

U.S.E

UNITED STATE OF ELECTRONICA

contact

band info@usemusic.com

management Frank Nieto: frank@230publicity.com

label Sonic Boom Recordings: jason@sonicboomrecordings.com

publicity 230 publicity: frank@230publicity.com

booking aero booking: krisk@aerobooking.com





Rocking a one-party system:
Carly Nicklaus, Amanda Okonek,
Jason Holstrom, Jon E. Rock,
Peter Sali, Noah Star Weaver,
and Derek Chan

United State of Electronica

Who: Seven-piece disco-rock band from Seattle whose Vocodered hooks, insistent tunes, and ridiculously joyful stage shows have made them one of the Northwest's most popular live acts. They've sold more than 10,000 copies of their self-released, self-titled 2004 debut, thanks largely to Internet buzz. Now, hometown indie Sonic Boom is reissuing it nationally.

Sound like: High-energy, ultra-positive dance tracks with 29-year-old drummer Jon E. Rock tossing in goofball raps about working as a

night-shift security guard. U.S.E. eschew irony but gleefully grab Junior Senior's songcraft, Daft Punk's sonics, and the B-52's' rollicking moxie.

You don't know Jaxx: Their lineup and the free-for-all, constant motion of their live gigs were inspired by a Basement Jaxx show. "They come through town with a troupe of divas and dancers," says keyboardist/frontman Noah Star Weaver, 26, "and I thought, 'Why not have a posse with girls and boys, and make it a party?'"

Next stop, Osaka: The band brought the first 90

By Michaelangelo Matos

hand-painted copies of their album to a show in a nearby town and sold them all before they played their first note. Their unofficial theme song, "Emerald City," features shout-outs to Seattle neighborhoods ("Belltown? We love it!"). "At first, we were just singing, 'New York City,'" says Weaver. "But there were already so many songs about New York." Despite their local appeal, U.S.E. scored a No. 2 hit on Japan's dance-music chart with "It Is On!" No small feat, says singer Amanda Okonek, 24. "We beat U2!"

U.S.E. spreading the happy, trippy Seattle love

By Tom Scanlon /
Seattle Times staff reporter

Did you hear the one about the band that started out as a joke — “hey, we’re a German disco act!” — and turned into a pop phenomenon?

The punch line: **United State of Electronica** is on.

This Seattle electro-pop big band recently returned to Seattle from Austin, where it caught the notice of several big record labels at the South by Southwest festival, only to turn around for a mini-tour of Japan. While the band is still a relative unknown in this country (outside the Northwest, of course), the U.S.E. song “It Is On!” landed on some Japanese pop charts, alongside the Backstreet Boys and Eminem.

Though it’s relatively easy to compare the career trajectory of U.S.E., it’s almost impossible to find a Northwest band that sounds like this one. Most Seattle bands tend to be angry or morose, sometimes both; with more hooks than a pirate convention, U.S.E. is unapologetically happy and insistent on sharing the fun — perhaps the audio version of Ecstasy.

“We definitely believe in what we’re doing,” says **Noah “Star” Weaver**, the glammy, Bowie-meets-Speed Racer lead singer. Then, without a trace of irony, he deadpans: “We’re very serious about having as much fun as possible.”

Weaver sounds like a blissed-out robot, singing with a vocoder over disco-house beats to pump up audiences into dance-party frenzies. Songs like “Emerald City” (go, Seattle!) and “Open Your Eyes” seem, when broken down into individual elements, juvenile and silly; but all the parts — thumping beats, obvious hooks, simple, repetitive lyrics (“It is on/everyone’s singing along”), way-positive vocals, cheerleader dancing — come together ingeniously. Shows often turn into mini-raves, or electronic pep rallies.

Those who have seen U.S.E. magic dust spread on traditionally reluctant Seattle crowds probably are not surprised the live show works elsewhere. The stunner might be the band’s self-produced, self-titled album, which was released last year by Sonic Boom Records ... and now has been re-released, in large part due to some strong national press.

An Entertainment Weekly critic recently called the band’s self-titled Sonic Boom release an “ecstatic debut album. The fizzy fun begins with ‘It Is On!’ — a synthy trip to euphoria that, we’re pleased to report, is followed by many happy returns.” Pitchfork called the album “just terribly fun — nothing more, nothing less.”

A week before the Japan trip, **Amanda Okonek** was feeling ill, but the other six U.S.E. members — Weaver, guitarists **Peter Sali** and **Jason Holstrom**, singer **Carly Nicklaus**, bass player **Derek Chan**, drummer **Jon e. Rock** — were gathered at Sali’s Belltown apartment.

