

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

I've been a fan of Japanese animation – or “anime” – for a long time. When I was in college I used to watch and re-watch Akira, the classic sci-fi anime on laser disc. That's how old I am. Back then, I really identified with the teen angst of the characters. But anime has always been a youthful medium – or at least the anime that gets exported to the West. And as I've reached middle age, I don't feel a connection with a lot of anime unless it's looking at youth from a more mature perspective.

So, I had been searching for a new series to fall in love with. That's when I discovered Cowboy Bebop. It's weird to say I discovered Cowboy Bebop because the show been a cultural phenomenon for over 20 years. I always knew it was a classic. I have no idea why I didn't get around to watching it before. And it's short -- only 26 episodes.

The show blew me away on so many levels. It's set in the far future when the Earth is barely inhabitable. Humanity has colonized the solar system and everything's grungy and hyper capitalistic. By the way, the jazz and bluegrass music I'll be playing is the soundtrack to the show, which was written by a legendary anime composer named Yoko Kanno.

Matt Alt is the author of How Japan's Pop Culture Conquered the World, and he's lived in Japan for years.

MATT: I think actually the soundtracks have been one of the big hurdles for a lot of anime to takeoff among more mainstream audiences in the West, because they tend to be based more in Japanese idol sounds and Japanese, like J-pop sounds that aren't really what Western people are used to hearing. Whereas Cowboy, Bebop has a very, both new and, and, and kind of comforting and known soundtrack at the same time.

Evan Minto writes for the Anime New Network and other anime-related sites. He says Cowboy Bebop also came out at the peak of analog animation in Japan. Anime is still hand drawn, but it's all put together on computers now. And Cowboy Bebop was made by a studio called Sunrise, which was founded back in the '70s.

EVAN: The animation has aged really, really well. It really is like these animators at Sunrise, it's kind of them at the peak of their abilities, you know, putting all of that

experience to work on this show. It's 2020 in that show. It still looks better honestly than a lot of stuff that's coming out today.

Two other things struck me about the show. First, it's very much for adults, with grown up problems like earning money to buy food or dealing with relationships in a way I relate to now.

Secondly, I deeply connected with the American-ness of the show, which is really strange for anime. The main characters are a misfit group of bounty hunters with Western names like Spike Spiegel, Jet Black and Faye Valentine. The nickname for a bounty hunter in this world is a cowboy.

The show uses a lot of Wild West iconography, but it's also a mash-up of film noir in terms of how much the characters are haunted by their past. The grimy cities they visit on different planets are right out of detective films. And the dialogue is hard-boiled, which sounds even more authentic in the English-language dub.

SPIKE: Look at my eyes, Faye. One of them is a fake because I lost it in an accident. Since then, I've been seeing the past in one eye and the present in the other. So, I thought I could only see patches of reality, never the whole picture.

FAYE: Don't tell things like that. You never told me anything about yourself, so don't tell me now!

The other reason I wanted to watch Cowboy Bebop is because there's a live action version coming out on Netflix next year. The history of Hollywood adapting anime has been disastrous. But the live action version is going to star John Cho – which is a positive sign they're not white-washing it. And that made me wonder, if we look at the history of Cowboy Bebop, and how it was made, could the show service as a guide to how cross-cultural exchanges can work?

Cowboy Bebop first debuted on a channel called TV Tokyo in 1998. Back then, most anime was funded because it was connected to a toy line. That's how the show runner Shinichirō (shinny-CHEER-o) Watanabe got the money – but it wasn't for the characters, it was for spaceships. Evan Minto says the show quickly disappointed its funders.

EVAN: It had a very rocky experience on TV. It was originally aired with just like a couple episodes or just, I think about half of the episodes aired on TV, Tokyo at a prime time, time slot at 6:00 PM. And that was not, not cool with TV Tokyo, because it turns out like the show was, um, was pretty racy has, you know, episode one has, has drug

use in it. So, they only aired the episodes that would sort of be appropriate for that time slot. And then it had to get moved. It was like a, you know, effectively canceled because the whole show didn't air and got re-aired on the cable channel now. At a late nighttime slot. And then it could air everything because it was sort of like, Oh, now it's, you know, 18 plus we can put all the sort of sexual content or drugs or whatever.

