



Steve Aoki played at a packed out The Wall (這牆) last Thursday and rocked it hard. Aoki polarizes opinion. He is either an innovator, setting trends for modern electro, or an all-image right party boy unable to mix or produce, cashing in on fame, rehashing the past and selling it as the future.

The Vinyl Word hung out with Aoki, partying at his hotel and getting massages. We discussed the criticism of his so-called trust fund success, "selling out" with "Brand Aoki," his album *Pillowface and His Airplane Chronicles* and the hipster scene he inhabits.

"When you put yourself out there you are gonna get positive and negative criticism," Aoki says. "Everyone has their opinion and everyone has the right to talk shit."

The mission statement for Dim Mak Records that Aoki founded is "by any means necessary." "Because my dad founded the [Japanese steakhouse] chain Benihana everyone assumes I just live off a trust fund," Aoki says. "That is not true, I did it myself." (In 2006, Steve Aoki was one of only two of his late father Rocky Aokis' six children whom Rocky did not sue for trying to "wrest control" of his companies.)

It may appear that Aoki is selling out "by any means necessary" with superficial merchandising deals such as a new blue headphone collection (Aoki's current favorite color after last year's green) in partnership with WESC: "It's not the sound but how they look. I almost would rather wear headphones that sounded shittier and looked better. Like wearing an expensive jacket that's uncomfortable but looks fucking dope on you." Other tie-ins like an Aoki character for the *NBA 2K8* video game and a non-skating shoe for skating company Supra — Aoki admits he can't play basketball or skateboard well — lead to similar conclusions.

Aoki has no problem with this or being labeled a brand. "What is wrong with being a brand? Brands constantly need to be revived," he says. "That's what I'm trying to create with Dim Mak records ... a brand that has longevity and integrity ... if we started signing Paul Oakenfold, Paul van Dyk and fucking Armin van Buuran, we would become that second-rate, washed-up mainstream thing."

Aoki's record label, as well as his strongest passion, is producing some of the biggest names in electro in the world right now. He believes this



Paris-based rapper American Uffie, center, performed at The Wall with Steve Aoki, right, last Thursday.

PHOTO: RON BROWNLOW, TAIPEI TIMES

counters any claims of selling out and shows his finger is firmly on the pulse. Aoki has signed MSTRKRFT, The Ready Beetroots, Machines Don't Care, "groups that define the next wave of music ... that will never get old," he says. "We signed Bloc Party in 2003, we signed The Kills in 2002. We signed all these groups before they blew up. We want them to blow up. We want them to become mainstream ... It's not like I wanna stay underground."

Pillowface and His Airplane Chronicles is hated and loved. Many think Aoki has just re-mastered tracks to their detriment, some a year or two old, with lame hip-hop vocals on top. Others call it a masterpiece of new-wave electro. Aoki only calls it, "a fun record ... an introduction to the world of hip-hop and electro."

At the end of our long mid-week party, it is hard to dislike Aoki. He is engaging, interesting, energetic and knows everything about electro. He may party

hard, get wasted on the decks, have a penchant for big breasts and incur the wrath of purists who are annoyed he doesn't produce his own music or mix that well, but luckily he doesn't care. He cares mainly about Dim Mak: the baby saving his long-term credibility as the vultures circle, waiting for the electro bubble to burst.

What he says about hanging with hipsters defines his attitude toward life: "Hipster to me is like the same thing for all the kids who are fashion-forward ... trying to be unique in the way he is dressing ... If I had to hang out with that kid wearing lime-green jeans and a bright yellow T-shirt wearing crazy sunglasses at a club, or a fucking dude that works at a fucking hedge fund that I have nothing in common with, I'm gonna hang out with the crazy fucking jeans. That's my scene; I don't care if he is dressing crazy. Everyone has to find their own way."

— TOM LEEMING

Bliss is dead? Long live Bliss!

Two foreigners walk into a bar — and they buy it!