As intensely high-energy as they are on stage, the band members are quiet and almost shy in a



WILLIAM ANTHONY

U.S.E. is Jason Holstrom, center, and, clockwise from center of back row: Jon e. Rock, Peter Sali, Noah “Star” Weaver, Carly Nicklaus, Amanda Okonek and Derek Chan.

group interview. Perhaps they’re afraid to say the wrong thing, perhaps they’re just genuinely nice, modest people.

They are clearly comfortable amongst each other, and most of them have lived together at some point in “Rocktropolis,” as they dubbed their shared house in West Queen Anne.

U.S.E. is an offshoot of Wonderful, formed by a few Seattle Pacific University students in 1999. Back in 2002, Wonderful (known for a few years as the Lincolns) had just finished a sincere, Brian Wilson-flavored pop album. The members started messing around with a goofy side project.

“It was pretty spontaneous,” Weaver said, of the early days of U.S.E. “There was no real direction toward what we wanted to sound like, it was just a bunch of friends goofing off. ... We worked on the Wonderful album for six months, and we were just letting off steam.”

Shane Tutmarc, the man behind Dolour, was living in the house at the time and was part of the early days of U.S.E. “Shane ended up signing us up for a show at I-Spy — I didn’t even know we were a band,” said Weaver.

That first show was Sept. 14, 2002, with U.S.E. then toying with the name Mannheim. Nicklaus, then just a friend of the band, heard about the

show. “They told me their experimental electronic German band was playing. It was awesome.” She told them that, and they said, “Come to practice.”

U.S.E. was an almost-instant hit around Seattle, and soon was one of the headliners at the Capitol Hill Block Party. Like a sharp disciple outgrowing a master, the side project quickly became the main bread-winner, and Wonderful took a back seat to U.S.E.

Even though they are starting to get quite a bit of national press, U.S.E. has found it hit-and-miss on the road. “We still played a lot of shows with 10 people [in the audience],” said Holstrom. “... Some of those shows are humbling, in a good way.”

“It makes you work harder,” added Nicklaus, who sings in another promising band, **the Catch**.

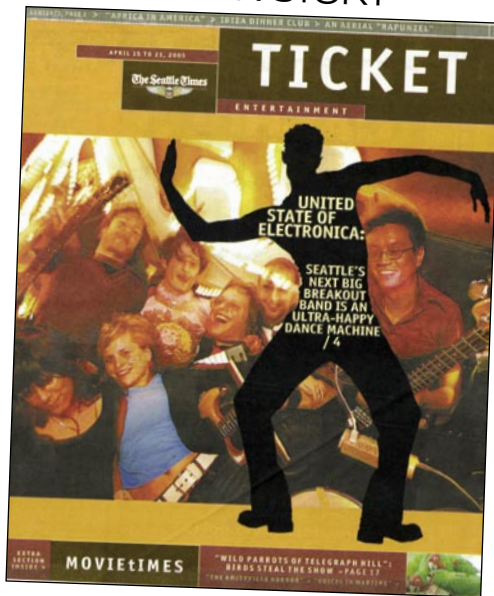
U.S.E. plays at 7:30 tonight (\$9) and 7:30 Saturday night (\$9) at the all-ages **Vera Project**. “We think of those as our true homecoming shows,” said Chan, sipping a can of Rainier beer like a true Seattleite (even if he was raised in Hong Kong).

After a few shows around Seattle — with a good half-dozen new songs in the set — U.S.E. will hit the road again. For now, they’re still just barely breaking even, seven of them crammed into one cheap motel room, eating dinners out of a rice cooker ...

But if you saw them pumping up a Memorial Stadium crowd (fittingly, opening for Death Cab) last fall at Bumbershoot, you know that it’s just a matter of time for U.S.E. “I got more love than anyone could ever wish for,” Weaver sings on the ridiculously — and, perhaps, sublimely — buoyant “Emerald City,” and audiences are agreeing with the chorus “we love it!”

Tom Scanlon: tscanlon@seattletimes.com.

COVER STORY



On a trip that could've been scripted for a Hollywood blockbuster, breakout



How the Heaven Did They Get Here?

