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Anime Expo Celebrates Its 15th Anniversary

by [Kat Avila](#)

Surrounded by incredible, fun-loving cosplayers, I felt naked without at least some cute cat ears, which could have been easily picked up in the wonderland vault known as the Exhibit Hall (aka Dealer's Room). But once I stepped past the badge checkers, I was an octopus yanked in eight different directions. Welcome to "I've come to spend money" **Anime Expo!**

Anime Expo (AX) 2006 at the Anaheim Convention Center, July 1-4, in Anaheim, California, celebrated its 15th anniversary with champagne, Pocky, and a record-breaking 42,000 attendees. Over \$21,650 was raised by the SPJA (Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation) Charity Auction for this year's beneficiary, the nonprofit Children's Hospital of Orange County (CHOC).

This convention report is a mere slice of what can be found at the largest *otaku* (hard-core anime and manga fan) convention in North America. Events I ended up bypassing, due to time conflicts and lack of Olympic stamina, included the **CLAMP** fan panel (went instead to the J-rocker Mana press conference), Anime Music Video contest (highpoint of the convention for some), AX Idol, Karaoke Contest, and Artists' Alley (which I was told had a large contingent of native Japanese artists this year, many probably part of the 200-student-strong Nippon Engineering College [NEEC] group who flew over from Tokyo, Japan).

One of the things I did differently for this convention was to talk to more fans. One fan was wheelchair-bound, and we swapped stories about how difficult it can be to get around (when my father was alive he attended **AX** and **Comic-Con International** in a wheelchair). When **AX** returns to the

Long Beach Convention Center in 2007 (because the ACC went first come-first serve to the Shriners), it will be especially challenging because the hotels and events at those locations are so far apart.

Another fan demystified his **Nintendo** DS Lite video game player while we were waiting for the SPJA Awards Ceremony to begin. Using a stylus, he scrawled short messages and drew a wolf on his touch screen to send to other DS players in the hall, then he hosted a series of **New Super Mario Bros.** mini-games. I was very interested in the presence of technology at **Anime Expo**, another example being how users of the Stickam video communications player could get live feed from the convention floor. A generation of **Apple** iPod and **Nintendo** Game Boy users are changing how we view animation, read comics, and communicate with each other (an issue touched upon during **AX**'s first-ever Industry Round Robin).



J-rocker Mana of Moi dix Mois
Photo Courtesy Mana Management

In the bigger, better, and much roomier Exhibit Hall where **VIZ Media** was celebrating its 20th anniversary, I introduced myself to Steven Plagman who designs and cuts mats for romantic fantasy artist and wife Nene Thomas, whom I interviewed for **Sequential Tart** in 2004. Thomas wasn't at the convention as she was busy working on chapter illustrations for his high fantasy novel; the artwork is expected to be completed within the next four years.

I also ran into Yamila Abraham of **Yaoi Press**. She wasn't supposed to be at **AX**, but had driven from Las Vegas with more merchandise because their booth had sold out in two days! For a publisher of original English-language (OEL) yaoi, not translations, they're having a great year.

At the **Geneon** booth, the band The Indigo was playing. They

are known for the ending theme songs for the TV series ***Ai Yori Aoshi***, the sequel ***Ai Yori Aoshi – Enishi***, and the TV series ***Someday's Dreamers***. The Indigo is composed of a female vocalist and a male guitar player; the saxophone player was there as backup. Another band I saw later, Akai Sky, played in the AniMatsuri area, on the roof of the Anaheim Convention Center; I caught them as the setting California sun charged the air with drama as they jammed.

The Art Show, accompanied by **The Gallery of Fantastic Art (GoFa)**, was within the Exhibit Hall this year. **GoFa** brought over from Japan their brief, awe-inspiring ***Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo*** exhibit. Within the fan artist show, I especially liked Megan Gregory's intricate paper cutouts (love the one of Soryuu from ***Descendants of Darkness*** [***Yami no Matsuei***]), Paul Furtner's mixed media pieces, and the cute humor of Marie Lu's roly poly bear illustrations.

The closest I got to buying cat ears was when I stopped by Glynis's hat booth **Crazy Heads** where she was selling her handmade polyfleece hats for \$25 each. I suppose I could have copied another cosplayer who put a cardboard box over his head and duct-taped on top two cardboard toilet rolls for ears.

