

Queen Sea Big Shark

QUEEN FOR A DAY

Jennifer Conrad and Gissing Liu go back to the future with Queen Sea Big Shark as they release their sophomore album, *Wave*

Dressed in a silver catsuit and then later stripping down to a graphic, cartoon-style leotard, Queen Sea Big Shark's Fu Han led her electro-punk band, one of China's biggest indie bands, through one of the most memorable sets *Time Out* saw at any of this summer's festivals.

Offering up her signature yelps and look-at-me stage moves at the Strawberry Festival in May, it was quite a contrast from the previous time we had encountered her, back in the studio at the Beijing TV tower, working on tracks for the band's new album, *Wave*.

Wearing a restrained black hoodie and jeans, rather than flashy stage clothes, her bleached hair streaking across her forehead, Fu was laying down vocals for the dance anthem 'Comxxpuda' while the rest of the band huddled over the mixing board. On that chilly April afternoon, she still looked every bit the rock star, but it was a bit like peeking behind the curtain in *Oz* – the illusion of magic is lost as the reality below the surface is revealed.

Since their self-titled debut album was completed in 2007, Queen Sea Big Shark have continued to perform, but ultimately left fans clamouring for a follow-up. Now, they have finally delivered; but, while the first album drew on new wave and surf rock influences, the latest material adds a different flavour.

'We're trying to create guitar, bass and drum parts that don't sound real,' guitarist Cao Pu explained during a break in the recording. 'They

sound more like they were produced by a robot or a computer.' They've also added some Chinese elements into the mix, using synthesizers to create sounds similar to those made by traditional Chinese instruments.

'They're all really good songs, so it's just been a question of presentation and making them sound as cool as we can,' added Martin Rawlins, the Beijing-based English producer who had joined them in April.

When we left the band, they were pressed for time, working on two songs a day but still optimistic that their album would come out this year. We meet again in early October as they prepare to launch *Wave*, and find the group eager to share their new sound with the world.

'We wanted to try some new ideas and avoid focusing on vintage music, but we're still deeply influenced by old music, like songs from The

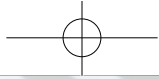
Beatles,' Fu says. 'I don't think our life in the future will be only high-tech. It may trace back to more natural and original ideas.'

They are toying with a concept Fu dubs 'future primitive'; they flat-out declare 'We are the future' (children and robots watch out!) on 'Back to the Future', a charged rocker with searing guitars that sees the band sounding like The Cramps' little electro cousins.

'Everyone's house is a studio,' says Fu, explaining their recording process. 'We're like four scientists.' Cao picks up where she leaves off: 'We finished lots of pieces at home and sent them to each other over the internet. Each member develops and adds their parts, and after that we do a rehearsal to make the piece sound more complete. This album is not a studio album; it's more like a DIY effort.'

Parts of *Wave* were in the works early last year, and the band say they've taken more





CHEN CHAO

Wave by Queen Sea Big Shark is out now.

Queen Sea Big Shark

As for the album's title, it could be taken as another oceanic reference to go along with the band's name, but they say it has other meanings too. 'It can also refer to a trend, a *wave* of people or the power of human beings,' says Cao. 'It's about the development of society, which we visualised as a wave.'

The band themselves have developed over the years since forming in 2004 and becoming associated with the so-called No Beijing movement that included bands such as Carsick Cars and Snapline. Fu gets nostalgic when she discusses the old days, back when fewer than 100 kids would turn up to a show and everyone would buy cheap beer someplace else and drink it outside. Still, she reasons, the band have more opportunities to grow now. Since those days, they toured the US in 2009, opening for the band they are so often compared to, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

'We took a bus from the west coast to the east coast,' recalls Cao. 'The Yeah Yeah Yeahs show was in a big venue, which made me feel like I was dreaming, but some venues were really small – we only had two people in the audience in Seattle. That drew me back to reality pretty quick.'

In Detroit, they met an old hippie who – as old hippies often do – offered a little bit of been-there-done-that wisdom. 'He said, "rock 'n' roll has died in the USA,"' remembers bassist Wang Jinghan. "But you guys from China warmed my heart. You taught us how to rock."

control with this album – drummer Xiao Wu did the post-production and mixing. They've created a collection of danceable, catchy electro-rock songs that show Queen Sea Big

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Shark have really matured since their debut. It's not completely perfect – the mixing feels a tad rough and the vocal parts are a little weak in places – but it's a fitting complement to their multi-sensory live shows.

'They are really smart and talented,' says Shen Lihui, the founder of Modern Sky, Queen

Sea Big Shark's record label, who has heard only a couple of the songs on the album when we speak. 'When I signed them, I didn't expect that they would be so popular, but when you listen to their music, you can tell they are unique and have strong characters.'

Despite the band's focus on the future, they retain a certain ambivalence toward technology; that much is evident from the album. 'I used to love a boy. He's living in the room. He got a boyfriend. His name is computer,' purrs Fu on 'Comxxpuda'. 'I call it a fight with the computer,' says Cao. 'MIDI technology makes songwriting easy, but we insist on playing the instruments ourselves instead of using a computer program. Otherwise the music is written by a computer and not by us.' Playing the new songs live, members often take up two instruments rather than relying upon pre-recorded tracks to recreate their studio work.

Behind the music

The band tell us about how their highly distinctive visual style influences their work

- Along with being musicians, the band members also get down with other creative pursuits, and both Fu Han and Cao Pu make visual art. We asked the talented foursome to come up with a concept for an exclusive *Time Out* photo shoot.
- The main image on this page was created by projecting images from Fu's laptop onto the band's white shirts, which are part of their bold look for the new album. 'We used to wear different outfits, but now we prefer dressing as a team, with simple, unified outfits,' says Fu. Along with the white shirts, they've been sporting thin red armbands, which they say represent the 'wave' in their album title.
- They've also begun incorporating their design sense into live shows. Fu explains: 'At our Modern Sky Festival performance in early October, we put 14 LED lights in the background to form our band's logo,' – the ultra-sleek wave/shark's fin that she also sports on her wrist as a tattoo. 'We want to bring some fresh ideas to the live show so that our audience doesn't think of us as just a fashion or disco band. We think they will understand us in the future.'