United State of Electronica are a 14-legged sonic love machine. Their methods have been phenomenally successful since they formed by accident in 2002 from the core of baroque pop band Wonderful—so successful that the members find themselves gearing up for a six-day, two-venue tour of Japan's largest cities, Osaka and Tokyo. After charming several major-label reps at SXSW in March and scoring a hit single in Japan earlier this year, and hot on the heels of Sonic Boom Records' reissue of U.S.E.'s self-released, eponymous debut, the fun-loving septet are poised to become Seattle's next breakout act.

U.S.E.'s ascent has resulted from relentless gigging and hustling their album themselves to area stores; they've sold more than 10,000 copies with no distributor. Now that Sonic Boom and Japanese label Side Out have picked up the disc, things are spiraling ever upward for U.S.E. Momentum continues to build with features and reviews in national glossies like *Spin* and *Rolling Stone* and in online tastemaker *Pitchfork*.

U.S.E.—guitarist/keyboardist Jason Holstrom, keyboardist/vocalist Noah Star Weaver, guitarist/keyboardist Peter Sali, bassist Derek Chan, and drummer Jon e. Rock—met at Seattle Pacific University in the mid '90s. All except Chan and singers/dancers Amanda Okonek and Carly Nicklaus played in pop-rock bands Lincolns and Wonderful before they chanced upon the embryonic idea of U.S.E. In contrast to Wonderful's fussed-over, lush sunshine pop, U.S.E.'s music arises out of spontaneous jamming channeled into compositions designed to levitate you on chords of euphoria and beats of bliss. It's a pure distillation of the pumpin' disco kitsch of Daft Punk's *Discovery*, Beach Boys' pop sophistication, and Andrew W. K.'s irrepressible uplift.

U.S.E. are totally sincere in their all-consuming love of fun music. Their glowing demeanors suggest their way leads to intense contentment, haters be damned. And sometimes, like on this Japanese tour, the intangible power of their music can change lives. At least for a couple days.

April 6, Sea-Tac Airport

U.S.E.'s most flamboyant member, Noah Star Weaver, strolls onto the Boeing 747, beaming as he stows his spray-painted pink luggage and admitting the band members are all Japan virgins. Weaver's sharp-featured face never loses its grin.

Much is at stake for U.S.E. "We really feel like we have to prove ourselves," Holstrom says. "Japan has already been so great to us based on our record, so I feel pressure to give them a show that lives up to it or more."

From Seattle the band takes a nine-hour flight to Tokyo's Narita airport, and then a shorter flight to Osaka—the only holdup occurs when the U.S.E. party is stopped at security and the bag with the tambourines repeatedly sets off the alarm.



April 7, Osaka

Once in Osaka, we take a taxi to our hotel. Holstrom peers out the window and says, "The whole town looks like a computer game. If it rains, the whole city will melt."

After checking into the Green Plaza Hotel, U.S.E. roam around Osaka seeking refreshments. But the search is incredibly hard, as English is only sparingly used on products, menus, and signs. Without our guides—Side Out honcho and roly-poly bon vivant Takeshi Matamura, publicist Hide Hirayama, and tour promoter Keita Iwai—we'd be bumbling our way into dubious digestive situations and regularly getting lost. Japanese cities are not plotted on a grid and unless you can read the language, your only hope is to have a great memory for landmarks. Clueless Americans end up smiling a lot, waving credit cards hopefully, and saying "sumimasen" ("excuse me for being an ignoramus").

In the evening we gather at the Hi-i-ki-ya restaurant, where the tour organizers treat us to an insane 14-course meal including sashimi, squid, sea urchin, pitchers of beer, and carafes of sake. It must've cost as much as the GNP of Guam. The band gamely tries everything, though Sali regrets trying to chew the sea urchin's spiky outer shell. The Japanese are world-class drinkers, and with Matamura leading the way, countless toasts are made, topped off with shouts of "kanpai!" ("cheers!").

April 8, Osaka

First stop on the pre-gig promo push is the HMV record store. A huge, brightly lit U.S.E. sign bearing the Japanese-only *Party People* EP artwork occupies a central area of the shop. The turnout is sparse, but those who are there noticeably perk up when U.S.E. enter the store. The disc promptly starts playing over the PA as the group signs autographs for HMV's staff. An adorable couple buys *Party People* and gets it inked.

We move on to Syft Records,



where U.S.E. sign an autograph for a dude looking to be near 40. The same guy follows U.S.E. to Tower (the band later learn that he's an obsessive autograph hound who sells his signed wares for healthy profits), where more signatures are dispensed. The band glance at glitzy Japanese rock magazines with U.S.E. features, none of which they can read. Publicist Hide has been diligently working for U.S.E. and it pays off: On Monday, the members will do eight interviews for print, radio, and television, and two photo shoots.

