

The man behind the [giant teddy bear] mask

Yuri Lowenthal on voicing Afro Samurai's Kuma

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Afro Samurai, which consists of five episodes, a movie and a game, is one of the best-selling anime series in recent years. One of its main characters, Kuma, is described by actor Yuri Lowenthal, the voice of Kuma, as a "teddy-bear-headed cyborg killer," and that should give anyone the idea this isn't your average samurai tale. Lowenthal, who has a long list of anime and game credits, including *Naruto* and *Final Fantasy*, discusses some of the unique aspects of this series and how much he's enjoyed being part of it.

How did you get involved with Afro Samurai?

Yuri Lowenthal: I actually wasn't cast in the role of Jinno/Kuma at first. I knew the guy who was going to be directing and he asked if I would come in and do scratch track for the first show—scratch tracks being the temporary tracks you lay down until you can get the real actor in to do it. It's so they can start the animation. It turned out I knew one of the producers from college, so we sort of had this teary-eyed reunion. So I did the scratch track and then I wrote it off as, "Well, that was fun."

Then I got the call saying, "Hey, they want to use you as the guy," which was terribly exciting. That was how I ended up getting the job and then they did the follow-up movie, *Afro Samurai: Resurrection* and the videogame.

Luckily my character is popular and they brought me back from the dead. Literally. **This was animated after it was recorded?** Yeah. It's a common misconception with this show that it's a dubbed show, that it was done in Japanese and then dubbed into English. I think Samuel Jackson's involvement is pretty much why it got made in the first place. It's only been recorded in English as far as I know. There's never been a Japanese dub of the English cast. We recorded first and they animated to that.

Do they watch it in Japan or is it just in America?

As far as I know, it has shown in Japan and as I understand it, it wasn't as popular in Japan as

it was in the United States. I don't know why.

Did you record alone?

Yeah. There are so many scenes where the Sam Jackson character and I interact, and we fight and I kick his ass and he kicks my ass and we go back and forth. Then when I would be talking to people about the job, they'd be like, "Oh, what's Sam Jackson like?" And I'd say, "I have no idea. I've never met the guy." Finally they had a party a couple months ago for the release of the game and he was there. I walked up to him and said, "Hey, Sam, you've been kicking my ass for the last three years. I figured I should probably come up and introduce myself." That was the first time we met. Everybody recorded separately on that show.

What was it like meeting Samuel L. Jackson?

It was fantastic. I was nervous just in the sense that I'm such a fan of his work and I was worried I would meet him and he'd be mean or standoffish. But luckily he was a really stand-up guy, very nice, down-to-earth, very warm. He's a very cool guy.

How is Afro Samurai different from other anime?

You can see it and just go, "Oh, that's anime," but the style is very different from most anime. The design, the theme. It's the *chambara* story, the samurai drama, bloodthirsty quest for revenge. That's all very classic Japanese storytelling and it's really at the heart of all these stories and the videogame. Revenge is a tough business.

And one interesting thing about the game is that whenever you adapt something that's been a TV show or whatever to a game, you really have to adjust the writing. Game writing is different. The player is going to be with this game a lot longer than they're going to be in a movie theater or in front of a TV. The writer for the game was great. Besides that, it's been fun getting to meet Bob Okazaki, who was the creator of the character. I've gotten to hang out with him in Japan and in the United States. For somebody who made such a bloody, violent, revenge-fueled saga that is *Afro Samurai*, he's a sweetheart. It's really, really funny. Another thing that really attracted me to the product itself was that the world they created takes place in a feudal Japan with weird anachronisms like cell phones and hip-hop music. It's a very interesting world they've created. This has been one of my favorite experiences in voice acting.

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