



ABOVEBOARD

Steve Aoki gets candid about his second album: *Neon Future I*, family, the naysayers & why it's important for him to document his life

Words by Vanessa Pascale

Photo Credit Brian Ziff

t's late May, and I am at Cielo in New York City for an advanced listen of Steve Aoki's sophomore album, *Neon Future I* (available September 30th). Steve mingles with journalists whom satiate themselves on an open bar and a spread of Mexican fare as his soon-to-be-released album spins in the background. After a couple of hours, the crowd dissipates, and the Miami-born 36-year-old --outfitted in white pants, a multi-hued jacket and camo gingham button-down-- joins me on the patio out back for some one-on-one time.

Neon Future I (a title that alludes to the bright future Steve foresees) boasts more than just music; it opens with Ray Kurzweil, famous for his ideas on singularity, (Johnny Depp's character in the movie, *Transcendence* was modeled from Ray, the Grammy-nominated record producer, tells me) and includes Steve's interviews with a list of people researching this process. Fascinated with the future, and how technology is advancing our lives creatively, "eradicating issues and problems that are facilitating us, killing us," Steve considers himself both optimistic, and pragmatic. "It's not like I believe in conspiracy theories and the Illuminati. I'm a very skeptical guy. I believe that the evolution is a spiritual process, instead of religion. I want to be able to understand, not just have leaps of faith. I'm really excited about what the future has to hold and to see it in my lifetime, so I don't die before the singularity comes."

While I'm not clairvoyant, I predict that Steve's empire will mushroom, even more, in the years ahead. Widely known as the son of the late Rocky Aoki, founder of the Benihana restaurant dynasty, Steve's business sense, ambition, and aptitude to grow a brand exponentially echoes his father's. The Dim Mak Records founder and CEO has capitalized significantly on adept DJing/producing skills coupled with idiosyncratic antics (cake tossing, champagne showers, inflatable boat crowd surfing...), resulting in national commercial deals with Bud Light Platinum and Sol Republic Deck.

A marketing mastermind, Steve has strategically set himself apart in the oversaturated EDM industry. How would you define your brand? I ask. "I'm not knocking on the door politely to enter into a house. I crash through the side window... I grew up in a punk / hardcore background lifestyle community and that ethos is very much about building your own culture. 'Ok, you can't get in? Create your own party. People don't like your music? Make it for people that love weird music, ya know? It's ok to embrace the weird side of you more than the normal side,'" he shares. "We represent the displaced sounds, the displaced people, and we give them empowerment and freedom of expression. But it's not like I'm trying to be a rebel to be a rebel. When you grow up, for me, it's like, I'm not saying, 'Aw, I was this poor kid, of course you know my family obviously is Benihana, so I grew up with a lot of access and opportunity that a lot of people don't have. My father cut those ties of opportunity and access, the money funneling..."

Because Steve started Dim Mak with only \$400 (free of funding from his father), he learned how to construct and sustain it for the last 18 years. "At this point I've eaten shit a million fuckin' times. Fallen on my face. And if you don't learn to brush that dirt off, get up and do it again. Figure out how not to do it again, wipe the tears away... That's what I feel like is how I've been successful. I've been subject to a lot of that eating on my own faults. Not other peoples' faults, like, taking responsibility for your actions and also helping others as they've fallen. Then all of sudden you have a group alongside you riding, pushing forward. When they fall, you stop and you help pick them up and you say, 'This is how you don't fall again. Like this.' And the other guy is like, 'Let's help this other guy out,' and we're a team of people eating shit." He laughs.



Banding together his friends to collaborate on music is a hallmark of Steve's. On his freshman album *Wonderland*, Steve worked with a number of his musically-inclined pals. Same goes for *Neon Future I*; his collaborators are either friends or have become friends through their shared love of music and the process. While *Wonderland* is a collection of different singles that took four years to produce, *Neon Future I* is a cohesive album that was written in months. "I took riffs and rhythms and ideas and made them into stronger ideas... The album in total, Part I and Part II is 16 songs. Total? I probably had 40-50 different ideas that I was packing. You structure them into proper songs, then you

test the songs out to different artists that you share an affinity with and see which ones make sense. Sometimes they don't, and you have to start from scratch with that artist in the studio, working from day one --which is also a really exciting process too, that I don't really get the opportunity to have because of scheduling. If I could add 300 more days in the year, I would, just so I could be in the studio more and be more creative."

During our first interview in January 2012, before the release of *Wonderland*, Steve's heavy tour schedule had him playing approximately 300 shows a year. This remains the same. Steve removes his cell phone from his pocket and opens his calendar to give me an idea. "My schedule is so fucking crazy. I have everything in here." He aims the illuminated screen toward me. "All the blue days are shows or studio days or music video shoots... I'm always working on music. I love it. It's like people that like to draw and paint. I like to work on music. It's not a chore for me. I always want to be better at my craft. It's not for anyone else. It's for me."

