

LIFE

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They're often derided as hipsters who got lucky, but Steve Aoki and Mark Hunter's ascent to the top of the Los Angeles party scene has been anything but easy

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Hustle muscle

Steve Aoki and Mark Hunter (better known as the Cobra Snake) finish each other's sentences. On Sunday, the day after DJ Aoki played to a wall-to-wall crowd at Luxy (which Hunter photographed), the best friends buckled down in the East District's (東區) NEU Store for a round of interviews. Aoki sat on a red velvet sofa while Hunter, dressed in a T-shirt and trousers from his upcoming clothing line, bounced around, flipping through a magazine and occasionally interjecting with a one-liner.

The two have thrown parties and toured together since Aoki was the head of a fledgling record label called Dim Mak and Hunter was a 17-year-old with a camera. In the past seven years, Dim Mak has made its name breaking acts like Bloc Party, the Kills and, more recently, the Bloody Beetroots. Hunter, meanwhile, has gained fame (or infamy, depending on whom you ask) for chronicling parties around the world and posting the photos on theCobrasnake.com.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RIKHUNG

Aoki and Hunter are often derided as hipsters who got lucky — Aoki because he is the son of Rocky Aoki, the late founder of the Benihana restaurant chain, and Hunter because his job appears to be running a glorified blog with photos of yet more hipsters. But Aoki says his famous dad did not fund Dim Mak (a claim backed up by the fact that much of the money made from his exhaustive touring schedule is poured back into his record label); before going into music, he considered an academic career in Asian American studies. And, as it turns out, the Cobra Snake wasn't just a kid with a camera — as an 18-year-old, Hunter went into his internship one day with a detailed six-page business proposal for his photography Web site.

The two talked with the *Taipei Times* about the show at Luxy, how they worked their "hustle muscle" and the continuing

impact of Bruce Lee on Aoki's record label.

Taipei Times: Steve, this is your third trip here. Based on your previous tours, is there anything that you did to gear your set to the Taipei crowd?

Steve Aoki: On this tour my set is comprised mainly of songs I've remixed or produced and tracks from artists on my label Dim Mak: the Bloody Beetroots, MSTRKRFT, Felix Cartal and remixes that we've done. I just want to support artists that are on our roster, new ones like Sonic C, who is an 18-year-old kid. We played a track by Afrojack, which is not going to come out for a while. It's brand new, so what people heard was a work in progress. There was the new Bloody Beetroots track we just released at the end of last year called *Warp 1977*. And of course I dropped my new single *I'm in the House* with Zuper Blahq.

TT: I know the two of you tour together a lot. How did you meet and start working together?

Mark Hunter: We are both from LA. I take photos and it complements Steve's amazing performances. Since we get lonely, we like to spend a lot of time with each other. I'm a huge fan of everything Steve does, so it's exciting to see him travel the world and have huge crowds of screaming fans everywhere he goes. It's really exciting, starting from just a little ... I mean, nobody has ever heard of Los Angeles ... to traveling around the world.

SA: [Laughs] We started throwing these little parties together when Mark was 17 ... we were touring together back when [theCobrasnake.com] was still Polaroid Scene [the original name of Hunter's Web site, which was changed because of trademark issues]. We went to Japan and brought 1,000 stickers each for Dim Mak and Polaroid Scene. We walked from morning to night, going to every subway stop, hitting up every pole and climbing up all this shit. We were being kids.

MH: We just really used our hustle muscle and it's slowing paying off.

TT: Mark, people often say, "Oh, the Cobra Snake just got lucky, all he does is put photos on the Web," but I've read that as a teenager, you wrote up a detailed six-page business proposal for your party photography and brought it into your internship one day. What was in it?

MH: I had an idea of something that I wanted to accomplish. I would start small and

ON THE NET:

STEVE AOKI: www.dimmak.com
MARK HUNTER: www.thecobrasnake.com
NEU STORE: www.neu.tw
DANCING THROUGH SUNDAY: dancingthroughsunday.wordpress.com



PHOTO COURTESY OF DIM MAK

grow to be an international phenomenon and launch a T-shirt line. How cool is that?

SA: I would say luck and timing are really important in factoring into someone's success ...

MH: ... yeah, we both just read this book called *Outliers* [by Malcolm Gladwell] ...

SA: ... but you can't just base people's success on luck and timing. There is a lot that goes into what someone does to get to the point where people find out about it.

MH: I think two things Steve and I do very well are that we are consistent and we work a lot harder than people think. There is a lot that goes on behind the scenes that is not as glamorous.

SA: I'm on the road about 300 days a year. Mark is on the road just as much, going to every fashion show in the world, in Paris, London, New York, Australia, wherever.

TT: Mark, did people recognize you at Luxy?
MH: More than I expected, actually. It was nice.

