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# STEVE AOKI

## THE KING OF EDM

Coat *B-JAMES*  
Suit *STILE LATINO*





Coat, Shirt, Pants, Boots  
PERRY WHITE



Jacket, Sweater JOYRICH  
Pants JESSE J COLLECTIONS

Words by  
Kimberly Haddad

Electronic dance music producer and award-winning DJ Steve Aoki, is one of the most prominent musicians in the EDM world, known for his unstoppable spirit, raucous live sets and relentless work ethic. With more than two decades of musical triumph, Aoki formed the indie label Dim Mak Records, boasting an eclectic roster of artists, including Bloc Party, MSTRKRFT, The Kills, Bloody Beetroots and more. He's released countless EPs, remixes and hit records, including his third installment of the most recent album franchise, *Neon Future III*, and has been known for wild collaborations with artists like Daddy Yankee, Blink 182, Snoop Dog, Cardi B, Jimmy Eat World and even Bill Nye "the science guy."

We sat with the artist to talk about his creative process, the release of the *Neon Future* comic book series and what it takes to survive in the ever-changing world of EDM.



**BASIC:** You have a reputation for being one of the hardest working artists in the music industry. Tell us about your upbringing as a child and how this may have influenced your overall work ethic.

*STEVE AOKI:* I think there is definitely some level of genetics that come into play. The Japanese work ethic is not a myth. It's a very real thing. Japanese people work their asses off and give 100 percent to whatever they are working on. Growing up, I always stayed busy with projects, but it really boils down to passion. When you find your passion, that could be your leading driver, the trigger that allows you to push you beyond your limitations. My driver, my trigger, which started when I was very young, was a small subset of an underground scene called the "hardcore" scene. When I was 14 years old, I found this community of people, three or four guys in high school, who listened to this music and it kind of gave me a lot of opportunity at the time. When you're a kid, it's all about trying to find out who you are and make friends. And for most kids, you find that through sports, but I was never really good at sports, so my way of finding my group of friends was through music. Once I found that and started listening to music, I kept moving forward. With anything very small, you need to build. And in order to grow, every single person in whatever community you are part of has to effectively work on it. I never thought I would be a musician, never. My first concert was Michael Jackson when I was a kid and I thought, there is no way I will ever get up on a stage. But as kids, we were so small, we knew we had to start a band to grow. We thought you know, we'd play in our garage, we'd play anywhere we can get a show, we could make a demo, screen T-shirts, you know? I learned how to screen print T-shirts in my mom's closet. Then we started finding places to put on shows like abandon spaces, illegal warehouses, and we'd put on these shows for the 20 kids that would show up. That was my initial driving force getting into music, but then I started to really understand how to build culture. It's not about money, it's more about building something you absolutely love and put your heart into. I didn't really think of it as working hard. I gave into this concept of DIY, do it yourself. It's like arts and crafts in a way. But that concept and philosophy absolutely stayed with me until my age now.

**BASIC:** Who have been some of your biggest influences in terms of creating your music and sound?

*STEVE AOKI:* The music I was listening to as a kid was mostly hardcore, bands like Minor Threat, Gorilla Biscuits, Youth of Today, Farside and Unbroken.

**BASIC:** Technology is constantly evolving and there have been a number of electronic music genres from House and Dub to Hardcore and Techno. Where do you see the EDM world going in the future?

*STEVE AOKI:* Alright, so one thing is if you study trends, you realize that trends that take a long time to solidify in general, last much longer. That's like a statement. But, trends, as they increase and speed up, they tend to drop in terms of relevancy. The only things that last are the things that stay relevant. How many songs or how their content will surpass what they put out there. Drake for example, is good at constantly pushing the envelope time and time again. When he first came out, people questioned whether he would survive, and he's only getting bigger. Skrillex is another perfect example. He comes out the gates strong and really

powerful. Out of nowhere, he came out with his first EP and everyone was like, "Who the fuck is this guy?" And then, people questioned him. But he dropped another record, and then he changed it up and did something no one had ever done before. Same with Justin Bieber. They are changing the game beyond the culture. You have to be agile, flexible and move with the tide and the culture. Take the things that work and challenge yourself to be different.

**BASIC:** The third installment of your album franchise, *Neon Future III* was released this past November. The album embraces the future of tech, science and humanity. Tell us about your overall process in creating this album.

*STEVE AOKI:* *Neon Future* has always been about these mega collaborations between genres. And in this case, *Neon Future* is very much a science concept. So, it's important that every single album reaches different science figures. Doesn't have to be scientists, but different science figures that are a part of our culture and have changed my life in a way. For *Neon Future III*, I was lucky enough to collaborate with Bill Nye and made a banger of a song called "Noble Gas," which was pretty epic. And for *Neon Future IV*, we have some really exciting stuff happening. I love collaborating and I want the listening experience to be diverse so that when you listen to the album front to back, you are entertained and constantly surprised.

**BASIC:** You recently donated a set of your touring gear to the Smithsonian's National Museum of America back in November. This is a huge accomplishment. Tell us about this experience and how it's made you feel as an artist.

*STEVE AOKI:* This was one of the biggest career moments of my life. Getting that call from Smithsonian and asking for the donation. When you think about the Smithsonian Museum, you think of Civil War relics and you know, weird extinct animals and I don't know, sports moments, that sort of thing, not really music stuff. So, to me, it was really cool and a huge honor for me. It was definitely a big legacy moment in my life. I remember I went to the museum to bring the equipment in and do the interview, and it was so insane to see all the old instruments that were played thousands of years ago, and Muhammad Ali's old boxing shorts, just so cool to see all that stuff.