And violent violence.

EVAN: Yeah.

There's a lot of gunplay in that show.

EVAN: So that, I mean, that, that's interesting. Cause I think it sort of disrupted the kind of marketing and the, you know, typical arc of popularity it could have had.

But it set a precedent that adult-oriented anime could air late at night and find an audience. In the U.S., Cowboy Bebop aired after midnight on Cartoon Network in 2001. And the show had a much bigger impact in the U.S. than it did in Japan. It's like the opposite of the old joke, "I'm big in Japan," which an American musician would say if they felt they were underappreciated back home.

American anime fans refer to Cowboy Bebop as the gateway drug that lead them deeper into anime. And you can find so many references to Cowboy Bebop in American movies, TV shows and video games.

EVAN: You couldn't even list all of them, it's so infused into nerd culture here, it's like trying to track down Star Trek references or something, it's just embedded into being a nerd in the U.S.

Roland Kelts is a Japanese American living in Japan. He also wrote a book called Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S. He thinks the American appeal of Cowboy Bebop goes back to the show runner, Watanabe, who has almost like a Generation X sense of irony.

ROLAND: Watanabe's humor. I mean, I think it works for viewers outside of Japan where he's taking things that you expect to see and kind of turning them on their heads. Whereas I don't know that the comedy always plays that well inside Japan.

That's so interesting that his sense of humor, you know, he's a guy who was very influenced by American culture. Although he's not a total Americophile, he said that he does not love the idea of American cultural hegemony, but he's still very influenced by American culture, but it's so funny that his sense of humor would actually play better here than, than that.

ROLAND: I think so, yeah, I mean I can't scientifically prove that, but Watanabe is sort of blessed with this very global sensibility and imagination and you know Watanabe I

was born in '65. So he's, Watanabe, his irreverence is very much emblematic of his generation. He certainly loves the music or the music that he does love from the U S uh, jazz and, um, hip hop.

Even the fact that he's into film noir is unusual. Film noir had a big influence on American sci-fi, like with Blade Runner, but Roland says:

ROLAND: When I sometimes have brought up the term film noir in Japan, except for my friends who are in themselves scholars or media scholars, a lot of people aren't quite sure what I'm talking about.

And Watanabe's embrace of old Hollywood genres ties into a very Japanese tradition of adopting, and even improving upon aspects of foreign cultures. Like in Japan, you get some of the best burgers, blue jeans, whiskey bourbon or jazz.

ROLAND: Japan, you know, has its sort of tradition of Monozukuri of, of making things really, really well, a high regard for craftsmanship and from you kind of an exquisite aesthetic perfectionism, uh, in terms of craft, lends Japanese to an approach to other cultures in which they'll take an element that really appeals to them and then kind of try to make it better.

It's a fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation – which is a serious issue. Just look at the history of Hollywood white washing anime or martial arts movies.

And even Cowboy Bebop may have crossed that line. In one episode, we meet a group of characters that were inspired by Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. And Watanabe said, that episode was an homage to movies he loved, like Shaft. But there's been a debate among the fans about how he handled that genre.

ROLAND: I actually have done a couple of talks about cultural appropriation over here in Japan, because a lot of, uh, Japanese have trouble understanding exactly what the problem is. Most people in Japan consider themselves Japanese, so you're not really fighting over a national identity. And therefore, if you, if you go up on stage with cowboy boots and 10-gallon hats and uh, sing badly accented version of bluegrass in downtown Ginza in Tokyo, it's not offensive to the audience at all. It's charming. It can be funny. And if you get the, if you play a mean mandolin a, you get a lot of, uh, appreciative responses.

Matt Alt says the positive aspects of Cowboy Bebop, and the way it embraces Western music and movies, fit into a long tradition of cultural exchanges.