Last year, Wunderground, a satirical news site, posted a bogus piece online laden with fake quotes, stating Steve, admittedly, is not an actual DJ. Much fuss is made about what constitutes a "DJ" these days, and because I am just as perplexed as the lot, I have Steve enlighten me. There are DJs that spin on vinyl and scratch, ones that just press play and mix on CDJs, DJs that play already beatmatched songs off computers, DJs that use keyboards and instruments, he

explains. "What they're *all* basically doing is presenting music to a crowd. What form or how they're doing it, doesn't really matter at that point if they call themselves a DJ. Some people say, 'Well, he's not a DJ.' That's all opinions." FYI: Merriam-Webster's definition is one who plays popular recorded music on the radio or at a party or nightclub. And Steve definitely fits the bill. The negative perception of Steve is being fueled by those who have not attended his shows and have merely seen video or photos of him when he's not behind the DJ booth.

"There's people going, 'Wow. This guy doesn't even DJ, he just presses play on a CD as mixing and then he goes and throws cakes at people the entire show....'" This is not the case. "I've never played a pre-mixed CD in my life. I've never even done those beatmatching programs. I create my set. I'm also playing with the crowd. 'Ok, that song would work next,' then I'm quickly changing songs. Doing what a DJ does. I've been DJing before digital, before I got computers. I was DJing with vinyl records. So it's like, when I'm DJing and mixing, do they really want a photo of me *then?*"

Does it bother you that people say that you're "not an actual DJ"? I ask. "Of course it bothers me," says Steve passionately. "But what am I going to do? But I'll tell you, it's not going to stop me from doing the shows. And I'm like, 'Ok, if you don't believe me, you can come and watch me. You can watch me behind the decks. I'm fucking an open book.'"

What many may also notice from the posted and circulating snapshots of Steve is that he's jumping -- in a *lot* of them. So, what's the scoop behind the Aoki jump? Very aware of how fortunate he is to travel around the globe, Steve takes along a crew to film and photograph his journey. Bored with simply standing in front of monumental landmarks, like the Eiffel Tower, for the requisite photo, Steve decided that a jump should be his pose. Each jump photo is chronicled with a number, time and location stamp, he tells me. "So, Aoki jump 560. I pick the best jumps in the city. I'll jump all over the place. Jump. Jump. Jump. I'll be like, 'That's the one that's going to be in Boracay, Philippines!' he says excitedly, "And this is the one for Sydney."

These frozen images and recordings have become exceedingly important to Steve, especially with the passing of his father. "All I want now is to see videos of him (his father) talking, and photos of him. Those memories are in here, so I want to see them again. I miss that. You miss people and you can't get them back. Now I have this weird tick of documenting everything. I'm with my mom and I'm like, 'Mom, I have my friend taking photos and video, and we're just going to have dinner.' I just want to have that," he says pensively. "I know it's annoying, but I'm like, 'Just let it happen, so we will always have memories of today, 'cause I don't know how many...'" His voice trails off. After a momentary pause, he continues. "Maybe that's a bad thing, because it takes away from the moment. When someone





EXCLUSIVE

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passes away, you're like, 'I gotta find a photo of me and my friend, like, 'Where's that photo fucking photo?' And you can't find it. 'Ahh, I just want to see, one more time, when we were both really happy and we had that moment,'" Steve says ardently.

While on the topic of his father, I ask if he still has his hand in the Benihana empire. Divided into two main companies, he explains, his family is a part of Benihana of Tokyo (BOT), which handles all the international franchises. "My dad's trust was involved in that world, and that was a long battle with my dad's last wife." I mention that TMZ had reported that his sister Devon and he won, and that he would have access to it when he turned 45. "Yeah. It's a little bit more complex. It's um..." From the way he shifts in his seat, I suppose that he is contemplating whether he should go on. "I'll just say, I don't want to talk too much about it, but I do want to say I'm happy it's over. Up until this point, it's been a long battle." His voice is weighted with exhaustion. "It brings back such bad memories of not being able to see my father. I was close with him, and she can, I don't wanna..." He stops himself from going any further. I apologize for bringing up the sensitive subject and switch to a lighter topic: hidden talents.

