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# 'Cowboy Bebop' director Watanabe talks anime

By

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Shinichiro **Watanabe** directed many anime favorites, including "Cowboy **Bebop**," which includes these characters.

The clash of the sword and the sound of gunfire ricocheting assaulted the senses of those in attendance at the IMAX theater in the Natural Science Museum of Houston Saturday night. Stories of space cowboys and hip-hop samurai fighting a **daily** battle against mercenaries, assassins and hunger unfolded before on the screen. These are the works of acclaimed Japanese animation director Shinichiro **Watanabe**.

**Watanabe** appeared in Houston as part of his American lecture tour on Japanese animation and, more specifically, the works he has been so instrumental in orchestrating. Those works include a virtual who's who of anime greats. These include the direct-to-video sequel of "Super Dimensional Fortress Macross," known as "Macross Plus," the outlandish hijinks of Spike, Faye and the rest of the "Cowboy **Bebop**" crew and the samurai hip-hop exodus known as "Samurai Champloo." "**Bebop**" and "Champloo" have managed to remain in syndication on Cartoon Network while other anime series have come and gone. The longevity of his works and the sold-out IMAX theater crowded with fans are more than enough proof that his films have made quite an impact on American audiences.

His talk recounted how boyhood influences, including KISS and American movies such as "Dirty Harry," eventually led him to decide to become a director. He chose animation over live action, thanks to a rumor that animation directors bypass years of training and bureaucracy live-action directors have to go through, an idea shared by Shoji Kawamori ("Super Dimensional Fortress Macross"). **Watanabe** later teamed up with Kawamori and the now-famous composer Yoko Kanno on "Macross Plus" before launching his solo directorial debut with "Cowboy **Bebop**."

**Watanabe** followed up with a "Cowboy **Bebop**" movie - "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" - "Samurai Champloo," and even found time to include a few shorts in "The Animatrix."

**Watanabe** explained that music is often the driving force behind many of his works.

"I'm so happy when they [fans] praise my works for the music," he said. "There are times when music comes before the animation."

For example, Episode 14 of "Samurai Champloo" features a piece of Okinawan music that plays uninterrupted for the first half.

"I made 'Samurai Champloo' the series in order to make this scene," he said.

A great deal of Champloo's soundtrack is hip-hop from artists such as Shing02. The art of sampling old music and changing it intrigued **Watanabe**. "The technique of using old music and remixing it into something new is very similar to what I was doing with the animation," he said.

Much like hip-hop rappers can represent themselves with a single microphone, **Watanabe** said, "I would like to represent myself with a single pencil on a blank piece of paper."

**Watanabe** concluded his lecture by announcing three new projects to begin showing next year, though he was reluctant to give away any details. The first is a short film with a "boy-meets-girl" story called "Genius Party." He also verified that he is working on a live-action film and an anime series that will be "very mysterious and different from the past [works]."

It was with all of this in mind that I made the journey through the off-limits corridors of the museum to meet **Watanabe** himself. I found him sitting in a conference room regularly used by the museum's public relations department, with an interpreter beside him and a stack of memorabilia to be signed in front of him. There were posters, DVDs, CDs and a pair of neon yellow hot pants made by a fan to look like the clothing worn by the character Faye Valentine in "Cowboy **Bebop**." A museum aide joked with **Watanabe** to hurry with the autograph, because the fan may be waiting in the lobby wearing a trench coat. What she was wearing while her pants waited for a signature is anybody's guess.

Hot pants aside, **Watanabe** looked relaxed and eager to answer questions about his past, his future and whether Spike's hair is, in fact, green.

**Daily Texan:** What made you decide to go on a lecture tour?

**Shinichiro Watanabe:** I was requested by the Japan Foundation to come to America and speak. They provided a series of location choices within the States, and from there, I made a selection. The reason I chose Houston is because it's the hometown for cowboys.

**DT:** Do you think your work is making animation more accessible to older age groups in America?

**W:** Actually, I don't know much about American animation at all. So what do you think? If there's anything that's similar to "Cowboy **Bebop**," please let me know. I'd like to see it.

**DT:** Was it your decision to work with Yoko Kanno as a composer for "Macross Plus?"

**W:** At the time "Macross Plus" started, Yoko Kanno didn't have a name. She hadn't made a sound track. She was mostly working in the commercial industry. So I really didn't know anything about her. Somebody from Victor Entertainment recommended her strongly. I reviewed all of the commercials that her work was used in. While I reviewed these, I was impressed with what I heard and decided by all means yes, I would like to use her.

**DT:** Is there a particular reason why she wasn't used in "Samurai Champloo?"

**W:** I wanted to use hip-hop music in "Champloo" and since Yoko Kanno is not a hip-hop musician, I decided to use other people. There were some people that suggested we ask Yoko Kanno to create some

hip-hop music, but I felt that that would be more of an imitation of hip-hop music than the real thing.

DT: Any chance of teaming up with Yoko Kanno again on your new projects?

W: I do want to work with Yoko Kanno, and I do have plans to work with her again on a future project, I just haven't decided exactly which project yet.

DT: Is Spike's hair black or green?

W: Dark green.

DT: In your lecture you said that you create characters who are constantly hungry and short on cash. In the case of "Cowboy **Bebop**," how are characters such as Spike and Faye able to afford smokes when they can't buy food?

W: Actually, in my cowboy universe, tobacco is incredibly cheap. And if I go on and say a little more, how do you know it's really tobacco? We'll leave it at that. [Laughs].

DT: For the "Mushroom Samba" episode of "**Bebop**," did you research how people, not to mention Ein the dog, would act under the influence of narcotic mushrooms?

W: It's completely my imagination. If I don't say that, I might be arrested. But Ein isn't just an ordinary dog. You may know this, but Ein is considered a data dog. As a data dog, he's different from a regular dog and has an unusual reaction or response. But actually, I don't know that much about data dogs myself.