On the way to interview soon-to-be former Bliss owner Barry Smit on Tuesday, I saw two men gazing at the mural painted on the wall outside the building. I blurted out, "Are you guys going to buy Bliss?" It turns out that is exactly what they were doing. During my interview with Smit, I watched them sign the papers.

News that Smit was leaving Taipei and was going to sell — or close — Bliss had been weighing heavily on many in the foreigner music scene. Smit, who used to play in a rock band in his native Holland, has spent much of his adult life involved in either the hospitality industry or the art world. When he blended the two by making Bliss into a live-music venue, he had both sensibilities in mind. And in so doing, he made Bliss one of the few music venues in the city that didn't take a cut from admission charges.

"If I give all the money to the bands, the bands will do their best to bring the crowd," Smit says. This strategy made Bliss, formerly called Chocolate and Love, into a place loved by musicians and fans alike. "That's true," Smit says, "but all truths are temporary." Running a bar has taken a toll on him. "For the last year I've had no creative energy ... It's good that it has new blood, a fresh start — I was falling asleep here."

That new blood comes in the form



Travis Bannert, left, and Barry Smit raise a toast to Bliss.

PHOTO: ALITA RICKARDS

of Travis Bannert and Oliver Campbell. Bannert hails from Edmonton, Alberta, and has a real down-to-earth friendliness. "The first time I came to Bliss," he says, "I was like 'Wow! I didn't know a bar like this existed in Taiwan.'" He told his friends, "I want to open a place just like this." So when he saw an ad for Bliss on Facebook, he jumped at the chance.

They don't have huge plans to change it: "We love this place, the general feel, and want to keep the core idea," Bannert

says. They'll try some new things on weekdays, and Smit is helping them work on improving the sound. The biggest initial change will be to hire a sound engineer who will be paid for out of the cover charge from the first five people to come see the band. The rest of the cover will still go directly to the musicians.

"I sleep better at night because I know I'm leaving it in good hands," Smit says, clapping a beaming Bannert on the shoulder.

Smit will remain in the hospitality business. He and wife bought "a huge piece of land, with a sea view, mountains in the back" in Taitung two years ago, Smit says, and they plan on making it a "place where people can escape the hectic city, get back to nature." There is already a well for water, and they will develop the land "fully ecologically, recycle the water, grow our own plants, use alternative energy," Smit says. Years drop off of his face as he talks about it: "Taitung is the forgotten county of Taiwan. I've seen on my travels in Thailand how things get going over time."

"I see this move as the next stage in my evolution in Taiwan." There will be a weekend-long farewell party, starting at 8pm tonight with Pan Africana. Whacked-out cover band The Originals open the show for the "Bliss Closing-Down Party All-Star Jam," which starts tomorrow at 10pm. Bliss is at 148, Xinyi Rd. Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市信義路四段148號). Call (02) 2702-1855 for more information or go to www.myspace.com/blisslivehouse to see a schedule of upcoming performances. For updates on Smit's venture in Taitung visit Bliss' Facebook page. Entrance to Bliss is free. Cover to see the music upstairs tonight is NT\$200 (free Hippie Party after 1am). There is no cover charge for tomorrow's farewell party performances.

— ALITA RICKARDS

[EVENTS & ENTERTAINMENT]

Appearing tonight at **Witch House (女巫店)** is Swedish a cappella group **#merlin** as part of the Taiwan International A Cappella Festival. For more information on the festival, visit blog.roodo.com/tcmc. Tomorrow alt-rock band **Peppermint (薄荷葉)** takes to the stage, and on Sunday it's the **Free Breathing Ensemble** (世界動靜), a jazz group that explores Latin, Indian and Chinese folk music. **►** 7, Ln 56, Xincheng S Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市新生南路三段56巷7號). For more information, call (02) 2362-5494 or visit www.witchhouse.org. **►** Performances start at 9:30pm. Restaurant/bar with queer/feminist bookstore and large collection of board games open 11am to midnight Sundays through Wednesdays; 11am to 1am Thursdays through Saturdays **►** Admission is NT\$300 on evenings with music shows and includes one drink

