hooray for IQU! It's nice to find a electronic act that doesn't take themselves so seriously, and it's double-nice to find them in Olympia, WA, home to a music scene that's used to taking itself entirely too seriously. So seriously in fact, that at times it felt as if there were some Olympians that believed the very fate of every white, disenfranchised, vegan, college kid rested in the lyrics of some Bikini Kill song. It was all rather alienating. Then came IQU. They quickly became part of the Northwest party/coffee-house/club circuit and (alongside Dub Narcotic Sound System) a kinder, gentler Olympia music scene began to emerge.

Japanese ex-pat K.O started the band in 1996 as a sort of free-form electronic jazz combo, and since then IQU has gone through a name change (from IKU, Japanese for to go, several member line-ups and countless musical influences and incarnations before landing at their present state. K.O and Michiko Swiggs hop around the musical spectrum with the help of a bass, drum machine, sampler, keyboards, and even a theramin, thrown in for that extra little 'umph.'

Check out their LP "Chotto Matte A Moment" (K Records), see them on their never-ending tour back and forth across the USA, and look out for their upcoming remix album with contributions from other Pacific Northwest fixtures

# IQU

取材、文/伊藤英嗣

昨年、フレーミング・リップスが主催してセバドー、ロビン・ヒッチコック、コーネリアス、そしてソニック・ブームらが共にアメリカをまわる、というツアーがあった。そこに日本人も在籍するIQU（イクと読む）が出演していたとコーネリアス小山田圭吾に聞いた（本誌10号参照）。かつてはICU（やはりイク）と名乗っていた彼等は、98年にKからファースト・アルバムを出している。それを聴いて以来気になる存在だったから、おっ、と思った。ある意味スラブ系にも通じるような、ルーズなヒップホップ/ループ感覚に貫かれたそのアルバムは、女性ヴォーカルの不思議な存在感と、骨太なかワフワフしてるのかわからないノリも、大変興味深かった。

それからしばらくして今年アタマ、リーダーのケント・オオイワが帰省のため来日しているという情報を、日本でKのリリース・ディストリビューションを担当しているレベル・ビート・ファクトリーのニッシンから教えてもらい、まだお正月って感じの頃に（まあ日本に帰省するなら、やっぱ、この頃ですかね！）、早速取材してきました。

小山田圭吾の話によれば、ケントはKで働いていたものの、バンドの方が忙しくなってクビになってしまったらしい、とのこと。「基本的にはそんな感じですね（笑）。IQUではK.O.と名乗って活動している彼は言う。「ツアーとかで、ほとんど地元には行かないこともあるし、自分達のレコードも出してるレベルで働いてたら、つい自分達のことに集中してしまうし（笑）」。

Kで働き始めたきっかけは、何だったのだろう。「キャルヴィンとは前から知り合いだったんだけど、そう、ニッシンと関係あるんだよね（笑）。彼がブラッド・サースティ・ブッチャーズとコーパス・グライダーズを（アメリカはオリンピアに）連れてくるってときに、キャルヴィンが…。本置かなんで偶然会って、「今度日本人のバンドのライブやるんだけど、ちょっと手伝ってくれないか」と…。それ以来ですね」。

それまでケントは、Kと同じくオリンピアに位置するレベル、ヨーヨー関係で働いたりしていた。その前は普通に日本で生活していた。1年間都内の大学に通い、留学のためオリンピアに移った（アセンスやチャペル・ヒルがそうであるように、オリンピアもまた学園都市。人口に占める大学生の割合が結構多かったりする）。別にKとかヨーヨーとかオリンピア・シーンに憧れて、という感じでは全然なく、本当に留学のためだけに。ただ、勿論音楽には興味があったから、そこで自然と現地の「シーン」に溶け込み、いつの間にかKで働くように、それからICU~IQUで本格的な音楽活動をするようになった。

ICU時代、彼等は3人組だった。「彼女のキャラクター、パーソナリティはすごく大きい」とケントも語る日系女性ミチコ・スウィッグス、そしてスタンダップ・ウッドベースを弾くアロン・ハートマン。ただ昨年アロンが脱退。取材の時点では、IQUはケントとミチコの二人組となっている。



「だから、ライブやるもの大変なんです（笑）。もともとウッドベースって、（ライブハウス規模の音響施設もあまりよくない会場では）ハウリング起こしちゃったりで苦労してんですけど、今はそれを弾いてくれる人を探さなきゃいけない（笑）」。

