

Astro Boy and Anime
Come to the Americas

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Astro Boy and Anime Come to the Americas

*An Insider's View
of the Birth of a
Pop Culture Phenomenon*

FRED LADD
with HARVEY DENEROFF

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Cover art: Japanese artist Osamu Tezuka's 1951 creation *Tetsuan Atom* (Mighty Atom), known in America as *Astro Boy*; background ©2008 Shutterstock

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To Eileen Laderman, whose computer skills and good sense made the production of this book possible; to Fred Patten and Frederik L. Schodt, whose scholarly research and passion for history-as-it-actually-happened were inspirational; to Harvey Deneroff, without whose persistent, indefatigable urging, this book would not have been written; to Kim Manning and Terry Kalajian, who have helped keep the history-making adventures of Astro Boy and Gigantor shining on Cartoon Network; to Takayuki Matsutani, president of Tezuka Productions, and to Tomoko Kanai, who provided rare images of Osamu Tezuka, Japan's "God of Comics," at work; and to the late Osamu Tezuka himself, the brilliant artist whose character *Tetsuan Atom*, our cherished *Astro Boy*, created the wave of anime that initiated today's multibillion dollar industry in the Americas, thus changing our pop culture forever, this author gives heartfelt thanks and appreciation. Without their efforts, this accounting of events that led to today's explosive growth of anime, told for the first time from an inside participant's point of view, would not have happened.

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Preface by Harvey Deneroff

I had first met Fred Ladd in 1996, when I interviewed him for a special anime issue of *Animation World Magazine* I was editing. At the time, anime had not yet achieved the widespread popularity in the United States it currently enjoys. However, interest in it was growing, anime clubs were popping up on college campuses, and the Society for Animation Studies was even planning a conference that focused on “Japanese Animation and Global Media.” So, the special issue, to be published in August 1996, seemed a natural for the newly launched online animation magazine.

As I felt my knowledge of Japanese animation was rather modest, I was open to suggestions as to possible contributors and topics. One of the first people I contacted was anime historian and critic Fred Patten; he not only agreed to write for the issue, but also suggested we do an interview with Fred Ladd.

Ladd, he told me, had produced the English-language versions of such TV series as Osamu Tezuka's *Utsuan Atom (Astro Boy)*. Although I was aware of *Astro Boy*, at the time, I was more likely to associate Tezuka with his hilarious personal films, such as *Jumping*, than with his pioneering TV work. But it seemed like a good idea and I undertook to do the interview myself.

While I was pleased with the resulting story, I didn't realize how strongly it would resonate in the anime community. In fact, over the next few years, I probably received more responses from that story than from almost anything else I had written for the magazine. Though most of these were queries asking how people could get in touch with Ladd, I began to get some sense of his place in the world of anime fandom.

Actually, by 1996, I had written a number of pieces about the Japanese animation industry. Most of those articles, for the likes of *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Animation Magazine*, and *Animation World Magazine*, as well as my own industry newsletter, *The Animation Report*, were related to the international animation industry; like a number of other animation journalists, I was

not above using Japan's example to browbeat Hollywood for its limited view of what one could do with animation. If I did need to know something about Japanese animation, I turned to people like Jerry Beck (who cofounded Streamline Pictures, pioneers of the distribution of such movies as *Akira* in the United States) or Fred Patten (whose voluminous writings on the subject have been compiled in *Watching Anime, Reading Manga*).

I recall being fascinated with stories Patten told me in the late 1980s about his role in starting the Cartoon/Fantasy Organization (C/FO), the first anime fan club in the United States. It was there that he and others got together to screen and discuss videotapes imported from Japan or taped from broadcasts aimed at Japanese Americans in Hawaii and Los Angeles.

I remember, several years later, observing animation historian Jerry Beck's enthusiasm about his plans to distribute Japanese animated movies on the cheap; his plans, with the help of Carl Macek, came to fruition under the banner of Streamline Pictures (in which Patten also became involved), and they were used to feed the growing appetite for anime created by C/FO and the hordes of other anime clubs that boomed in its wake, especially on college campuses.

I especially recall Beck's hilarious stories of what happened when he screened *Akira* for Hollywood executives; he reported they would first get very excited about the film, but then realize they couldn't release such a violent film because it was a cartoon! It was only when *Pokémon* became a runaway hit on American TV a few years later that anime, almost overnight, became part of the mainstream American entertainment industry.

After the interview, Ladd and I kept in touch. In 2003, he asked me to moderate a panel discussion celebrating the opening of the Postwar Japanese Anime/Manga exhibit at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in the Little Tokyo area of Los Angeles on April 6, 2003. In preparing for it, Fred called several times to make sure I would cover all the bases in my introduction and questions for the panel. At the same time, he would regale me with stories and anecdotes about his career and anime.

It was then that I came to realize that Fred should be writing this down. I then casually suggested he write his autobiography and offered to help him do it.

My view of his importance was confirmed in witnessing Fred's commanding performance during the exhibit's opening ceremonies and the panel discussion itself. After all, Fred Ladd is America's direct link to the beginnings of the worldwide phenomenon that is anime. His successful English-language version of such TV series as *Astro Boy* played a key role in jump-starting today's Japanese animation industry, which has proved to be the only effective counter to Hollywood's traditional hegemony. In the process, anime

has become a major influence not only on American and European animation, but also on many other aspects of international art and culture.

As happens with this sort of project, the process of writing the book took a lot longer than expected, especially since I moved out of Los Angeles, and eventually ended up in Decatur, Georgia, teaching animation and film history at the Savannah College of Art and Design. More important, the scope of the book evolved from a simple memoir to a personal history of anime in America.

At first, the writing process involved my interviewing Fred and editing the transcripts, which he then fashioned into the opening chapters. However, he soon started writing without the aid of interviews while I mainly acted as an editor, trying my best not to mangle his wonderful conversational style. After all, this is Fred Ladd's story, the behind-the-scenes story of how anime came to the Americas, told by one of the men responsible for bringing anime to the West, a story that I hope you will enjoy.

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