Tonight **Riverside Cafe (河岸留聲)** presents the **RAY Band (雷樂隊)**, a trio of veteran session musicians who play power-rock originals and covers. Singer **Waa Wei (魏如萱)** makes an appearance tomorrow night. Her high-pitched wispy voice, cutesy delivery and indie-pop sensibility have earned her a following that will likely ensure a full house. On Sunday it's **OK Bomb** and ska punk music from **Shy Kick Apple**. **►** B1, 2, Ln 244, Roosevelt Rd Sec 3,

Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路三段244巷2號B1), next to Taipower Building (台電大樓). Call (02) 2368-7310 or visit www.riverside.com.tw for more information **►** Shows start at 9:30pm tonight and 9pm tomorrow and Sunday **►** Entry is NT\$400 tonight, NT\$450 tomorrow and NT\$350 on Sunday

Dafu Jazz Quartet performs tonight at **Sappho de Base**, Taipei's favorite late-night venue for impromptu jazz sessions. **Black Sheep** plays Texas-style blues tomorrow night. On Tuesday the **Grace Jazz Trio** plays a set, with an open jam afterwards, and on Wednesday it's the **Isiah Richardson Trio**. Thursday night features singer-songwriter **Dana Wylie** and drummer and guitarist **Jezebell**. **►** B1, 1, Ln 102, Anhe Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市安和路一段102巷1號B1). Call (02) 2700-5411 (after 9pm) or visit www.sappho102.biz for more information **►** Performances begin at 10:30pm on weekends, 10pm on weekdays **►** No admission fee

Rock and pop cover outfit **Soma** plays tonight at **Tone 56 Live Bar**. Tomorrow it's house band **Loaded**, which plays everything from "rock classics to today's hits." Every Sunday features a regular rotation of groups;

this week it's blues, funk, and soul outfit **The Blues Vibrations**.

► 1F, 56, Minquan E Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市民權東路三段56號1樓), near the corner of Fuxing North (復興北) and Minquan East (民權東) roads. Call (02) 2517-3869 for more information **►** Music shows go from 9:30pm to 12:30am tonight and tomorrow; 7:30pm to 9:30pm on Sundays **►** No admission fee

Every Wednesday night at the **Cosmopolitan Grill** there's a blues open mic, held by the **Blues Society on Taiwan** and hosted by Torch Pratt. All are welcome to bring their instruments and sit in on guitar, bass, or drums.

► 1F, 218 Changchun Rd, Taipei City (台北市長春路218號1樓). Call (02) 2508-0304 or visit www.cosmo.com.tw for more information **►** Wednesdays from 8pm to 11pm **►** No admission fee

Exhibitions

Masterpieces of Chin and Tang Dynasty Calligraphy (晉書法名蹟展). The exhibition puts together 15 calligraphic works inscribed by Chin and Tang dynasty calligraphers. Highlights include Tang Dynasty copies of Wang Hsi-chih's (王羲之) three masterpieces, on display

together for the first time. **►** National Palace Museum (國立故宮博物院), 221, Zhishan Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市至善路二段221號). Open Mondays through Sundays from 9am to 5pm and Saturdays until 8:30pm. Tel: (02) 2881-2021 **►** Until Nov. 20

Whispers of Blended Shadows: The Art of Jerry Uelsmann (疊影絮語:傑利尤斯曼). Dubbed a magician of images, the radical surrealist photographer rose to fame in the US in the 1960s and is known for his practice of "post-visualization." Employing traditional darkroom techniques as a kind of alchemy, the artist frees photography from the shackles of "representation of the real world" to convey psychological truths through symbolic, metaphorical and conceptual images. The exhibition displays 79 of Uelsmann works. **►** Taipei Fine Arts Museum (台北市立美術館), 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號). Open Tuesdays through Sundays from 9:30am to 5:30pm and Saturdays until 8:30pm. Tel: (02) 2595-7656 **►** Until Jan. 11, 2009