だからというわけでもないけれど、アメリカに帰ってしばらくは新作のレコーディング、もしくはそれにに向けた準備をメインにしようと思っっているそうだ。昨年やはりKからリリースされたEP「Girls On Dates」の延長線上にある作品となるのか？と聞けば、「いや、あれはあくまで、ミランダ・ジュライとの共作なので」とのこと。確かに、クレジットは「IQU with Miranda July」名義になっている。このミランダ・ジュライ、今アメリカではかなり注目されているパフォーマー・アーティスト、とのこと。下手したら「00年代のローリー・アンダーソン」みたいな感じで、無知ですみません…。そんな大物とのコラボレーションが実現したのも彼等の実力のもと、そしてオリンピア・コネクションがあったこと、らしい。

ケントは現在、オリンピアから車で数時間の距離にあるシアトルに住んでいる。オリンピアとの関係を保ちつつ、いろんな意味でシアトルの方が住みやすいから、そりゃ、そうだ、とぼくも思う。だけど、そう言えば、ぼくが一度だけオリンピアでキャルヴィンに会ったとき、別れ際に「シアトルに引っ越す気はないの？」と聞いたら、「あんな退屈な場所にどうして引っ越さなきゃいけないだ！」と

言われたけど…と伝えると、ケントは大笑いしながら、「彼らしい！」と言った。そこには、勿論オリンピアのシーンを支えるキャルヴィンに対する尊敬の念が込められていた。キャルヴィンに関する面白いエピソードをひとつ聞いた。なにかのイベントで、オールナイトのDJタイムの朝方、もう結構年輪いってるにも関わらず、キャルヴィンは「（目をむきだして、手をガングン振りまわしつつ）こーんなんになって踊りまくってた」そうだ。「ああ、クスリとかやりつつ？」なのかな、と思ったら、「いや全然。彼、ホントにナチュラル・ハイになれる人だから！」。なんか、レベル主宰者とかって、ナチュラル・ハイ・バリバリってヤツじゃないとできない（やっつけられない）よな、多分（それは雑誌編集長も：笑）。

さて、彼等の（ICU名義での。近々IQU名義に変えての再プレス予定もある）ファースト・アルバムには、「帰ってきたヨッパイ」を勝手にサンプリングした曲も入っていた。ぼくが子供の頃はやってた、ある意味レジデントみたいな曲。昔は日本でも、こんな「実験ポップ」が突如大流行したりしてた。でもこの曲、ケントの年齢だと、直接知ってるわけじゃない白色、と思ったら、やはり両親のレコード棚から見つけて面白かったから、とのこと。まあそれはそれとして、この曲をとりあげること自体、なんとというか、日本と海外の距離感を埋めるのに非常に有効だとぼくは思っていた。そのアルバム・タイトル「Chotto Matte A Moment!」にしてもそう。普通「チョット・マッテ・クダサイ」か「Just A Moment」、どっちかでしょ（笑）？「これ、もともと酔っぱらいの言葉だったんですよ。地元のジャパニーズ・レストランで飲んでるとき、現地在住の日本人（注：ワシントン州には日本人が結構多い。だから大魔人佐々木もシアトル・マリナーズ選んだでしょ）が、それまでは普通に英語しゃべってたんだけど、酔っぱらって「あ、あ、あ、チョット・マッテ・ア・モーメント！」とか言ってるのを目撃したんですよ。それが印象に残ってます」。

わっはっはっは！ 酔っぱらいの台詞をそのままタイトルにしちゃう？ オアシスも新作でそれに近いことやってた、というのは話飛びすぎ、関係ないですけど、やっぱ、本当の意味での文化交流、「日本と海外の距離感を埋める」って、こういうことだと思います。ぼくは思います。

彼等の新作、期待しながら待つことにしよう。



## Village Voice

The biggest splash belonged to icu (pron. ee-koo), a studious but thrilling instrumental trio of upright bass, keyboards, and sequencer/turntable/guitar/theremin, who recalled New Order in attitude and methodology, and used high-speed breakbeats like they'd come up with the idea themselves.