TT: Does that help or hinder you when you are taking photos?

MH: Some people are scared of me, to be honest, that don't know me. So if they know me, it's a little better, because I can be a little intimidating. But it doesn't really matter either way, because I'm good at getting photos of people. That's what I've been doing for a while.

TT: Steve, I've read that you want to cut back on touring and spend more time in LA producing. Have you been able to slow down at all? Your touring schedule is still pretty intense.

SA: Next year I'm hoping to cap my gigs at 250. That will leave at least 100 days in LA, which is actually a major difference. Honestly, every single day I'm in LA, it's a scheduled day. Whatever deadlines I have on the fashion end [Aoki designs clothing for Dim Mak, which is available in Taipei at NEU Store, and in collaboration with other labels] and whatever studio time I have to finish up, everything is scheduled.

TT: What drives you to keep touring? Is part

of the reason that you can reinvest the money in Dim Mak?

SA: That was always the initial reason. The main reason I was playing shows was to pay off my Dim Mak bills. There's no real money in the label. I'm really reinvesting that money and time into developing new artists. Watching an artist like the Bloody Beetroots, which we signed in 2007, grow into a worldwide success and phenomenon, it's really amazing to see that. There's no better feeling.

TT: You are both clearly hardworking and put out a lot of stuff. Mark, you're constantly updating your Web site and Steve is constantly touring and getting publicity for Dim Mak. But are either of you worried about overexposure?

SA: I think we are far from overexposure. We are still part of the underground. We are not commercial, like the Black-Eyed Peas or Lady Gaga, or on that level. If we ever get to that stage, then yeah, that's something we can discuss.

MH: I think we haven't had to change anything that we do, so the more people that can accept what we like, the better.

SA: I remember in 2003, when I signed Bloc Party. They were budding new artists from England. *Sound Alarm* came out in 2005 and sold 350,000 records in America. That was a really big, big transition for the label. Someone asked me that question then, is this overexposure for Dim Mak? But there is no such thing as overexposure for us right now. That is so far from where we are. That was 2005, and now we're at a different stage. We're putting out more dance and electronic music. There is still so much more work to be done. I guess in the small world of people who only listen to this kind of music, we might be at the top of that scale, but we're really trying to think beyond the box. That's why we tour so much. Mark really went global with the Cobra Snake. It started as just an LA thing. If Mark thought of Cobra Snake as just an LA experience, then yeah, that's overexposure for sure. But we're thinking globally and touring our asses off.

TT: I know you studied women's history [and sociology] in college and were thinking of going into Asian American studies. Your heroes include Bruce Lee and Malcolm X. Does your interest in radical politics and Asian American studies continue to inform your work?

SA: Well, I can never escape the fact that I'm Asian ...

MH: [Jokingly] You're Asian?

SA: ... that's something that will always be part of my identity politics in every single thing I do. It's already informed, it's already cultivated. When I was thinking of advancing in academia, it was to do research for the advancement of Asian American identity politics. That's the main reason I [went to university]. I thought, am I going to focus on myself by going into a program where I could specialize in marketing — which is really where I am at, my head is more into the marketing aspect of Dim Mak. But I was like, fuck that, I'm going to go towards something that is more meaningful, like social work and research in the field that I understand the best, which is me being Asian American.

But [after university] I decided to go the music route, because that is where my heart is. It made the most sense. I made my decision back in 2002 when I heard the Kills' demo. I was like, fuck it, I'm going to go the fucking label route and support the Kills. I got accepted into [Asian American studies graduate programs at New York University and San Francisco State University]. Once I knew I'd been accepted, I felt validated, like all that work and time was meant for something. I just needed that thumbs-up, and then I went into music.

TT: In the US, it's difficult for Asian Americans to break into music ...

SA: For sure. I named my label after Bruce Lee because he was the only Asian American icon throughout my whole childhood who broke through racial boundaries. Everyone accepted him. It's not easy for an Asian to be accepted out of the Asian community. There are plenty of Asians that are doing great things, but as far as being accepted [by audiences of different races], it's very difficult.

When I was growing up, everybody I knew loved Bruce Lee. I think that's why I loved him. He killed as far as his work ethic went. He wasn't just a fighter. He had a philosophy, he wrote books. I read *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* and watched all his talk show interviews. He was so well-spoken, articulate, just charming and he really crossed that boundary. He really broke through and made Asians look like we're not just silent and docile people. We are actually pretty fucking cool, you know.

TT: When you are listening to demos and looking for bands to sign, what do you seek out?

SA: It's not just that one song. It's always the package you look at. The whole thing, like what kind of style they represent or want to identify with, their package of songs, material, the whole image, everything. All that stuff is really important. But sometimes, when the music is so outstanding, it doesn't matter what the presentation is. Sometimes that's all I care about, just that one song.