Rocks and Water — Solo Exhibition by Monika Kropshofer (水石之間 — 德國藝術家柯妮妮個展). Neither photography nor painting, Kropshofer's art is a combination of

the two. Taken during several trips around the world, the photos are painted over with layers of bright colors by the artist who explores the concepts of surface and space. **►** German Cultural Center Taipei (台北德國文化中心), 12F, 20, Heping W Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市和平西路一段20號12樓). Open Mondays through Fridays from 1pm to 8pm. Tel: (02) 2365-7294 **►** Until Nov. 11

New Germany Contemporary Art Exhibition (新德國當代藝術特展). The exhibition introduces visitors to the lasting influences of German expressionism, neo-expressionism and the New Leipzig School through the works of young German artists including Matthias Galvez, Martin Galle, David Ostrowski and Marcel Eichner. **►** AKI Gallery (也趣), 141 Minzu W Rd, Taipei City (台北市民族西路141號). Open Tuesdays through Sundays from 12pm to 6:30pm. Tel: (02) 2599-1171 **►** Until Nov. 2

Hu Kun-jung's Solo Exhibition (胡坤榮個展). A new series of Hu's abstract paintings. **►** Main Trend Gallery (大趨勢畫廊), 209-1, Chengde Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市承德路三段209-1號). Open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2587-3412 **►** Until Nov. 8

RESTAURANTS

Hutong No. 2 Yakiniku Dining Bar (古月同燒肉夜食)

Address: 139, Civil Blvd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市市民大道四段139號)
Telephone: (02) 2570-0373
Open: Daily from 6pm to 2am
Average meal: NT\$1,000 plus 10 percent service charge
Details: Chinese and English menu; credit cards accepted
On the Net: www.hutong.com.tw

Surprisingly, on a recent Monday night at 8pm, Hutong's Dunhua location (17, Ln 161, Dunhua S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City, 台北市敦化南路一段161巷17號) was booked until 9pm. However, the server who greeted our party immediately called the yakiniku, or "grilled meat," restaurant's second and newly opened branch on Civil Boulevard (市民大道), and five minutes later we were comfortably settled in.

A bar seating about 15 runs down the length of the restaurant in front of which is the kitchen. There is one table for larger parties towards the back. The color scheme is autumnal and the decor features wood finishing. To the side of the entrance, which consists of three large antique Chinese doors, there are 21 cubicles built into the wall in which diners can store their belongings to prevent them from acquiring the smell of barbecued meat.

Our server Robert Lin (林京濤) told us there are two ways to dine at Hutong. With the first option, patrons order from the menu and grill the items themselves. We opted for the second method, which leaves the cooking in the server's hands.

We began with rice tea soup with salmon (NT\$50) and Japanese salad (NT\$100). The light flavor of the soup blended well with the salty seaweed and small chunks of fish. The salad, which consisted of mounds of crispy iceberg lettuce topped with kelp and smothered in sesame and miso vinaigrette.

For dinner, we ordered mostly red meat, which arrived raw on separate plates. The meats were marinated in Hutong's secret sauce (which had hints of sake, soy sauce and miso) and topped with sesame seeds. Lin then set to work grilling and serving, occasionally changing the grill because, "it is healthier and doesn't allow the ingredients' individual flavors to interact."

The streak, or marbled, beef (NT\$240) and prime streaky beef (NT\$340) were thin strips of US beef that had been marinated in Hutong's sauce and grilled according to our specification, which was medium rare.

Special mention needs to be given to the salted Kobe pork (NT\$180) for its tenderness. Lin persuaded my dining companion, who dislikes the taste of pork and usually refuses to eat it, to try a nibble. One bite of the succulent dish was enough to convince him to eat half the order.