—DOUGLAS WOLK



MICHAEL SCHMELING

CMJ's biggest splash: icu at Tramps, using high-speed breakbeats like they'd come up with the idea themselves

## Entertainment Weekly

**ICU Chotto Matte a MOMENT!** (K) "Electronica" isn't generally known for cuteness. But this shaggy mix of lo-fi groove-rock and DJ mania is more Mattel than NASA. With hyperactive acoustic bass, busy turntables, squeaky keyboards, helium-voiced samples, theremin, guitar, and static, this Washington trio makes instrumental music that, alongside kin like Land of the Loops, offers giddy counterpoint to ponderous post-rockers and computer-music depressives. Proof futuristic pop doesn't need to be dystopian. **A-** —Will Hermes

## A.P.

### ICU Chotto Matte A Moment!

Raw beat collages that could even appeal to indie rockers.



As Olympia, Washington's once-proud music scene slowly descends into irate DIY drivel, ICU come along to combine the experimentation and irreverence of Olympia's indie past with a psychedelic collage of electronica, hip hop and jazz that stands tall next to any Ninja Tune release of the past year. *Chotto Matte A Moment!* brims with raw beat collages and expansive drones that capture the lazy swagger of the best hip hop while displaying a whimsical side sorely lacking in the genre.

As ICU float with the cream of the electronica scene, stand-up-bass player Aaron Hartman propels tracks such as "Yopparai (A Drunkard Who Fell From Heaven)" into manic spasms, his fingers moving as deftly and nimbly as Squarepusher's do in that drum & bass artist's fretboard explorations. Sure, Northwestern acts such as Land Of The Loops and Sukpatch have ventured into the same indie electronica terrain, but ICU never rely on ironic or absurd samples for cheap laughs; instead they deliver a seamless blend of styles that ultimately sounds like no one but them. **(K, POB 7154, Olympia WA 98507)** Bill Cohen

## Magnet

### ICU

#### Chotto Matte A Moment!

Take all of your old-school hip-hop records, spin them on sparking circuit boards and let the bass rise above the digital house jams. Welcome to ICU's world. Combining synths with sped-up vocal samples and multiple effects, this Olympia, Wash., trio produces raw, analog sounds that reduce traditional electronica to a silicon-coated dust cloud. While K.O. tends to the turntables, samplers, drum machines and theremin, bassist A. Hartman and keyboardist Michiko Swiggs concoct ass-wagging rhythms with enough energy to start a riot. "Yopparai (A Drunkard Who Fell From Heaven)" begins with a calculated breakbeat that feeds violently into Hartman's thumping bass. "Can't You Even Remember That?" and "Done The Twist" cool the feverish palette with a slow-jam tribute. Substituting Middle Eastern harmonies for bludgeoning speed, "Aluet" feeds off the digital hype with ambient soundscapes and scratchy feedback. For ICU, categorization is an impossibility. Just when relaxation sets in, ICU sets its phasers to stun, leaving your body quivering while you emit electric shockwaves across the dancefloor. **(K, POB 7154, Olympia WA 98507)**

—Jonah Brucker-Cohen

## URB

URB STYLE: SCOTT HARDKISS □ DJ DARA □ KING BRITT □ HEATHER HEART □ RICHIE HAWTIN



### ICU

In the world of icu, nothing is certain. At least that's the feeling you get during live performances by the Olympia, Washington-based band. The trio's debut CD *Chotto Matte A Moment!* (K) fuses elements as diverse as Squarepusher-inspired drum & bass, jazz and Japanese pop culture, but the recorded versions of songs like "Aluet" and "Flower and Moon" don't do the band justice.

Unlike the stern-faced knob-twiddlers that usually mark a live electronic performance, icu (K.O., Aaron Hartman and Michiko Swiggs) don't just stand there. They fiddle, they push, they pull and they squeeze every imaginable sound out of their instruments: theremin, guitar, two turntables (and a microphone), an analog keyboard controlled by Swiggs and Hartman's upright bass. While K.O. does battle with the turntables, effects and guitars, Swiggs and Hartman do their best to keep up with the madman in the middle. Somehow, all three manage to chain smoke the entire duration of a set. It's as mesmerizing to watch as it is to listen.

The record only barely hints at the untamed energy of the band's live show — a decidedly unruly affair — with spacey, dubbed-out and tricked-out beats that veer uncontrollably from one schism to the next. icu are steering their music towards a future place where the schism between indie rock sensibilities (and its lo-fi mechanisms) and the high-tech electronic universe isn't so wide, pushing ahead to a time when punk's DiY ethic is more of a universal standard.

TRICIA ROMANO • photo: Michael Lavine