Following the record-store roulette, U.S.E. sightsee in Amerika-Mura, an Osaka 'hood abounding with funky boutiques playing hiphop, and get hit up for more sigs. The band members are uniformly gracious, trying out their rudimentary Japanese phrases and bowing respectfully to their admirers. It's not quite Beatlemania, but U.S.E. have the gratifying experience of having people thousands of miles away from Seattle showering them with devotion.

Most of the shops in this area sell Western clothes, but there are also some products that could only arise from Japan's obsession with cuteness. Okonek purchases a pink container in the shape of a bunny rabbit, thinking it's bubble-bath soap. It turns out to be toilet-bowl cleaner. We spy a shop called Love Smile, and it sounds like an ideal title for U.S.E.'s next album.

April 8, Osaka, Club Noon

Club Noon's a dingy, dank, narrow box and trains roll loudly overhead with regularity. As the guys sound-check, I approach U.S.E.'s female contingent, who are discussing what outfits they'll wear at tonight's gig. They opt for short, tight skirts, saucy mesh gloves, and in Nicklaus' case, a form-fitting bodice.

"We've had one fight in three years," claims Okonek. Nicklaus agrees, "We get along really well—better than my other band [the Catch] does... I'm afraid you're gonna write an exposé about how we're really not always happy." But they really are this happy. That's the scary part.

April 8, Osaka Green Plaza Hotel

After sound check, U.S.E. do an interview with Music Japan TV in the hotel lobby for a show called *Thunder Beats* (gotta love the Japanese). The questions are astoundingly banal, but this exchange shines:

Interviewer: "What kind of band would you like to be in the future?"

Holstrom: "We want to appeal to everyone in the world."



Seattle septet U.S.E trigger mass mania in Japan. WRITER DAVE SEGAL RIDES SHOTGUN.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF U.S.E AND HIDEYOSHI HIRAYAMA

Rock: "Especially Steven Seagal and Jean-Claude Van Damme."

April 8, Osaka, Club Noon

Pre-show, Rock gets really serious, stretches, cracks his knuckles, and prays. Five minutes before show time, U.S.E whoop and shout, whipping themselves into a frenzy, standard operating procedure for them. Chan pours water over his head. There's a group hug, including a prayer they recite before every gig that Nicklaus' musician grandfather taught them. Amid all the party-rousing and hard drinking, U.S.E carry a spirituality that's evident in Weaver's lyrics, whose positivity and espousal of love make Dale Carnegie seem like a curmudgeon. "Let's fuck shit up!" Weaver yells as they romp onstage to the dying strains of Daft Punk's "The Prime Time of Your Life."

U.S.E start with "Open Your Eyes," which they launch with fist-thrusting "Hey"s and, holy shit, nearly all 250 people in the packed club are jumping and pumping fists from the first note, as if on cue from a shameless Hollywood director. Fans shout the lyrics with looks of ecstatic joy. "La Discoteca" sounds slightly sluggish, but "Vamos a la Playa" reasserts why it's one of the most euphoric songs ever—a perfectly engineered roller coaster of swooping "doo doo"s and a bridge that inspires rapturous arm swaying. "This is the best show U.S.E has ever played," gushes Okonek after "Vamos." And for those who think U.S.E are all sweetness and light, songs like "Party People" and the new "Dance with Me" offer surprisingly savage and heavy counterpunches of staccato funk and crunchy AC/DC guitar voltage.

By the gig's halfway point, Weaver's garish navy-and-purple pants slide down and reveal butt cleavage—not that he's aware of it. Okonek gets pulled into the crowd during the penultimate "There's Always Music," and continues to sing from there throughout set closer "It Is On!" Nicklaus stage-dives twice during this number. Both vocalists perform while consumed in the teeming throng of Japanese youth. The show ends and Weaver attempts to leap over the drum kit, but crashes. He then bounds up the steps to the makeshift green room and hugs me, his sweatiness like that of a marathoner at the finish line. "That was the greatest hour of my life," he blurts, as the fans repeatedly holler "U! SI E!"