THE DIRECTORS

Noboru Ishiguro (president of **Artland Animation Studio**)
"I was looking at all these shows, and I thought you could shuffle the characters and stories around and it wouldn't make any difference. Seeing shows where the characters are interchangeable, then I think anime is devolving."

However, Ishiguro thinks director Hiroshi Nagahama's award-winning TV series ***Mushishi*** is one of the finer shows (coincidentally released by **Artland**). Regarding other anime he finds interesting, even with them Ishiguro says there's room to concentrate on showmanship and entertainment value that could pull an audience through an entire series. Since the advent of video games, he has observed a lot of shows don't care about consistent storytelling anymore.

Tomoki Kyoda (***Eureka 7***)

"Invention of the iPod and iTunes changed how people look,

read, and listen to media. I feel a kind of pressure to start thinking of providing for such mediums as well. "

I asked Kyoda how he captured the wonderful feeling of flight in **Eureka 7**; did he jump out of airplanes? He replied the lift boards basically move around like missiles in **Macross**. Kyoda also said if you were to make the movie **RahXephon** into a TV series (ignoring the earlier **RahXephon** TV series), you would get **Eureka 7**, Haruka/Ayato vs Eureka/Renton.

Seiji Mizushima (**Fullmetal Alchemist** movie and TV series)
"I'm making anime for everyone in the world and all the aliens in space. Anyone who can empathize with my world is my target audience. "

The biggest change for Mizushima has been on a personal level these past few years. Because of **Fullmetal Alchemist's** popularity, he has been invited to U.S. conventions and has been able to experience firsthand the reactions and feelings of fans abroad to the anime.

Hiroshi Nagahama

Nagahama said now that **Mushishi** has been released they are seeing good results from the business end, that it's not necessary to go with trendy or popular anime right now. In his anime, Nagahama did not abridge expressions from the manga and wanted to portray **Mushi** as something that could be beautiful.

Ryuhei Kitamura (**Azumi**; **Godzilla: Final Wars**)

"They couldn't run, swing a sword, couldn't do anything. Japanese kids these days. So weak. "

Kitamura was talking about the cast for his bloody live-action film **Azumi** (2003) on their first day of training after spending a year and a half to find them. He said he never looked so nervous as that day. Kitamura chastised them, "Ten people holding swords and I don't think you have a chance beating me." He put the actors through two months of full training and told them if he didn't like what he saw at that time they would not be in the film. **Azumi**, adapted from the manga by Yu Koyama, was just released in the U.S. by **Urban Vision Entertainment**.

THE CHARA AND MECHA DESIGNERS

Yutaka Izubuchi (***RahXephon***; ***Mobile Suit GUNDAM; Record of Lodoss War***)

"I'm positively sure my robots are cooler and stronger than the main character. The role of the bad guy is to make the good guy look better. Behind the scenes, the bad guys would win."

Over the last 20 years, the bulkier robots started slimming down, and in movies the directors strove for a more realistic look, said Izubuchi. Asked about his philosophy when he designs mecha, he said it really depends on the time and situation. Speaking about ***RahXephon***, which he also directed, he said you can't call the *OoPART* a real robot, but a heavenly thing, a spiritual robot. His advice to animators is to open your eyes, to have interests beyond anime that can be brought into one's animation — "If you eat only what you like, you won't develop much of a taste."

Atsuko Nakajima (***Ranma 1/2***; ***GetBackers***; ***Trinity Blood***)

"I'm pretty good at making the girl characters look cute and the boy characters look cool."

Nakajima is not a manga artist as she believes the parts of the brain you use to draw manga and to do animation are different. A character designer's first steps are to minimize lines to make the animation process easier for the animators and to produce three different views from front, side, and back. Her favorite character design is the female Ranma. As for how much freedom she has to design, she replied anything difficult is long past since she's been doing this for so long. Nakajima believes designing original characters would be the best, but says she doesn't seem to get that kind of work.

THE VOICE ACTORS

Crispin Freeman (Arucard in ***Hellsing***)

"I want sophisticated and mature storytelling. I want stuff that is emotionally dangerous, that's what I'm interested in."

