

# SWORD PLAY

**AFRO SAMURAI, THE FIRST JAPANESE MANGA TO MAKE ITS ANIME DEBUT IN ENGLISH, IS BREAKING ALL BOUNDARIES. METROPOLIS SPEAKS WITH ITS CREATOR AHEAD OF THE MOVIE VERSION'S TOKYO PREMIERE**

BY ANDREW LEE

## **CHANCES ARE, YOU KNOW ALL ABOUT SAMUEL L. JACKSON.**

But it's just as likely you've never seen him as a revenge-seeking, sword-wielding black Samurai with great hair—the *Afro Samurai*. This cult anime began life as a manga created by Tokyo-based artist Takashi "Bob" Okazaki. Over a couple of beers at his apartment, Okazaki spoke about the influences behind his work, and about befriending the superstar American actor.

"I first started sketching Afro when I was a student," explains the 33-year-old. "That was 11 years ago. At first they were just sketches of black guys because I really like hip-hop and soul, R&B and reggae. I also loved that '70's TV show *Soul Train*, which used to be on NHK. Those guys had really, really big afros," he says, shaking his own fairly decent mop of hair.

From those initial doodles and Okazaki's love of samurai movies, a story began to unfold around the main character. The result was the manga *Afro Samurai*, first published in 1998 in a fanzine called *Nounou Hou*. "At that time, I was really frustrated,"

Okazaki says. "I was working as an illustrator and wanted to go crazy with the illustrations. But the clients always asked me not to go over the top. So with my manga I only drew what I liked. 'This is mine!' I thought. No one can touch it."

The manga and its main character caught the attention of an art promoter named Yumi Yamaguchi (author of the recently published *Warriors of Art: A Guide to Contemporary Japanese Artists*), who was curating a collaborative project with a toy company. A figurine was made, and quickly became a collector's item—a funky black dude with a wicked afro in full samurai gear and a joint hanging from his lips. Afro was a blend of so many pop-cultural references, both East and West, that he was bound to capture people's attention—and soon did.

"Back when I was working as an illustrator," continues Okazaki, "I met a guy from the animation company Gonzo and gave him an Afro doll. He thought [it] was cool, but said my style of drawing isn't popular in Japan, so we should work on something else. But then a guy from Gonzo US came to the Tokyo office, saw my Afro toy, and thought 'Wow!' So I met him, and he suggested we make an animation for America. That was 6 or 7 years ago, but we couldn't move forward for years. We would talk about it over a drink but nothing happened."



Eventually, a pilot anime was made and taken to the US, and one day the people at Gonzo got an unexpected phone call—from Jackson. The Oscar-nominated actor had somehow seen the pilot and loved Afro. "That character is mine!" he told Gonzo, and threw his star power behind the project, becoming executive producer. "Once Samuel was on board," Okazaki recalls, "everyone wanted to give us money."

The artist was flown to LA to have a meeting with the star. "The first time I met Samuel was about two years ago at his office in LA. I couldn't believe it. I was really nervous, but he was wearing a *Star Wars: Episode II* cap and a *Lone Wolf and Cub* T-shirt,"

Okazaki says, obviously impressed. "I thought 'Wow! He really understands my concept! I was surprised; he is definitely an *otaku*.'"

I picture Jackson cosplaying Mace Windu in the back streets of Akihabara as a chuckling Okazaki says, "Seriously! He really knows Japanese *jidaigeki* and *yakuza* movies."

It's no surprise the two got along.

Okazaki shares similar pop-culture interests, and he reminds me that George Lucas was also a fan. "The name Obi-Wan came from obi belts and Jedi came from *jidaigeki*," says Okazaki, whose house is crammed with Japanese movie artefacts and *Star Wars* memorabilia. There are three R2-D2s sitting in his living room—including one, appropriately, that is black.

**A**fro Samurai's route from page to screen has been a curious one. Created by Okazaki in Japan, it is the only anime from a Japanese-language manga that's been made first in English, rather than Japanese. So far, this has proven to be a winning formula—the first five episodes have been a smash hit around the world, airing on SpikeTV in the US, Bravo in the UK, and MTV in Australia. Now the series, re-edited into movie format, is finally coming to Japan and will be shown in theaters in English with Japanese subtitles.

The unusual decision not to dub the film in Japanese is surely due to the caliber of the stars involved in the project. Besides Jackson, Ron Perlman from *Hellboy* plays Afro's nemesis, Justice, and Kelly Hu from *X-Men* is Okiku, Afro's love interest. The film's soundtrack has also attracted a big name, with RZA from the Wu-Tang Clan providing the score.