Soon, eager U.S.E converts crowd the green room for autographs, photos, and chat. One dude pleads for Holstrom to swap his sweat-drenched U.S.E wristband for his own new one; Holstrom complies. Another Japanese fan keeps saying, "Ees goood, ees goood." Merch sales boom to ¥46,000 (and top ¥100,000 the next night). The U.S.E panties sell out. The band members mingle among their admirers until 2:30 a.m., at which point Matamura whisks the jetlagged troupe back to the hotel for some much-needed rest before the following night's important show at Tokyo's

legendary Liquid Room. Matamura—a man of exceptionally large spirit and soul—actually shouts, "On to Tokyo!" with a triumphant raised arm as U.S.E pile out of the club.

April 9, Nozomi Shinkansen to Tokyo

Arriving at the train station, U.S.E are greeted by five Japanese fans who'd been wowed the night before at Club Noon and had struck up friendly conversations with the group after their gig. They want last-minute photos and glad-handing, but the band has to hurry on to the ticket booth.

Japan's shinkansen (bullet train) glides effortlessly and swiftly over the countryside; it's undoubtedly one of humankind's most glorious feats of engineering. It would only be a slight exaggeration to compare U.S.E's Japanese experience thus far to the shinkansen's smooth ride. "To come across the world and have people know your music is pretty nuts," says Sali. "And then to have people waiting for us at the train station—it's awesome."

April 9, Tokyo Hotel Excellent Ebisu

Chan goes online and shows me www.USEmusic.com stats. Hits have come from Morocco, Japan, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Norway, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Germany, Sweden... and the U.S. government.

April 9, Tokyo, Liquid Room

"This girl had me sign her cell phone," Nicklaus says in U.S.E's dressing room at Liquid Room (which resembles EMP's Sky Church, but with all-black decor) before the group ready themselves for a radio interview with Inter FM. Admiration doesn't get much higher than that in Japan, where cell phones hold the same status as crosses in the Vatican. This is a nation where sometimes it seems citizens would rather dourly stare and poke at their handheld wonders than look another human in the eye. But that notorious Nipponese insularity melts away in the clubs U.S.E play on this trip.

The radio interview includes that old chestnut, "How do you categorize your music?"

Sali says, "Arena rocktronica." Weaver chimes in, "It's a celebration," but Holstrom nails it by adding, "Collaborative goofing off."

Just when it seems things couldn't get any more cinematically perfect, Weaver's old girlfriend Saori—whom he hadn't seen in three years and who now lives in Kagoshima in Japan's deep south—shows up looking stunning in a denim miniskirt. They rekindle the fire with enviable ease. The couple spends the next day by the Meguro River watching Japan's legendary cherry blossoms blow romantically in the wind—and Weaver writes a song called "Sakura" (which means "cherry blossom") for the band Wonderful.

Not everyone in the U.S.E camp is feeling spry, however. The post-gig celebration in Osaka has taken a toll on Okonek, Nicklaus ("I feel disoriented today"), and Rock ("I feel

queasy"). Even the normally unflappable Holstrom admits, "I'm nervous tonight, and I'm never nervous." Much stretching, back-rubbing, and jumping around ensue as U.S.E try to shrug off the effects of excessive partying and being in a time zone 16 hours ahead of Seattle's. With his typical gift for sartorial understatement, Weaver dons sequined blue trousers, a midriff-bearing magenta/white-striped shirt with LOVE emblazoned on it, magenta diva gloves, and a feathery magenta scarf. This is the biggest gig of U.S.E's existence and Tokyo deserves nothing less.

"Let's posse up!" Holstrom shouts and U.S.E huddle and intone their prayer in unison. Then they run onstage and the crowd—about 600 strong—roars and crushes the barrier separating the audience from the stage. Weaver leaps into the air, lands before his Juno-60 and Korg keyboards and vocoder, rips off his gloves, and U.S.E kick into "Open Your Eyes." From the first drum-machine beat, the fans jab the air and jump in an impressive display of synchronized aerobics—*déjà vu*, but this time with a smoke machine and killer light show.

Nearly everyone's dancing and engrossed in the show. When U.S.E's most magical song, "Emerald City," appears, hundreds of arms bob in synch to the paean to Seattle. At moments like this, U.S.E's inspirational power really manifests itself. Love ping-pongs from band to crowd and back, intensifying mightily as the night progresses. After the orgasmic celebration that is "There's Always Music" concludes, Rock throws his sweaty towel into the sea of hands and a young girl fights like hell to hold onto it.

Once again during "It Is On!" Nicklaus and Okonek enter the seething mass of fans and are welcomed with mad hugs and worshipful caresses as they coo their lines. No security goons deign to break up this love affair.