In addition to his ability to catch some serious air during his jumps, most notably atop the roof of his private jet, without falling off [You didn't fall off or did you? I ask. "No. I didn't fall off," he quips; surprised that I could doubt his skills.], Steve reveals that he can play golf ambidextrously. He then prattles off a few, obviously fictitious, tidbits: He has 14 toes and two eyes in the back of his head. His playful answers don't stop there. When I inquire about whether the photo he posted from his trip to Marvel's office means that he will be collaborating with the comic book enterprise, Steve tells me that he's been cast as the next Wolverine. "I've been in the gym getting all strong." He tries, unsuccessfully, to mask his smile and stifle a laugh. "I gotta get buff. And, I'm like, implanting hairs in my chest, 'cause I don't have any hair on my chest. You gotta have hair on your chest if you want to be Logan."

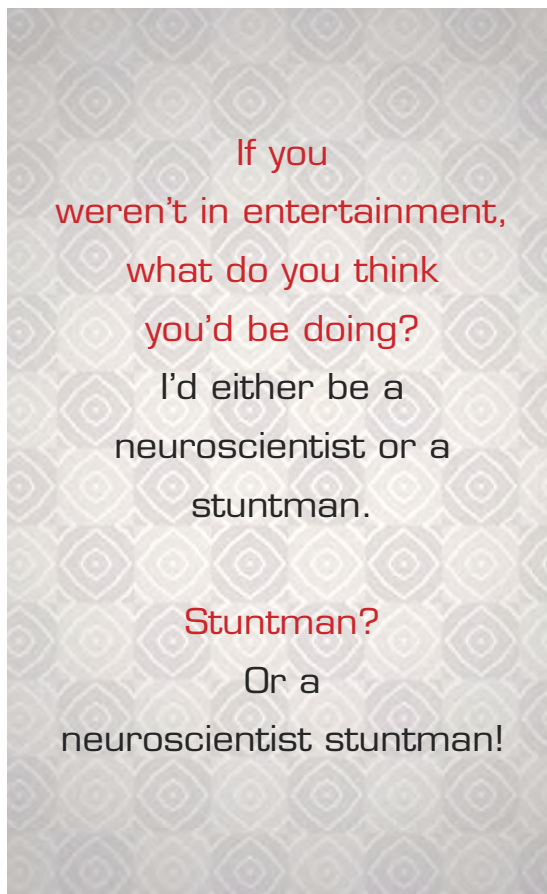
This summer, Steve is playing shows in France, Sweden, Spain, Turkey... but the highlight of this tour is the Madison Square Garden show (August 16th). "That's my crowning achievement, to be playing in that room. It's the most important, most defining show of my career, because Madison Square Garden is the most iconic place in the world. New York is such an important city for me. It reminds me of my father

--this is his stomping grounds. Not many dance artists get to even play there; it's very rare, few and far between for a dance artist to be headlining that place."

While his present list of shows does not indicate a stop in Miami soon, when Steve is in South Florida, his favorite spot to visit is his "amazing" brother, Kevin's Brickell restaurant, Doraku (who also has another restaurant in Miami: Aoki --in honor of their father). "There's a lot of Miami love, Aoki Miami love there. That's where I like to go stomp around and get food. I'm a South Beach guy at heart. I love South Beach. It's hard for me to leave South Beach." Does your family like to

cook or is it the restaurant business that appeals to the Aokis? I inquire. "It's more like they're just in that business. I've never really seen my brother cook. I never really saw my dad cook. But, they're marketing geniuses and they know how to build up brands."

You might be surprised to find out that Steve is in the restaurant business too, and he doesn't cook either. Involved with three restaurants (by way of investor), Eveleigh and Goldies in Los Angeles, and Dudley's in New York, his association is kept under wraps, while his friend, restaurateur Nick Mathers runs them. A patron of Eveleigh when I lived in L.A., I had no idea that Steve was a part of the regularly-packed eatery. "I don't put my name out there," he replies. "It doesn't need Steve Aoki's face attached to the side. My brand is more music-related... When he [Nick] told me the concept of what he wanted to do and what his plans are, I was like, 'That would be a place I would go eat at all the time!' We did a tasting and I was like, 'This is incredible food.' And we are killing it. Killing it."



The restaurant's edifices aren't branded with Steve's face, but the t-shirts sold on his website are --imprinted with an outline of his distinctive mane and beard. Have you ever thought of shearing off your long locks? I ask. "Yeah, let's just shave it. Right now! Get me some clippers. I can still be Steve Aoki with no hair. Do the samurai. Good-bye. I'm going to quit being a DJ. I'll tell Wunderground, write a new article: *I Quit being a DJ to Become a 21st Century Samurai*. Start chopping off bad guys' arms." It'll work with you being the next Wolverine, I chime in. "Exactly. When they asked me to be Wolverine... 'We want you to have samurai swords coming out of your hands.'" Next level, I play along. "Called Aokivine. Aokiverine!" he concocts. And with that, I wrap up the interview so that Steve, who is hungry at this point, can head on over to Dudley's for dinner. **ML**