It will be interesting to see what local fans make of the film. While those familiar with the original manga will notice differences in the drawing style, Okazaki emphasizes that his original concept has not changed. "The story line is the same," he says; Afro is literally seeking Justice for the death of his father. "But the comic version is difficult to animate. It has a darker mood."

The character of Afro has also been spiced up a touch, thanks to Jackson, who gave Okazaki a few hints into the American psyche. "One time," he recalls, "Samuel made the comment that Afro needed a sex scene—because without it, he looked gay! The Japanese staff were like, 'What!? Oh... Ok...'. So in the second episode there is a sex scene." A very sexy one too—it was missing from the TV version but available on the uncut DVD and in the film version released here. →

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→ Another interesting change has to do with Afro's choice of beverage. One of the highlights of the film is when Afro walks into a bar and asks for "Lemonade. Ice cold." Jackson's voice makes it sound like a threat, and it turns out that the lemonade was his suggestion.

"In the original script, Afro drank coconut milk" Okazaki reveals. "But Samuel checked it and said 'Not coconut milk!' We said OK, because we don't know about funny American stuff." It's probably safe to say that Jackson could have made "Coconut milk. Ice cold" sound pretty good too.

Afro is accompanied throughout the film by a sidekick called Ninja Ninja—a figment of Afro's imagination that serves as his conscience.

Ninja, whose every second word is "muthafucker," is also voiced by Jackson, and together the two create what one critic at *Ain't It Cool News* has called "the biggest marquee presence to come into anime for a while." Speculation has even been made about a live-action version, with Jackson mentioning in interviews that he would like Ryuhei Kitamura, who made *Versus* and *Akemi*, to be involved.

There is, however, more to the film than the main character. Others worth looking out for are Kuma, a samurai who wears a teddy-bear mask, and The Empty Seven, a group of jive talking techno-monks who exist to bring Afro down. But most important are the objects that drive the story forward: two sacred headbands worn by Afro and Justice. As the film unfolds, the owner of the "Number 1" headband becomes a god who can then only be challenged by the wearer of "Number 2."

The only problem, to quote from the anime, is that anyone in the world can challenge the number two—and Afro is number two.

Which begs the question: why headbands? "Sometimes, when I go to Asakusa and see people buying those "Ichi-ban" T-shirts and headbands, I wonder, 'Why do they want to be number one?' Because number two is good too... I think," Okazaki says, looking a touch puzzled. The artist then gasps as if remembering something. "Oh! And when I was a high school student, I used to love this UK ska band called The Trojans." Excitedly, Okazaki grabs a CD from his collection and shows me the cover. "That's where the character Justice got his sense of style from," he says, pointing to a photo of the lead singer. "I remember

The Trojans came to Tokyo and I went to the show. At the end of the concert the singer threw his *hachimaki* into the crowd and I caught it. I still have it!"

The Trojans are not the only UK influence to inspire Okazaki; there's also English sci-fi drama from the '60s. "I loved that show *The Prisoner* and how [the characters] didn't have names, only numbers." Just like Afro and the Empty Seven.

When I ask him about these odd cyber-monks, he hesitates a little. "The Empty Seven is kind of difficult to explain," Okazaki says. "But when I was a kid I saw a documentary on TV about these quintuplets. It was shown once a year, as they were growing up. I used to think that, as kids,

it was probably OK for them to have very similar faces, but when they got older it would be a little scary. I kept thinking about what they would be like when they grew up... so that really influenced the Empty Seven."

As we open another couple of beers and munch on pizza, Okazaki expands on his influences. "The revenge story is from *Lone Wolf and Cub*. I like Spaghetti Westerns, so Justice is partly from there too. I also like sci-fi, so the technology is from *Star Wars*, Afro-droid is from *Terminator* and," he adds, pausing for effect, "Kuma is Darth Vader..."

"Hang on?" I interject. "Darth Vader? But his head is a teddy-bear!"

"Yeah," Okazaki says smiling, "the bear is from a previous job I did for a movie. I kind of kept drawing that character because I liked it." In doing so, he created what is perhaps the most twisted character in the film. But

when I suggest to Okazaki that Kuma may be central to the continuation of the story, he simply lifts an eyebrow and smiles. He is now working on the manga for episodes six to ten.

Until then, fans who enjoy the anime version will soon be able to play the Xbox game due out next year—and, having seen a sneak peek, I can tell you it's going to look incredible. **Afro Samurai opens at Cinema Rise in Shibuya on October 27. There will also be an exhibition of Takashi Okazaki's original artwork at the Gallery of Fantasy Art in Aoyama until November 4. See exhibition listings (Harajuku/Aoyama). Fans may also want to check out the nearest X-LARGE store ([www.xlarge.jp](http://www.xlarge.jp)) for a range of T-shirts featuring Afro.**



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