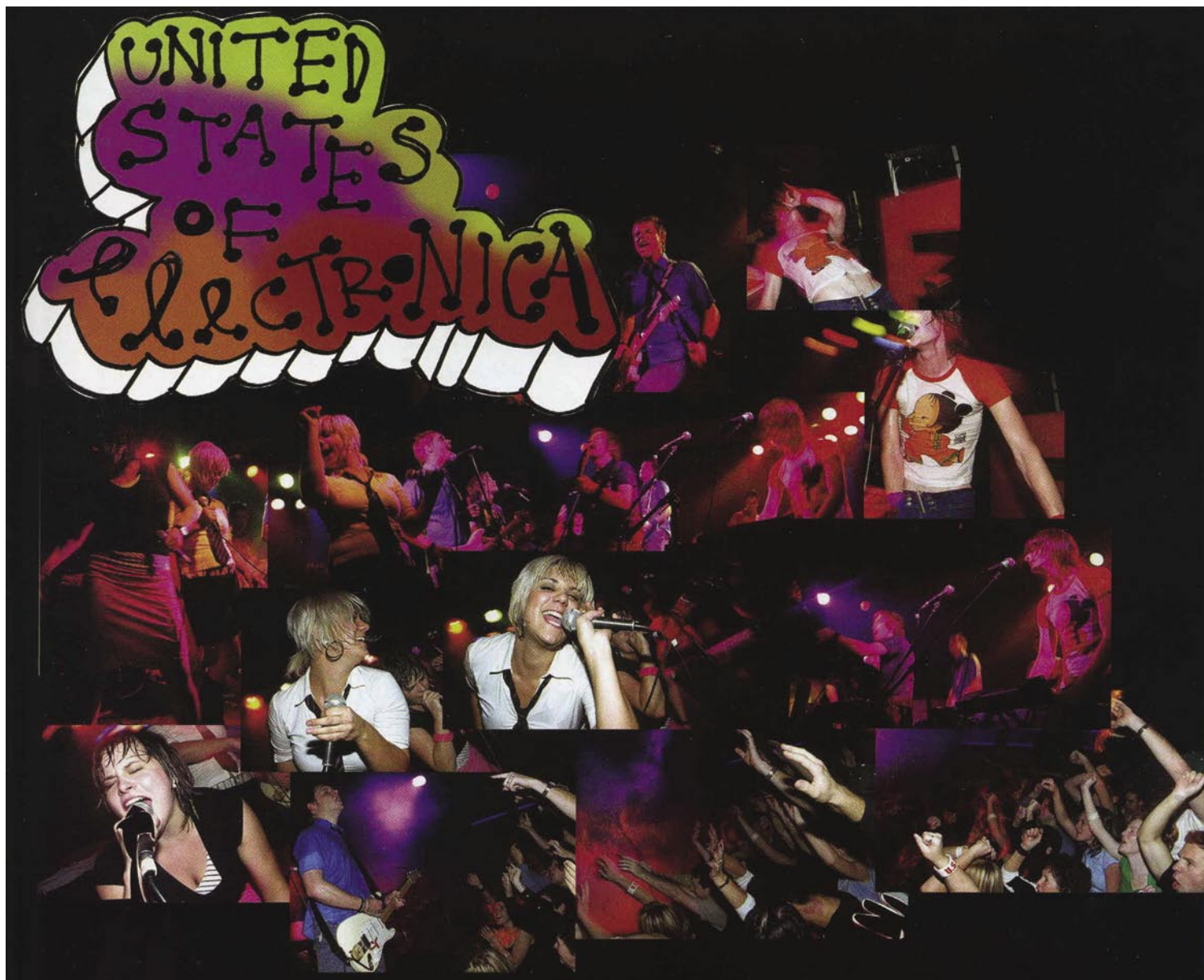
U.S.E repeat the set from Osaka the night before, but this time they're told by the promoter to do an encore—something they usually oppose, but since Matamura has treated them like royalty, and the punters' faces are upraised with U.S.Euphoria, and the adrenaline is flowing like sweat off Holstrom's cherubic mug, the band return onstage with another version of "Open Your Eyes." The cheers penetrate the finest earplugs. That Hollywood director is pushing his luck...

Before U.S.E took off for Japan, Holstrom told me, "We have been consistently and completely blown away by every bit of news that comes back from our crew in Japan. They just kept buying CDs from us until finally they wanted to press their own. I feel like this music had an intent of worldwide appeal from its creation, but you don't always count on your dreams coming true."