MATT: There's this like ping pong of influences going back and forth between Japan and the West forever. I mean like it's when, when the West first encounter Japanese woodblock prints, like it sparked basically the whole impressionism movement. You have people like Van Gogh and Degas, all of these people incorporating Japanese designs into their stuff. And then Japanese see that and it transforms their art and, you know, and so on and so on. I mean, I think those kinds of cross cultural interpretations where you're, you know, taking things from abroad and return re-interpreting them through your own eyes and not in a, in a culturally appropriative way, but in a way, because you're a huge fan yourself are where you get things that are truly transformative, like the original Matrix movies. I mean, the Wakowski siblings were obviously huge fans of, you know, Asian martial arts and anime and kind of digested, all of that stuff into this weird new form that they made into a hit movie.

Or take the 1954 film Seven Samurai. The director Akira Kurosawa was inspired by Hollywood Westerns, but Seven Samurai was so popular in the U.S, it lead to an American remake, The Magnificent Seven.

Cowboy Bebop actually referenced that feedback loop in an episode where the crew discovered a ridiculous bounty hunter named Andy, who put on the full cowboy schtick.

ANDY: That one was mighty close! Hi-jah!

In the end, Andy decides to switch personas into a samurai with equally bad taste.

BOMBER: Andy?

ANDY: Call me musachi! Go judo-maru!!

For most of the 20th century, when anime was exported to the West, it was supposed to be quote culturally odorless. That's a term a Japanese scholar came up with. And Roland thinks:

ROLAND: It's arguable that Japanese artists back then were a lot more insecure about Japan to set something in outer space or an apocalyptic or futuristic environment would be, you know, almost obvious compared to setting something in Shibuya.

When Cowboy Bebop came to the U.S. in the early 2000s, it was height of anime's global appeal. Around the same time, Hayao Miyazaki won the Oscar for Spirited Away. And Avatar: The Last Airbender debuted on Nickelodeon – which was the first American-made show to completely emulate the style of anime.

But in the last 15 anime in Japan has changed. A lot more stories are set in Japan, with very specific cultural signifiers. And a lot of anime is influenced by Otaku culture, where young men in Japan vicariously live through fantasy instead of taking part in society.

ROLAND: It's a much more inward focused generation. They're not learning English on the one hand. They're not all that curious about what's happening in the U.S. or even outside Japan period.

It's ironic that a trans-cultural show like Cowboy Bebop lead the way for anime to become popular here, because when I talk with anime fans in the U.S., I feel like they're now competing to show me how much they get the subtle cultural references or anime in-jokes that I completely missed. In fact, there's now a tourism industry for people who want to visit the locations in Japan where their favorite anime took place.

And while Western anime fans are willing to cross that cultural divide more than ever, interestingly, the debate over whether you should watch anime dubbed or with subtitles has become more complicated. For a long time, fans in the West were adamant that you should only watch anime with subtitles. But Roland says:

ROLAND: My mind has been shifted a bit by anime artists, actually directors and animators. I've spoken to here in Tokyo who have said on more than one occasion, that they really hate it when foreign audiences watch the subtitled version, because when they see a viewers' eyes dropping to the bottom of the screen to read, they're missing all the visual work where they want you to be focused.

Matt Alt agrees, and he used to write English subtitles in Japan.

MATT: But working with the other subtitlers, and then, you know, some of whom were native speakers of Japanese instead of English to seeing how much you had to lose to shoehorn it into the eight or 10 characters that you had per second or per two seconds on screen was really, it was really eye opening. Um, and I think of, well now I've definitely gravitated toward the western dub for the experience for the entertainment experience.

Once again, that change began with Cowboy Bebop. Back when American dubs were generally pretty bad, the English-language dub of Cowboy Bebop is considered one of the best ever. And Evan says look at the character of Jet, one of the bounty hunters in the crew. Like a lot of anime characters, Jet looks racially ambiguous.