The line for Freeman's fan panel was so incredibly long that it

exceeded that for some Japanese guests of honor, and fans had to be turned away. He acknowledged this year has been unbelievable. (Who would have ever thought that for English-dubbed anime?) Freeman's archetype is romantic leads, for which he notes there aren't a lot of romantic leads in American animation, especially with any kind of sexual energy, such as the role of Touga Kiryuu he did for *Revolutionary Girl Utena*. Women fans get ignored in America, he said. Historically in Japan there's all sorts of flexibility in the storytelling, and Freeman believes Western girls deserve their bishounen, too.



Voiceover actors Laura Bailey and Vic Mignogna sign autographs for Fullmetal Alchemist fans
Photo by Kat Avila

Vic Mignogna (Edward Elric in *Fullmetal Alchemist*)

Laura Bailey (Lust in *Fullmetal Alchemist*)

Toru Furuya (Tuxedo Mask in *Sailor Moon*)

During the Opening Ceremonies, Mignogna surprised *Fullmetal Alchemist* director Seiji Mizushima with an Italian bracelet made up of 21 links of characters from the anime. In an unexpected announcement, Romi Paku (aka Romi Park), Mignogna's Japanese counterpart, was unable to join the American *FMA* voiceover cast or fellow Japanese voice actor Toru Furuya at the convention.

THE MANGA ARTISTS

CLAMP (*Chobits*; *Cardcaptor Sakura*; *X/1999*; *Tsubasa: RESERVoIR CHRoNiCLE*; *xxxHOLiC*, to name a few).

CLAMP was co-sponsored by **Anime Expo**, **Del Rey**, **Funimation**, and **TOKYOPOP**. Missed the fan panel, but I did join the tightly packed press conference. In their introductions, Satsuki Igarashi said it was a great feeling for them to see the cosplayers, Ageha Ohkawa said she had sampled the great California champagne, Tsubaki Nekoi said the strong sun and palm trees made her realize she was in California, and the kimono-dressed Mokona, having previously heard stories about **Anime Expo**, realized many

people love anime and manga. Ageha Ohkawa acted as spokesperson for the popular four-woman studio. The best news was **CLAMP** would be resuming work on the supernatural *Legal Drug*, which stopped at volume 3 in its English translation.

Mick Takeuchi (*Her Majesty's Dog*)

"I haven't drawn a complete blank as yet [re artist block]. I honestly believe as the deadline comes closer and closer, something comes from above."

The Guest of Honor Panel audience sang "Happy Birthday" to Mick Takeuchi as July 4th was her birthday. Discussing the sensitive topic of scanlations (before titles are officially licensed), she said doing it for personal use is okay, but in making it publicly available there needs to be some trust between the original creator and the translator. If the translation isn't good, it becomes a different piece of work, which is very scary to the creator. On another topic, Takeuchi's Japanese editor who sat with Takeuchi said she couldn't imagine what type of people would be reading manga in the U.S., but she saw it was cute and beautiful people.

Koge-Donbo (*Di Gi Charat; Pita-Ten*)

This immensely popular manga-ka dropped off my radar (as did **DMP**-sponsored Izumi Kawachi), partly because I'm out of the target age-range where sweet-and-innocent would be appealing. Still, the longer you look at Koge-Donbo's illustrations the more they grow on you.

THE MUSICAL GUESTS

Mana (Gothic Lolita fashion icon; current band Moi dix Mois; former band Malice Mizer)

"My life's philosophy is doing exactly what I like."

Though it was initially a difficult decision to miss the **CLAMP** fan panel and a chance to get their autographs, the press conference turned out to be a memorable experience. The enigmatic, soft-spoken Mana is by far prettier and more mysterious than any individual I've ever met, though he wouldn't have stood out much amongst the cosplayers.

The press conference took on the aura of a performance art

presentation. It was unusually quiet, though not uncomfortably so. In his feminine guise, Mana calmly met the eyes of his curious questioners; replies were filtered and delivered back via one of two collaborating translators. Why he makes music is because he has music inside himself and just wants to bring it forth. Mana, with his band *Moi dix Mois*, will tour the U.S. later this year. Knowing that fans look to him as their idol makes him very happy.

yozuca* [sic]

rino — *"I'm honored to be standing on the stage in the U.S. I would like to let all my fans know what a wonderful experience I had at **Anime Expo**."*

Their songs are associated with the **Da Capo** PC games. While the stage presentation wasn't as exciting as Kotoko's concert last year, the audience seemed pleased with yozuca* and rino's sincere performances.