Guess what happened? *

segal@thestranger.com

U.S.E perform Fri April 15 and Sat April 16 at the Vera Project, 7:30 pm, \$8/\$9, all ages.



"U.S.E. started a long time ago, several universes over from this one," explains Noah, one of several mop-haired co-founders of United State Of Electronica, the hottest thing to happen to Northwest party pop in, oh, a long time.

The band's Tony Basil-meets-Parliament-meets-Daft Punk sound stands in stark contrast to aesthetics of other projects U.S.E.'s members have been involved with over the past seven years they've known each other, but the change is all in good fun. The band's other active projects, the Catch (an all-lady quartet that's sugary like pop rocks) and Wonderful, self-described as "textural pop that's musically experimental and dreamy, like early Pink Floyd", are growing in popularity in the Northwest, but U.S.E.'s the straight-away winner when it comes to filling up clubs and breaking down audience-performer barriers.

"We want the audience to be as much a part of our party onstage as possible," the band agreed. "We definitely feed on them; they make us freak out!" says platinum-blond bombshell Carly, half of the saucy backup vocalist section that lends cheeky, brash energy to harmonies and even more electricity to an already raucous live show. Replete with legwarmer-clad dancers and five-foot Sesame Streetish foam letters spelling "U.S.E.," venue stages often look like they're cups that've runneth over — and the spirit translates to herds of beat-thirsty, gyrating

fans below. It's a somewhat novel thing on the upper West Coast; rock crowds are used to the organic, foresty sounds of Portland bands on Kill Rock Stars or Seattle bands on Barsuk. This? This sounds like something from ... another label. GSL, maybe, or Troubleman. But right now, the group's on neither — they're self-releasing everything on boutique label Manheim and micro-indie B-Side Records.

"Seems like we're doing what we wanna do, and it's cool if people take interest, and we'll assess our options as they come. Indie labels can be cool, and major labels can be cool, too. The music we're making isn't for some niche audience — it's not for hipsters or jocks or whatever, which might sound like a cliché, but old people and young people like it," reasons Jason, guitarist and second vocalist, before explaining that his 2-year-old niece "dances her ass off" whenever she hears the band's Seattle-themed cheerfest "Emerald City."

Amanda, Carly's childhood best friend and vocal counterpart, says that her grandmother attended a recent show at the city's prestigious Experience Music Project. Nieces, nephews, grandparents, and dance fans alike will be able to see U.S.E. this season when they tour the West Coast. "We wanna do an all-house party tour," they say. Keep your living room free.

— Joan Hiller · photos by Justin Dylan Renney

ALSO RELEASED

Clinton Sparks ★★★

Maybe You Been Brainwashed
Csparks Entertainment
The first official mix CD from Boston hip-hop DJ and radio host Sparks is as in-your-face as an FM morning show - and as much of an annoying hodgepodge as most star-heavy mix tapes. But thanks to the Clipse and some Roc-A-Fella crew members dropping top-shelf rhymes over hooky production, *Brainwashed* is more entertaining than the average hour-long block on your local hip-hop station.

Vic Chesnutt ★★★

Ghetto Bells
New West
With post-jazz guitarist Bill Frisell working up elegant whispers, the twelfth album from Chesnutt proves alluring even when the tunes are undercooked. Chesnutt hasn't lost his edge: His harrowing story-songs strike somewhere between a Flannery O'Connor novel and a junkie's lament.

Prefuse 73 ★★★

Surrounded by Silence
Warp
Scott Herren specializes in cut-and-paste hip-hop in which the MC

is just another voice in the sonic soup. Jumping from buzzy lounge-hop to hard grooves to jazzy fantasia and mixing in cameos from Ghostface and El-P, *Surrounded by Silence* isn't exactly coherent, but it isn't supposed to be: Strictly for fans of fragmented, forward-thinking beatscapes.

United State of

Electronica ★★★

United State of Electronica
Mannheim/Sonic Boom
Let down by the new Daft Punk? The West Coast beatmasters in United State of Electronica have what you need, building giddy techno smashes out of vocoder voices, disco beats, strings and Avalanches-style soul samples. It all comes together in anthems like "Climb the Walls (Umbrella of Love)" and "La Discoteca."

A Static

Lullaby ★★★

Faso Latino
Columbia
Like Thursday, Cali screamo band A Static

Lullaby are equal parts drum-tig chops and youthful catharsis. Th second album mixes up propuls near-metal and heart-tugging lyrics, but lacks hooks.