DT: Are you involved with the video game versions of "**Bebop**" or "Champloo"?

W: Actually, no. I've seen a little bit of them. But I was often so busy creating the animation side of it that I didn't have any time to dedicate over to the video game side of it. So if the games aren't all that interesting, it's not my fault.

DT: You said in your lecture that the characters you relate most to are Mugen and Spike. Care to explain?

W: First, I'm often shooting people and slashing them up with a sword ... It's a joke. [Laughs] Spike and Mugen aren't very straightforward in expressing themselves. For example, even if there's a girl they like standing right in front of them, they don't pursue her directly - in fact, they do the opposite, they ignore her almost. I think that part is kind of like me. If I was to sum it up, it's kind of like being a little contradictory or rebellious.

DT: Are you talking about Spike's relationship with Faye?

W: Of course. Sometimes I'm asked the question, 'What does Spike think of Faye?' I think that actually he likes her quite a bit. But he's not a very straightforward person so he makes sure he doesn't show it.

DT: Episode five of "**Bebop**," "Ballad of Fallen Angels," seems to be foreshadowing the events of the final episode. Is there a connection?

W: Actually all of the episodes that contain Vicious that come out in "Cowboy **Bebop**" are directly related to the ending. Even before I made the first episode, I already had the ending in mind. Even though I had the

ending in mind by myself, I was opposed by my staff. They were upset because they were saying that we wouldn't be able to make a continuation. So I told them I'd think about it a little more, but ultimately I decided to go with my original idea.

DT: Have you received any negative feedback for Spike's death?

W: I've never officially said that he's died. At this point, I can tell you that I'm not sure if he's alive or dead. I think probably rather than being yelled at for killing Spike, I think ... people are more upset that I might make a continuation.

DT: I'm sure you've heard the next question a thousand times, and I apologize for asking again.

W: Then I pass. [Laughs]. I'm joking.

DT: When are we going to get to see more "**Bebop**"?

W: Someday ... maybe, someday.

DT: How was working on a movie different from the series?

W: One thing is that with a TV series, you only have 20 minutes, so you can't convey a long story. I feel like I was able to convey a longer story in the movie. For example, in the movie there is a 20-minute mecha scene. If I were to do that in the TV series, it would take up an entire TV episode.

DT: It's common to hear animators remark about how long it takes them to be offered a solo directing opportunity. How were you able to do this so quickly?

W: The animation industry is one that doesn't really rely on age or educational background. Rather, it depends more on a person's skill and on luck. So for myself, the first TV series I directed, "Cowboy **Bebop**," was a hit, and as a result of its success, I was offered the opportunity to direct a film. It doesn't really matter how much skill you have, if you don't have a hit work, a popular piece, you won't get any offers to make a film. In that respect, I consider myself lucky.

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DBrown

Tue Nov 17 2009 18:21

I wouldn't ask for a sequel. **Watanabe**-san and everyone involved with making Cowboy **Bebop** have moved on to other projects, other interests. They won't want to go back and revisit a 10+ year old program they did to make another one (well, I can't imagine they would). I agree totally with Devin, that it's up to the individual to decide. I choose life. :) As long as Director **Watanabe**-san doesn't come down one side of the question or the other, then everyone can be happy.

Personally, I think ambiguous is a better ending than one that's definite.

Tom

Tue Sep 22 2009 22:47

The star falling at the end could just as easily be Vicious' star. However his death makes the most thematical since.

They also don't need to bring Spike back to life to make more Cowboy **Bebop**. They could make Spike and Jet prequels of them together the 3 years before Episode 1. They could also make Jet and Faye sequels, maybe Ed and Ein and Ed's dad(he could replace spike as ass whooper extraordinaire) could join and re-join up. And a Spike/Vicious prequel would kick ass too. Maybe just two more seasons? please!

DBrown

Sat Aug 15 2009 16:10

Spike is not necessarily dead. If you have the DVD, do a frame by frame and you'll see that the life threatening/ending injury it looked like he got never happened.

J.R.C 021890

Sun Aug 2 2009 17:46

spike is dead, not that i would mind if he lived he was a great character and the life of the show but i know mr **watanabe** said there was a possibility he is alive just as much as there is to he is dead but honestly he was slashed deep in the stomache fell on his face and didnt move then on top of that a huge metaphorical death by the star fading out symbolizing a warriors end not necessarily death but all the things added up im pretty sure hes dead but remember this is just an opinion and i respect others opinions great show great story **bebop** forever the best

John Walsh

Wed May 27 2009 19:56

I view Cowboy **Bebop** the same way I do The Matrix Trilogy: Not having everything spelled out and answered for you is a large part of what makes it so wonderful. Every frame of this series is just brilliant, and the movie as well. I think that the perfect amount of story has been told to create a deeply rich and vibrant universe within the mind of the viewer. Any more and we wouldn't be as free to explore for ourselves.

Mr. **Watanabe** has done us the greatest service in the world by knowing exactly just how much to create, and what to leave alone.

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Your name

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Devin

Thu Apr 23 2009 15:22

Even so, it's up to the independent mind to decide if he's dead or alive. There's is no plain answer and that's just part of the intrigue of Cowboy **Bebop**.

You really shouldn't look at things like a bureaucrat.

SpaceCowboy

Tue Apr 7 2009 18:05

**Watanabe** knows this himself. Basically it's like this, if **Watanabe** wants to make more cowboy, he will use that excuse for bringing Spike back.

SpaceCowboy

Tue Apr 7 2009 17:58

Yes my friend Spike is defintely dead lol

bountyhunterSF

Tue Apr 7 2009 00:17

is spike really deadi want to know pls.

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