EVAN: I think part of it is, uh, it's. It is some like really good casting. I think Bo Billingsley in particular is like a great choice for Jet that's. That's one that's been really like, you know, a lot of people have talked about, and I think it's relevant in the, in the current, uh, climate, I'd say to talk about the fact that like Jet has light skin, but he was cast with a black actor and a lot of people are like, yeah, that's right. Jet's black.

JET: You wanted to know what happened to my arm?

SPIKE: Huh?

JET: This is what I paid, yeah, for being too gung-ho and running ahead of the game. You get the point?

And for the live action version of Cowboy Bebop, Netflix cast a black actor in that role. We don't know much else about the live action remake, except they're still filming in New Zealand, where COVID rates are low. But Matt is not interested.

MATT: Well, I think that whole, like we're going to make an American of it. A mindset is just so outdated now. It's like, I think that especially young audiences are in tune enough with diversity and multiculturalism to be able to appreciate films on their own merits. And mean look, Parasite, won the Academy award. That's an extremely Korean film, it's set in the midst of Korean society and you can only watch it with subtitles and yet it won.

Roland agrees.

ROLAND: I don't know that live action can replicate the reasons why you enjoy anime. They're almost a dream world where your mind is maybe faster to turn imagery into metaphor or fantasy. So, you know, if you look at Cowboy Bebop and you think it's great anime, and if you strip that away and you make it live action, or even 3D CGI, it's not just retelling the story, it's, it's doing it without part of what made it magic.

But Cowboy Bebop is not just about style. At the beginning, the show is a lot of fun, and its action-packed, but the final episodes pack a wallop. In fact, some fans

are still trying to emotionally process what happened to the characters in the end. We'll get to that after the break.

BREAK

As I mentioned before, one of the things that struck me about *Cowboy Bebop* is that the show felt very adult -- but I couldn't quite figure out why.

Cowboy Bebop first aired here on a programming block called "Adult Swim" on Cartoon Network. So earlier in the day, kids were watching *Powerpuff Girls* or *Dexter's Lab*, and if they were allowed stay up after midnight, or managed to secretly turn on the TV, they discovered *Cowboy Bebop* on Adult Swim.

Ironically, I never really watched Adult Swim because I was a grown-up with job. So, I either went to bed early, or I was out late on weekends. If I had seen *Cowboy Bebop*, I don't think would've reacted to it very differently than I did now.

But on the show's 20th anniversary, there were a lot of articles written by people who were kids when they first discovered *Cowboy Bebop*. Back then, they loved the show for its style, but as they grew older, they began to understand the characters in ways they never expected -- like Eric Vilas-Boas, who ran an website about animation called *Dot + Line*.

ERIC: You know, I've returned to it and still found things that applied to me more or less, every two or three years of my, of my life since then, there's always been something new. There's always been some new struggle or some new connection, whether it's being a freelancer, you know, dealing with people who are slow on, on payments, you know, like dealing with clients, whether it is the emotions of having a, you know, a first love or a young, or like a young love type situation and like feeling what Spike felt in terms of that heartbreak and not being able to get over it.

Spike Spiegel is the main character, and the biggest surprise for Eric is that he understood Spike very differently when he got older. When he was a kid, Eric thought Spike was just the coolest guy ever.

Spike used to be part of a crime syndicate until he was betrayed by his closet friend, and lost the love of his life, named Julia, who we mostly see in flashbacks.

SPIKE: We'll leave here. We'll get out of this.

JULIA: And go where? And do what?

SPIKE: Live. Be Free. It'll be like watching a dream.

To give you a visual imagine, Spike has a giant mop of brown hair, usually a cigarette dangling from his mouth, a skinny blue suit with his tie loose and his collar popped out. Eric wrote an article about how Spike perfectly embodies an Italian word called sprezzatura (spetz-a-tura) – which is very fun to say.