Suit MICHAEL CINCO  
Glasses BONNIE CLYDE  
Stripes Chain 18k Yellow Gold GAUDY ATELIER  
Watch JBW WATCHES





Suit *MICHAEL CINCO*  
 Glasses *BONNIE CLYDE*  
 Jewelry *LUXBRAND*  
 Shoes *K-SWISS*

**BASIC:** You moved towards fashion about six years ago, launching your Dim Mak Collection in Japan and then at Saks Fifth Avenue in Canada. You also became a partner in Vision Street Wear. Tell us about your journey in fashion and what inspired you to break into the industry.

*STEVE AOKI:* When I was a kid, I was in the punk-hardcore scene and when you first pick up a guitar or a microphone, you also pick up a silk screen press. It's just part of the culture. I designed graphics and learned how to silk screen when I was a teenager, same time I was making music. My introduction to music was also my introduction to fashion. I didn't think of it as fashion at the time because it was merchandise, but I was obsessed. At the end of the day, fashion is just art on clothes. My critical moment into fashion was in 2006. MAGIC (tradeshow) hit me up and asked if I would DJ for them and I said of course, but I asked for a booth to sell clothes. So, I made a bunch of graphics and designs and sold them. Then, I went to Japan, where I met with Japanese designers and manufactures and I started making clothes in Japan. Japanese streetwear is my favorite streetwear for men, period. I was finally working with people who inspired me. I was under the insight and education of the people who designed my favorite streetwear. This is where I get my inspiration from, Japan. We made four collections together and it really advanced my way of thinking and my process in fashion. Now, here we are with Dim Mak on its ninth collection. We are very small, but we do really well, sell out of our collections and have an incredible team that works with us. It's very mom and pop and brings you back. It feels very underground because it's not about how many pieces we sell, but the process of making the product and doing really cool collaborations and caring about the details.

**BASIC:** Can you speak to us a little bit about your recent Bruce Lee collection and other collaborations with BAPE & Diesel?

*STEVE AOKI:* For myself, I do tons of collaborations across the board. There's my brand Dim Mak and I just partnered with Vision Street Wear, a legacy skate brand from the late 70s. With Diesel we did a whole watch line and for BAPE, I designed a shoe with them and worked with them on their campaigns across the board. This is actually our third collab we have done together as a company. I love the team and the company. Burton as well, I did a whole bag collection with them. I'm a snowboarder so it was great to work with them. I've worked with Happy Socks too. I just love being part of the process of making very interesting and cool products.

**BASIC:** The first issue of the *Neon Future* comic book series was released at Comic Con this past October. Talk to us about how was collaborating with Impact Theory and Jim Krueger.

*STEVE AOKI:* Jim is a legend. All the guys I work with are legends, legends, legends in the comic game. If you look at what they've drawn, penciled and inked on storyboards, it's just absolutely incredible. The thing is, is that *Neon Future*, as much as it is my musical concept, it is absolutely a narrative that needs to be told. For a long time, I have always wanted to do a comic. My whole world of science and why I am obsessed with the human brain and what I'm so into now, is all a result of my roots of being into comic books. To come full circle and meet with a team of people is incredible. This is our brainchild. Issue one is a great story. There's going to be 18 storylines, a full-on narrative. It is so compelling, literally

you are on the edge of your seat the whole time. If you like comic books or not, the storyline is something we can imagine. And in this case, the robots are us. And technology isn't the bad guy. You know, every sci-fi plot, we look at the future and technology as something that destroys us. But *Neon Future* is quite the opposite and it's absolutely phenomenal. I am really proud it.

**BASIC:** You have traveled to over 41 countries. What are your top five favorite cities you think everyone should visit at least once in their life?

*STEVE AOKI:* Tokyo, Los Angeles, Ibiza, Iceland and Sao Paulo in Brazil.

**BASIC:** If you were stranded on a deserted island and could only bring three items, what would you take with you?

*STEVE AOKI:* I would take, let's see, this is a good one. I'd take a water purification device so I can live. I would take an eye mask cause I need one to sleep. And I would take a device from *Neon Future* that transports people to come to the island so that they can come visit me. Cause I've got the water purification device and I've got the eye mask so we can sleep. It's no problem and they can come visit me.

**BASIC:** If you could only wear one outfit in your closet every day for the rest of your life, what would you wear and why?

*STEVE AOKI:* Well, it has to be from the Dim Mak collection. People wear designer clothes and feel a certain kind of way when they wear expensive clothes, but for me, when I wear clothes that I have made for myself, I feel really special. You wear clothes that make you feel a type of way. I wear my clothes a lot because I am proud of them. I'd say right now, My Bruce Lee tracksuit. We collaborated with Bruce Lee and made this sick "Game of Death" tracksuit and when I wear it I feel like Bruce Lee, like I'm ready to battle.

**BASIC:** What would be a good theme song for your life?

*STEVE AOKI:* This is a good one. I'd have to go with one of my songs, "Singularity." There's a line in it that says, "We're gonna live, we'll never die." **B**



Coat *FURROCIOUS FURR*  
Shirt *STEVE'S OWN*  
Pants *JESSE J COLLECTIONS*  
Shoes *K-SWISS*



Suit *MICHAEL CINCO*  
Jogger Set *BRAYDON ALEXANDER*  
Stripes Chain 18k Yellow Gold *GAUDY ATELIER*  
Shoes *GUCCI*







Suit *MICHAEL CINCO*  
Stripes Chain 18k Yellow Gold *GAUDY ATELIER*  
Watch *JBW WATCHES*  
Shoes *K-SWISS*



Jacket, Pants *DAVID GIAMPICCOLO*  
Shoes *K-SWISS*



SCAN TO WATCH  
BEHIND THE SCENES VIDEO