

What is Anime and why is everybody talking about it?



Over the past few years, animation produced for the Japanese domestic market, known as *anime*, has been finding its way onto shelves in comic book specialty retail shops and video stores throughout the country. It is a business which has evolved out of an underground, unlicensed movement to bring this material into the States by the vanity duplication (read "bootlegging") of imported *anime* laser disks. The material which has surfaced has remained, for the most part, niche product which augments the imported *manga* (Japanese comics) and occasional imported video game which makes its way West.

The potential for mainstream exposure to *anime* will be put to the test by several factors including the syndicated television release of *SAILOR MOON* and *DRAGON BALL* as well as upcoming

video releases by mainstream distribution entities such as SONY, POLYGRAM and ORION PICTURES. There are rumors that MARVEL may even be considering entering into this field.

SONY is launching its effort in the anime market with an animated version of *STREET FIGHTER II* offered at an extreme sell-through price point. POLYGRAM has taken on the distribution of the US branch of a UK company, MANGA ENTERTAINMENT. And ORION HOME VIDEO has entered the picture by making an output deal with STREAMLINE PICTURES to serve as the distribution arm of Streamline's VIDEO COMICS library.

Each of these distribution companies has a different approach in attempting to bring this material to the mass market. SONY and POLYGRAM are handling the



video distribution as a traditional music company distributor. ORION, on the other hand, has concentrated on distributing Streamline's VIDEO COMICS as a traditional video distributor.

The ORION approach seems to work given the context of Streamline's library. Since its inception seven years ago, Streamline Pictures has concentrated on acquiring the best theatrical *anime* available for distribution in North America. Streamline's initial exploitation of these films begins with theatrical exhibition in independent theaters and through theatrical repertory. Once an animated film has received some critical reception and played through a number of major cities, it is made available for home video. Streamline's string of theatrical releases

include AKIRA, FIST OF THE NORTH STAR, THE PROFESSIONAL, VAMPIRE HUNTER D, ROBOT CARNIVAL, LENSMAN, WICKED CITY and the forthcoming SPACE ADVENTURE COBRA.

Another factor in the success of VIDEO COMICS has been the company's focus on distributing English language versions of these films. The bulk of the material released in the U.S. has been put out in subtitled versions. Streamline's president, Carl Macek (an animation producer in his own right), has noted that



"all animation is dubbed", and that Streamline's goal is to make "viewer friendly product which will be easy to assimilate by the mainstream public".

The longevity of these titles as classic *anime* and the quality of the original (and English-language post) production have positioned Streamline's VIDEO COMICS titles as an "evergreen" library which sell

significant numbers for every title, month after month. A recent article in NEWSWEEK still points to AKIRA as the major title in this niche genre.

Recent activity in the acquisition of *anime* properties by a growing number of



US distributors has given Streamline and Orion cause to reevaluate their marketing strategy. But rather than compete with the glut of product which is flooding the market, Streamline is content to work on quality productions. "It's like 'The Tortoise and the Hare', every new company is trying to beat the competitor to the punch with the latest material from Japan. We had a goal in mind when we started, we made a list of titles and went after that list. So far we have been able to acquire distribution rights to nearly every title we set out to bring to market."

The strategy seems to be working. Most new product produced for the domestic Japanese market is getting far-

ther and farther away from the neutral international productions of the late 1980's. Following the phenomenal success of highly ethno-centric, teen adventure series SAILOR MOON (\$250 million at last count) most new anime productions incorporate the same sort of super-deformed characters and physical gestures which contributed to the programs uncanny popularity. But as these gestures and design elements become more and more esoteric and obtuse, the ability of this type of material to take hold in the "savvy", mainstream US domestic merchandising arena is uncertain.

The future, as far as Macek and Streamline are concerned, is in co-production and joint ventures with anime producers and rights holders. By combining the best of both East and West a new category of product will be unleashed for global consumption. Several other companies have the similar viewpoints. Manga Entertainment, Bandai and several other companies are pre-buying territories for new anime productions. Jim Lee's GEN¹³ is scheduled to hit the market sometime in 1996 as a direct-to-video production. The difference is that GEN¹³ geared for a Western audience while acknowledging the *anime* style. The Manga/Bandai approach is still focused on the Japanese market at the linchpin for the production. Streamline, on the other hand, working with veteran *anime* producers, plans to develop a series of projects which will play to both markets. It will be interesting to see which approach wins out.

In the meantime, VIDEO COMICS will continue to market the classics and strive to get more and more exposure in the mass market. With the pioneering efforts of mainstream corporations such as Streamline/Orion, Polygram, SONY and Pioneer anime is here to stay.