





# System of a Down From "Sugar" to *Saturday Night Live*

By Randy J. Klodz

Photography by Ian Jennings



Few hard rock bands today, or in the history of the genre, can match the fury, melody, and the hooks (sometimes all in the same song) that *System of a Down* can spew.

*System of a Down*—which includes Serj Tankian (vocals, guitar, keyboards), Daron Malakian (guitars, vocals), Shavo Odadjian (bass) and John Dolmayan—rock the house with powerful songs like "Aerials," "Sugar," "Toxicity," not to mention, "Cigaro," with its "My cock is much bigger than yours" intro.

In the middle of directing the video "Hypnotize," the title track of *System of a Down*'s newest release during a short tour break in LA, Shavo Odadjian—he of the bald head and braided goatee—gave SOAK a ring.

Odadjian (pronounced Oh-dod-GEE-IN) talked up SOAK about what it's like to do his best Quentin Tarantino with his band's music videos, the pleasures of rocking out with Metallica and the power of swearing on live TV.

**SOAK:** *Mezmerize* hit stores in June and now you've just hit the *System of a Down* faithful with *Hypnotize*, even more new music. How'd the decision come along to introduce two releases in one year?

**Shavo:** These two records really make one record, so we're going to jump back and forth with singles. We did two from *Mezmerize* and we're going to do the song "Hypnotize" [the first single from *Hypnotize*] and then we'll probably jump back to *Mezmerize*. You know, do things that aren't normal.

**SOAK:** *The first time I saw a "Sugar," the first System of a Down video, I remember thinking to myself 'Holy shit, who is that?' A hard rock band that's kind of out there, and balls heavy, but it was mind blowing.*

**Shavo:** Never in my life would I have ever thought that song would ever be a video, or even a single, or even be played on the radio.

**SOAK:** *And sometimes you guys perform it as a medley when you play live.*

**Shavo:** That, and "Suite Pee." Those are two songs that I think we've played in every set since 1994.

**SOAK:** *You've been behind the camera for System of a Down's last four videos including "Aerials," "Toxicity," "Question!," and "BYOB." How did you become interested in directing videos for your own band?*

**Shavo:** To be honest, I have no clue. It's

always been a passion of mine to turn audio into video. For as long as I could remember when I was a skater punk in Hollywood, where I grew up, I used to take this big ass camera that would put a VHS tape in it, and then we'd film ourselves skateboarding. Then I would take my Grandma's VCR and take it to my parents' house and connect it to my parents' VCR and press play, record and edit. I didn't know what I was doing, but I was actually producing a skateboarding video. [laughs] Now that I'm doing it professionally, it's like 'Wow, I did that when I was 11 years old without knowing what I was doing.' So it kinda came naturally to me and ideas just pop into my head. I never do things that are not natural. That's our band's motto. We do what comes natural.

**SOAK:** *That's a rare, yet great approach to take.*

**Shavo:** We give each other the space and the room. For example, Daron, he's an amazing songwriter, he's an amazing producer, so why step on his toes? When he has a vision for something, go for it, you know? If he's

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cooking in the kitchen, let him make a meal and go for it. And then when it comes to videos or big production, let me run with the ball, you know?

**SOAK:** *How did your first summer headlining arena tour go?*

**Shavo:** We've never really headlined arenas before. We've always opened up for huge, huge, huge bands. Bands like Metallica have always asked us to be their opener, and how could you say no to Metallica, and how could you say no to headlining the Ozzfest? I think it was time for us to actually step up and say, 'You know what, we're a headliner now.' Some shows are completely packed and full and we're playing longer and we're having two-nights in a row sold out. Then we might play Nebraska and have it be half full, but it's all an experience. We react the same way to the crowd for those 5,000 or 15,000 or 100,000 that are there and we give it our all.

**SOAK:** *What's the oddest thing that has happened to you guys while out on tour?*

**Shavo:** That's not a fair question. Because we're a rock band, we live off of oddity. [laughs] You could ask every band member and he'll tell you something different. For me, it's been meeting my idols and playing

with my idols onstage. Most of my idols are dead, but let's go back to Metallica. They asked me to play a song with them onstage on the guitar, because I was originally a guitar player. That was, 'Woah!' I got to get up onstage with Metallica and play a song [he played "Enter Sandman"]. I'm right now working on an album with the guys from Wu Tang Clan for Sony. Wu Tang is one of my favorite group of artists. I don't look at them as rappers, I look at them as geniuses. We did a couple of tracks with me on bass, so instead of them using an electronic bass, we use the live bass I'm playing. I'm a fan of anything that's good. There are things that happen that I trip out on.

**SOAK:** *How have you and your band members changed since you started?*

**Shavo:** We've grown up. I was 20 years old. I'm 31 now. So me and my other band members have all grown. We're a more mature band. We make decisions a little more carefully. Our main goal is to keep our integrity and never settle and never let anyone tell us what to do because of what

may be 'big' at the time. We'll never change a song, write a song, do a video, or play a show because it will sell an album. We'll do it because it's our standard and it's our best.

**SOAK:** *There was an incident during System of a Down's live performance on SNL...*

**Shavo:** Yep. We did *Saturday Night Live*. In the middle of one of the songs, Daron forgot he was on live TV, and he yelled 'Fuck you.' And the censors didn't get a chance to bleep it. It wasn't on purpose; we weren't trying to be badasses, we just wanted to play a song on *Saturday Night Live* and it just happened. In some ways it was cool and some ways I would have rather him not done that. But it was a big measure and just being able to play *Saturday Night Live*, I mean, come on, it's *Saturday Night Live*.

**SOAK:** *I guess it didn't cause too much of a raucous following what Ashlee Simpson did.*

**Shavo:** That's funny, we were planning to actually lip synch our first five seconds and kind of like, screw up. We decided to not lip synch and just play the best we could for our fans.

*To rock out with System of a Down, check out [www.systemofadown.com](http://www.systemofadown.com).*