MASQUERADE (Monday, 3 July 2006)

(NOTE: For Masquerade 2006 photos, see [AX Backstage](#).)

*"Brothers and sisters, do you feel the **AX** spirit moving through you?"*

— One of the two Masquerade master of ceremonies

The Masquerade is an opportunity for the cosplayers to display their costume-making skills and theatrical creativity for a loud, responsive audience. The "Best of Show" prize went to the both impressive and humorous "The TRUE Power of the Clow"

(**Cardcaptor Sakura**); 1st Place to "Signing Bonus" (**Final Fantasy 6**); 2nd Place, "Soul Caliber Idol" (**Soul Caliber**); 3rd Place, "No Life King" (**Hellsing**); and Runner-up, "Nekoyaki" (**Chrono Crusade**).



Taiho of Eureka 7 at the Bandai booth
Photo by Kat Avila

The 1-1/2-hour show started on time and ran fairly smoothly. It wasn't a particularly standout show but evenly entertaining throughout. One of the most hilarious moments was when two giant boxes of Pocky walked onto the stage; costumes were then thrown off to reveal two guys naked — except for fig leaf-accessorized briefs — who danced for the appreciative crowd. The halftime show was an outstanding martial arts showcase built around two fans mapping out their ideal martial arts movie.

SPJA CHARITY AUCTION (Tuesday, 4 July 2006)

Autographed merchandise and original art were donated by the guests of honor. Half the fun at the SPJA Charity Auction is witnessing how outrageous the bidding will become, especially bidding duels. Children's Hospital of Orange County (CHOC) was this year's beneficiary of over \$21,650.

Specially labeled **Anime Expo** bottles of water, signed by all the attending guests of honor (except **CLAMP**), were auctioned off for as much as \$50 a bottle. Even an ordinary bottle of water, half drunk by the Charity Auction's master of ceremonies, fetched \$20.

The highest bids were for original color sketches by Atsuko Nakajima from the anime TV series **Trinity Blood** (final bid \$4000) and **GetBackers** (final bid \$4200). An original color sketch of Vash the Stampede from **Trigun** by character designer Takahiro Yoshimatsu went for \$2000. VIP **Anime Expo 2007** passes for two went for \$1000. Posters, autographed by **CLAMP**, of **Tsubasa: RESERVoIR**, **CHRoNiCLE** and **xxxHOLiC** sold for \$500-\$625. These were a few items a passionate fan could bid on. The final piece was an original color sketch from the manga **Her Majesty's Dog** by Mick Takeuchi that raised \$1900 for charity.

VOLUNTEERS

Convention staff and volunteers sign on to stuff bags, badge check, play camera narc, masochistically do crowd control, and make a lot of new friends. I bumped into 15-year **AX** veteran Rich Simental whom I first met at **Anime Expo Tokyo** in 2004. You may have also seen Rich at **A-Kon** in Dallas, Texas, where he has volunteered all 17 years (the

convention bills itself as "The Nation's Longest Running Anime Convention"). Another 15-year **AX** veteran I know is top-gun translator Takayuki Karahashi, immediately recognizable in a crowd by the brown felt fedora he wears.

CLOSING CEREMONIES

Veteran director Noboru Ishiguro drew in the second eye of the giant good-luck Daruma doll, which every **AX** official guest of honor had autographed on the back. (The first eye had been drawn in by character designer Atsuko Nakajima during the Opening Ceremonies.) With that gesture, **Anime Expo 2006** came to an end, and everyone shuffled off to watch the 4th of July fireworks at Disneyland next door.

*Special thanks to Chase Wang of **BAM! Marketing, Publicity & Promotions**, the rest of the **AX** Pressroom staff, and the **AX** volunteers for their kindness, assistance, and the snacks during the convention.*

LINKS TO VISIT

[Anime Expo](#) — Official site

[Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation \(SPJA\)](#)

[A Fan's View Anime Expo — July 1-4, 2006 — Anaheim, California](#) — (for press conference and cosplayer coverage)

[ANN Anime Expo 2006](#) — (for in-depth coverage)

[Publishers Weekly's Anime Expo Keeps Manga in Focus](#) — (for industry panel coverage)



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