CHRISTIAN HOAI
ROB SHEFFIE



Chesnu
King of
margin
spooky
South

United State of Electronica
United State of Electronica
[Sonic Boom; 2004]
Rating: 7.5



United State of Electronica are a party band, and on their self-titled debut, they pull out all the stops for mindlessly awesome celebratory ambience: giant, anthemic hooks, a deference to dance before song-to-song variety, shit-for-brains lyrics, some vaguely political obnoxiousness, and, if they're being ironic, a remarkably impenetrable sense of irony. The record pulls no punches: Each track is stuffed with simple and catchy vocal and guitar melodies set against tight, no-frills rhythm sections and a Basement Jaxx-worthy sonic overload in between. And with one big exception, the disc is front-to-back footworthy, never losing a bit of the steam it works up to within its first minute out of the speakers. In fact, though it's probably to say too much or too little, U.S.E. could very well be 2004's Junior Senior: their debut delivers the immediate gratification that we came to associate with last year's D-D-Don't Don't Stop the Beat, and given the density of some of these songs, U.S.E. might eventually pack a little more replay value than their '03 predecessors.

The songs are consistently solid here, but if we're to rally behind one song as a possible single, "Emerald City" seems the surest shot: Its glittery vocoded opening gives way to a steady rhythmic pump and spiraling, intertwined choral and guitar melodies. As the track progresses, U.S.E. wisely reconfigure their instrumentation, most notably keeping in check the guitar lines-- which could have been a mess of riffage and FX-aerobics-- without leaving them unrequited.

Elsewhere, "Climb the Walls" features some dynamic synth and guitar lines working wonders in tandem amidst ambient party noise and bass thump, and the shouts, horns, and seering guitar riffs that serve as the prologue to "Open Your Eyes" are rivaled only by the further developed reincarnations as the song plays out. "Vamos a la Playa", meanwhile, appropriates what U.S.E. seems to think is a characteristically "Latin" shuffle, and with huge help from an 80s synthesizer line, anchors the album's last third quite well. U.S.E.'s only critical misfire is when they tread in the shark pit of "Night Shift", whose G. Love-style pleasure rapping should have been confined to another plane. Still, U.S.E. have put together a consistent collection of well-considered, boneheaded party anthems: Their album is just terribly fun-- nothing more, nothing less.

-Nick Sylvester, May 12th, 2004

SHORT TAKES

UNITED STATE OF ELECTRONICA *U.S.E.* (Sonic Boom) Junior Senior's "Move Your Feet" meets *Discovery*-era Daft Punk on this electro-pop act's ecstatic debut album. The fizzy fun begins with "It Is On!"--a synthy trip to euphoria that, we're pleased to report, is followed by many happy returns. **B+**

STEREOPHONICS *Language. Sex. Violence. Other?* (V2) These Britpopsters could shine if they ever figured out a way to showcase singer-guitarist Kelly Jones' booze-soaked croon. Alas, *Language* finds his vocals buried behind blocky dance-rock that recalls U2's sludgy *Pop* at its densest. **D+**

AQUALUNG *Strange and Beautiful* (Red Ink/Columbia) Not a Tull tribute, but a set of gorgeous, lo-fi-Coldplay swoons by British balladeer Matt Hales, highlighted by the must-hear title track. Even when he sings about "falling out of love," he sounds enraptured. **A-**

PETRA HADEN *Petra Haden Sings: The Who Sell Out* (Bar/None) This L.A. singer has boldly remade Pete Townshend's favorite Who album a cappella-style--with stunning results. Leaching out the boombastic arrangements, Haden locates the melancholia in Townshend's melodies. Her voice--tender and affectless--is like a benediction to the songs' creators. **A-**



WANT MORE MUSIC? If you're a subscriber, check out Listen2This, our free monthly music supplement. Recent issues of L2T have featured stories on Bob Marley and Green Day, and CD recommendations from Sofia Coppola. **PLUS:** the best in new music, videogames, DVDs, and more. To sign up, visit ew.com/register2listen.

FINALLY: ROCK MUSIC YOU CAN DANCE TO

Not since Deborah Harry was a cute little lass has there been so much rock music to dance to. Examples: **UNITED STATE OF ELECTRONICA**
Hometown: Seattle

Sound: Warm synth-rock you can cuddle to
Album to get: U.S.E.

Rump-shaker: "Emerald City," which could be the theme song for the happiest action-news broadcast on the planet

Pitchfork | top 50 albums of 2004

writer's pick by ROB MITCHUM

11. United State of Electronica: U.S.E.