ERIC: Sprezzatura! Uh, uh, yeah, like it must be said, you know, in, in as Italian and accent as possible, I think, you know, sprezzatura is sort of this, like, you know, the idea that you can, uh, you can put yourself together in any number of ways, uh, you know, you can be what some people might consider perfect within the constructs that we sort of like, you know, that we live and work in, but something might be off, right? Like, you know, a pocket square might be like slightly akimbo. And to my mind Spike is like sprezzatura to a T, right? Like he, he is entirely about like, you know, the sort of like laconic seemingly lazy, but clearly very proficient character. He projects this image of an almost like calculated ease, right? There's like a laziness about it. That is also informed by, by competency. He is not just this bad ass who beats up, you know, like hordes of bounties, and bad guys. He is also doing it by keeping his eyes closed half the time, or by keeping his hands in his pockets. This way that he carries himself about it is like it functions as an armor. Like he can, can continue going bad as day and not forming very deep attachments with people that makes his life a lot easier. But it's also revealed at the, of the show to be totally bullshit and like, totally like, you know, the, this like armor that he's put up for himself, whether Spike knows it or not, he has formed attachments.

JOHN: And that's trauma, right? That's what trauma does.

And that's Eric's friend John Maher, who's also written about Cowboy Bebop.

JOHN: The thing with trauma is you can't run from it. It is always going to come back to you. Schopenhauer or some such coined it as the hedgehog's dilemma, which is, you know, you're a hedgehog and you're covered in spikes. You want to get closer to other hedgehogs, but you don't want to get so close that their spikes will pierce you spikes. Right? Spike

Yeah, I was just thinking that I was like, right. Of course, how appropriate cause you think of Spike is just sort of a generically cool name, but it actually has double meanings.

JOHN: It kind of does. And, and at the same time as this hedgehog that does not want to be pierced by spikes or spines, whatever you still need the warmth of other hedgehogs to survive the winter. You know, the winter, perhaps being your trauma.

All the crew members are grappling with their past. Spike's co-pilot, Jet, is an ex-cop whose former partner was secretly working for the mob.

PARTNER: This is the real world. There's no place for pretty ideals

JET: That's why you betrayed me! That's why you lied and took me out here!

And there's Faye Valentine, who seems to be a carefree femme fatale, but she was cryogenically frozen a generation earlier, and she's haunted by the fact that she can't remember her past.

FAYE: I am alone. I don't need any comrades. They're not worth it. I end up worrying about things I shouldn't

JOHN: Faye does not want to care about her comrades. In fact, there's a whole episode where she's confronted with the fact that they are her comrades and she denies it, but they are she, but she doesn't want to get close to them because her memory is lost and she feels that herself is lost and she doesn't want to have another self to lose. Again, Jet, doesn't want to get close to people because he wants to think of himself as the retired tough cop. And because his former partner betrayed him, and, and lost loves and all that. But he has to, he has to get close to people. Spike as the same thing. This all leads to, for him, a boomerang that he can't escape from, that he might've been able to escape from had he simply processed his needs.

Major spoiler alert. To talk about Spike's journey, I need to talk about the ending because that's when the arc of the entire show comes into focus.

And at the end of the series, Spike feels like he has to confront the crime boss who betrayed him and killed the love of his life – even though it's clearly a trap and a suicide mission. Jet is quietly heartbroken. Faye begs him to stay:

FAYE: My memory finally came back. But nothing good came of it. There was no place for me to return to. This was the only place I could go. And now you're leaving just like that. Why do you have to go? Where are you going? What are you going to do? Just throw your life away like it was nothing?!

As a viewer, I knew Spike would kill his arch nemesis, but I figured he'd walk away, badly injured and alive. No. Spike drops dead, collapsing on a giant stairway in front of the entire crime syndicate, with their guns aimed at him.

SPIKE: Bang.

And at the end of each episode, they flash to the words, “See You, Space Cowboy” before the end credits. But after the final episode it said, “You’re Gonna Carry That Weight,” which is a reference to a Beatles song.