We also ordered the French lamb chop steak (NT\$100), salted squid with green onions (NT\$140), butter king oyster mushrooms (NT\$80) and green peppers (NT\$60), which, like all the ingredients we ate at Hutong, were cooked so as to bring out the food's natural juices.

Hutong serves Orion draft beer from Okinawa (NT\$140) and eight different kinds of sakes and Scotch whiskeys.

The two stools closest to the restaurant's entrance should be avoided at all costs because they are located near the dishwashers, which when opened emit a detergent mist that can mingle with the great barbecue smell.

— NOAH BUCHAN



There are two ways to dine at Hutong.

PHOTO: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES

Teppan Izakaya (鐵匠鐵板居酒屋)

Address: 13, Ln 265, Dunhua S Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路二段265巷13號)
Telephone: (02) 2738-9171
Open: Mondays through Fridays from 6pm to 12am; Saturdays and Sundays from 12pm to 12am
Average meal: NT\$500
Details: Chinese and Japanese menu
On the Net: www.hiroshima.com.tw

Tucked down an alley adjacent to the Far Eastern Plaza Hotel Taipei (台北遠東國際大飯店), Teppan Izakaya is an unassuming-looking Japanese tapas bar that supplies a decent selection of grilled and fried snacks complemented by carafes of sake and shochu, an increasingly common feature

of the capital's culinary map. One thing the bar takes pride in and that sets it apart from its kind is the serving of okonomiyaki, or Japanese pizza, prepared in the Hiroshima style.

The interior exudes a cozy feel with wooden furnishings, soft lighting and easy-listening J-pop. Though the displays of koinobori, or carp windsocks, and Japanese lanterns may add a kitschy, yet pleasing ambience, the authenticity of Teppan's food is suggested by the proprietor's Hiroshima origins and his Japanese patrons. Okonomiyaki is a must on each and every table and comes in five flavors that include kimchi (泡菜), cheese (起司), or (NT\$240) and homemade sticky rice cake (麻糬燒, NT\$320).

We ordered the original-flavored Hiroshima okonomiyaki (廣島燒, NT\$180), which is topped with a fried egg, a generous serving of thick okonomiyaki sauce and dried skipjack tuna flakes. The batter cake consists of layers of cabbage, pork and fried noodles (either yakisoba or udon) and comes with a bottle of Japanese mayonnaise of which the waiting staff encouraged us to consume as much as we desired. The dish doesn't fit in the light and healthy image of Japanese cuisine.

Unlike barbecue menus you might find at the more trendy and upscale Japanese tapas bars favored by Taipei hipsters, the grilled meat available at Teppan Izakaya is neither pretentiously presented nor complicated by high-priced ingredients. Rather, it is the juicy burger with French fries (皇家漢堡肉, NT\$160), simply seasoned grilled mackerel (鹽燒鯖魚, NT\$200) and beef tongue (蔥鹽牛舌, NT\$180) that slake the appetite.

Deep-fried dishes like crunchy chicken cartilage (酥辣雞軟骨, NT\$120) and crisp burdock root slices (卡哩卡哩炸牛蒡, NT\$120), are, unfortunately, a bit greasy, but provide a suitably simple complement to the bar's sake collection, which is priced between NT\$280 and NT\$700 for a carafe, and selection of shochu (NT\$140 to NT\$250 a glass), a beverage distilled from rice, barley, taro and perilla that is stronger than sake but weaker than whiskey.

The service can be inattentive when there is a big crowd, but for the most part the staff is experienced, polite and happy to make food and drink recommendations.

One thing to avoid, however, is the Japanese-style back room as the space under the tables is fairly limited for diners to cross or stretch their legs.

— HO YI



Diners come to Teppan Izakaya for its signature Hiroshima-styled okonomiyaki.

PHOTO: HO YI, TAIPEI TIMES