

How Flying Lotus crafted the sounds of *Yasuke*, Netflix's new samurai anime

Before he started working on *Yasuke*, an upcoming anime series on Netflix, Grammy-nominated producer Flying Lotus was only somewhat familiar with the story. "I knew that there was a Black samurai that existed, but I didn't know much, because there wasn't really much out there for so long," he tells *The Verge*. So when it came time to adapt the tale, Lotus – who served as both composer and executive producer on the show – knew that they'd have to take some creative liberties.

Yasuke is a six-episode series that follows the life of the titular samurai, a real-life historical figure who arrived in Japan in 1579. However, much of his life remains a mystery, and much of what has been documented could be best described as conjecture. There are a lot of holes in the *Yasuke* legend – which gave the team lots of room to be creative. The anime follows the samurai's life, but it also mixes in elements of fantasy and sci-fi: there are mechs and robots, humans transforming into animals, and all kinds of magic and sorcery.

For Lotus, it was the fact that the show would be an anime that inspired many of these far-out ideas. "It was rich enough on its own," he says of the *Yasuke* legend, "but for anime it just needed that extra thing to take it over the edge."

Lotus is just one part of an impressive creative team behind the show. *Yasuke* is directed by LeSean Thomas, possibly best-known as the creator of *Cannon Busters*, and features *Get Out* star Lakeith Stanfield in the lead role. Meanwhile, revered animation studio Mappa is helming the production. Lotus is no

stranger to these kinds of collaborations – most notably, he's worked with *Cowboy Bebop* creator Shinichirō Watanabe on a number of projects – and he says part of what made *Yasuke* so interesting was that he was involved beyond just the soundtrack, which included helping shape the story early on.

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The trick, he says, was balancing history and fantasy. "I think there's enough of the historical document in the show that serves *Yasuke's* story, and honors his story," he explains. "When we tell our version, no one really knows what happened to him after a certain point – I thought it was fun to speculate as to what that could be. It's such an important time for this story to come out." Lotus adds that, while Thomas was well-versed in the historical side, his own contributions were different. "I was the person to bring in the more left-field concepts, and the more ethereal ideas and spiritual concepts."

Being so involved in the production also helped when it came to the score. Lotus says that, initially, he mostly knew what he *didn't* want the show to sound like. "I knew that people were going to be like 'Oh, Flying Lotus is involved, he's going to do a hip-hop thing, so it's going to be like *Afro Samurai*, it's going to be like *Samurai Champloo*, maybe it'll be like *Cowboy Bebop* if he does a jazz thing,'" he explains. "This is also the stupid voice in my head, the voice that's going off all the time. I also wanted to do something that'd surprise me, and be true to what I'm looking at."

"I wanted it to be a journey getting there."

He says he started thinking about the music from the very beginning, but it wasn't until production was well underway, and he was able to see actual animation, that he could properly compose. The process involved watching episodes with musical instruments in arms' reach – a few keyboards, some Japanese and African percussion instruments – and seeing what

felt right. It took a while to find that sound, he explains, but once he did things started to flow. "I just felt the call to action," Lotus says. "Alright, Yasuke's got to cut some people up, well I'm gonna help him with my music. I'll help him win these battles. I'm going through this with you."

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Part of that involved writing the songs in chronological order, so that the music developed alongside the character. "I wanted to have the music have progression like Yasuke's character and the story that's being told. Along the way, the story gets more magical; you start dealing with witchcraft and shamans and sorcery and all of this stuff. I wanted it to be a journey getting there."

"I have a deep connection with this."

Often composers aren't given a lot to go on; maybe they're shown some art and given a few notes from the director about the mood of a scene. But because he was so involved in the show's creation, Lotus was able to create the score in a more organic way. That's not to say that the process didn't have any drawbacks: namely, there was a lot more pressure.

"It makes it way more intimidating," Lotus says. "Being there from the beginning, you know how much everybody worked on this. You know how much LeSean put in, and Lakeith had his voice in there, and the studio drew all of these amazing things and all these animators, character designers, directors worked on it already. They did their part. Now here you go: set the tone, and be great, in a pandemic."

The important thing, he says, is that he wasn't just a "gun for hire," a big name brought on to help promote the show. For Lotus, his relationship to the source material was much more significant than that. "I have a deep connection with this, deeper than someone giving me a bunch of cool pictures to make music to. I'm invested in this." Plus, he notes, "it was a lot

of fun to be a samurai for six months.”

Yasuke debuts on Netflix on April 29th.

<https://www.theverge.com/2021/4/9/22373405/yasuke-netflix-flying-lotus-interview>