John didn’t watch the show until he was a teenager. A friend of his lent him the DVDs. And when he got to Spike’s death, it struck him to the core because John’s mother died when he was five years old. By that point, his father had remarried, his stepmother adopted him. So, John thought he had moved on but:

JOHN: When I finally finished Bebop I just sobbed; I couldn't stop crying. And of course, my biological mother was nothing like Spike Spiegel, nothing like him. But at that moment, all I could think about was what if something had gone differently? What if something had been fixed? What if something had been avoided? It brought up this wellspring of emotion about my mother's death and what I didn't realize then that I realized now what I was mourning for, who I was mourning for was me. And I didn't know it because I didn't realize that I was playing out the same drama as Spike. I hadn't processed what had happened to me. I hadn't gone to therapy. I hadn't accepted that. The people around me were going to die and I hadn't accepted the ways that I needed to move forward to get through that. And I think there was a part of me, uh, internally, you know, subconsciously that knew that if I kept moving in the same direction, that Spike had not allowing myself to move on, not allowing myself to accept the inevitable and find a way through it that I would end up the same way, you know, drinking myself to death or something. It can be a frustrating waste because you see how inevitable it is because Spike chooses not to deal with his shit, right? It's like, you could've done this man. You're smarter than this. You're whatever, but like, it doesn't happen. And it feels inevitable. And that inevitability is frustrating. For me, it felt devastating because the inevitability of this person dying so young, so tragically shouldn't have been inevitable.

Again, Eric Vilas-Boas.

ERIC: People tend to focus on Spike’s death. and, and rightly so, like, it's this huge emotional gut punch, but like, it's, it's really, I almost see it as an, as unfair that the, the death of this, this family is, is not just as much a part of the discourse in that, the discussion around the show.

The idea of found family is a common trope in space shows like The Expanse or Firefly where a crew of misfits only belong to each other and keep roaming the galaxy having adventures together.

And it's not just Spike, Faye and Jet on the ship. Along the way, they picked up a girl -- a genius hacker named Ed, and a Corgi named Ein. So, they really did feel like a family for a while. But their familial bond started to erode before Spike died, a few episodes earlier, when Ed struck out on her own and the dog went with her.

ERIC: There's a real frustration at that. Like you, you really wanted Spike to live. You wanted everyone to live and to also still be a family at the end of Cowboy Bebop because that like, you know, that would have proven that the experiences that they had had formed them into a family, like that's what we want. The ending of Cowboy Bebop is, is not a happy ending.

The show runner Watanabe has said, he didn't want Cowboy Bebop to go on indefinitely – which you can do with animation.

ERIC: From a perfectly ruthless perspective. Like you always got to leave your audience wanting more. We would not be talking about the show, you know, 20 plus years later, if it had gone on for another five seasons, which I guess it could have, but they would have just gotten stale. And then we would just have to be talking about it, like, as, as that influential thing that, you know, that sucked after a while or that went on for too long, like it would always be couched in some qualifier. Whereas now, like we look at, we look back on it and like, oh yeah, it's still a masterpiece after 20 plus years, Holy crap.

That's another aspect of the show that's harder to understand as a kid. As an adult, you know that you can mourn the loss of something that ended too soon but you can also appreciate the beauty of something that was wonderful and didn't last.

That's why a lot of fans I talked with are not interested in the live action remake. After you've loved and lost something or someone, you can take pleasure in the fact that they continue to live on – indefinitely -- in your memories. And that's where a lot of the fans of the show want Cowboy Bebop to remain.

That said, I'll still be watching the Netflix show. I mean, what else is going to be on TV next year?

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Roland Kelts, Matt Alt, Evan Minto, Eric Vilas Boas and John Maher. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. I put a link to Matt's new book, Pure Invention: How Japan's

Pop Culture Conquered the World, in the show notes, along with Roland Kelts's book, Japanamerica.

By the way, if you'd like to hear more about anime, I've done episodes on Ghost in the Shell, Neon Genesis Evangelion and Avatar the Last Airbender.

In my next episode, I'm going to continue looking at cultural translation, including Chinese and Korean sci-fi literature.

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