

Hikaru Sasahara Interview

Hikaru Sasahara, the CEO of Digital Manga, Inc. sat down with me in their Gardena California Headquarters for this long and rollicking interview on February 8, 2007. You can read the interview online at <http://liheliso.com/buzz/archive/00000703.htm>

Interview by Ginger Mayerson, Editor, The Journal of the Lincoln Heights Literary Society

Ginger Mayerson: I read in the Publishers Weekly interview[1], that you came here in 1973...

Hikaru Sasahara: Long time ago.

GM: ...when you were three years old-

HS: (*laughs*) I was already twenty-three years old back then. I'm an old guy now.

GM: Nah. I was thirteen. The old thing; it's interesting.

HS: I still like what I saw in America at that time: the hippies, the music. Everything was evolving and revolving back then. Now, everything is static. Doesn't seem to be moving fast enough for me. Kids are all doing the same things, same fashion, same thinking, same music. Everything is the same, even internationally, it's all merging. I don't see much cultural difference anymore.

GM: It's interesting because I didn't think it was a global thing, I thought it was just me personally and my age. But, the music; am I old? Or does it all sound the same?

HS: I don't think so. If you listen to the Sixties and Seventies music it was so different. It was much deeper in melody, more diverse, more variety.

GM: We're probably going to get in trouble for this part of the interview.

HS: I always fight with my son. "Is this music? Or noise or what?"

GM: How old is your son?

HS: Twenty-two.

GM: Oh, he should be growing out of the loud and obnoxious music phase really soon. It's frustrating. I was in Europe for four years and when I came back and started driving around, listening to the radio, because that's the only place I listen to the radio is in the car, I was shocked that there were two or three "classic rock" stations. Are those the only choices? Loud and obnoxious rock or "classic rock"? I was shocked. The Seventies were okay because punk rock was a backlash against the so-called progress of the Sixties. The Seventies were hell, so progress? What progress?

HS: Well, there was folk music. Joan Baez, Bob Dylan...

GM: But they were part of the anti-war movement.

HS: There was also the Kingston Trio.

GM: Yeah. Were there protests in Japan about the war?

HS: Yes. In the early 70s and late 60s, I was too young to join those student movements, but there were many protests.

GM: Were you at University at that time?

HS: I was in High School. This was when the Beatles came to Japan and an American band called Ventures, which was an instrumental surf band. I was so impressed; this was something I'd never heard of in Japan. I think that triggered my first interesting coming here. Especially the Ventures.

GM: What were you doing in Japan before you came here?

HS: My dad was running a small animation studio.

GM: You know, I'm from LA where there's Disney or Warner Brothers, so, in my mind, I can't imagine a small animation studio.

HS: Well, in Japan there are many small family-run anime sub-contractors. My dad's studio was kind of unusual because it did everything: paint, tracking, shooting the film - the whole process, instead of just part of the process.

GM: Were there any big projects the studio worked on?

HS: A few, one is still running today. It's called "Sazae-san" which is the longest running anime in Japan. It never came here.

GM: Why not?

HS: It's really Japanese-y, it still is, I don't think most Americans would understand it. I read that the (Western) business people who go to Japan, the first thing they do is to watch "Sazae-san" anime to get the Japanese perspective. You know, eating, customs, family life.

GM: Is it an ongoing story?

HS: Yes. Actually the author, Machiko Hasegawa, died a long time ago. A long time ago we published the manga here (at DMI).

GM: What's a long time ago?

HS: Four years.

GM: Did you read manga and watch anime as a kid?

HS: When I was a kid, there were the manga rental shops, where you'd pay, like, five cents and there's no computer, so I just put down my name on a piece of paper and the old lady would say, "Okay, you return that tomorrow." Everything was just based trust because the neighbors knew everybody.

GM: What did you read?

HS: I can't remember; a lot of stuff. But that was one of the few available entertainments for my time. There were very few movie theaters around in town, very expensive and only Japanese films, which are not really interesting.

GM: Hey, I've been on a Kurosawa jag lately...

HS: Oh, well, now, yes, but back then there weren't such big films. Basically, Japan was very poor. Right after World War II, there was nothing to eat, no entertainment-

GM: Huge black market, gangsters-

HS: Some. The ultra-rightists were causing a lot of trouble.

GM: Did the same people who led Japan into the war, get back in power after it?

HS: They did, but the Occupation, which almost colonized Japan, kicked out the ultra-rightists, which was good, and tried to democratize the country.

GM: I was watching "Stray Dog" from 1949 and the Occupation censorship was almost a joke because a clever director and screenwriter could easily get around it by being extra Japanese or something. In his post-war work, Kurosawa was somewhat critical and satirical of the Occupation and very critical of the materialism of the generation that came of age after the war. This would be your generation, as being too materialistic.

HS: Oh, I don't care.

GM: Oh, I know, but was your generation more materialistic?

HS: I don't know, maybe because everyone was poor and they just try to cling to whatever they could see they could own.

GM: Everyone suffered the want and fear of rebuilding and the Occupation. I can't imagine how long it took for, say, the manga industry to get back on its feet.

HS: Manga kept going because it was cheap to produce. Movies took longer because they were so expensive.

GM: Did you read "Captain Harlock"?

HS: I can't remember, because I read so many.

GM: Do you like manga?

HS: Now? I don't. (*laughs*) I grew up with it, but now, maybe because I'm publishing it, I don't like it very much. I sometimes read Osamu Tezuka's manga, which I really enjoy. The style is so old now, so people don't feel like reading it, but once you read it you can't get out of it because the story so deep. It's almost like the manga version of Kurosawa to me. Tezuka is said to be the father of manga. He did "Astro Boy."

GM: Did he also create "Phoenix Future"?

HS: Exactly.

GM: J LHLS has very smart reviewers, and one of them, Tom Good, lived in Japan for a while and also knows a lot about manga. VIZ gave us a review copy of *Phoenix Future* [2] and I wondered about it because the style was so, um, deco or something, and I didn't find it appealing. But reading Tom's review, the content of the book, which asked, and I'll quote Tom here: " The story seems to invite all sorts of philosophical questions. Does intelligent life naturally tend towards self-destruction? Are video games and movies kind of like Moopies, and are they dangerous? Does progress lead inevitably to decadence and stagnation?" And this made me wish I'd looked harder at the book and not been so off-put by the art style.

HS: Tezuka, in addition to being a manga artist, was also a medical doctor, so his viewpoint is always very keen to care for the environment, health, how to save people. Fantastic stories. One of his titles, "Dororo," is a very old manga. We tried to license it, but we haven't so far. In Japan they just released a movie of it. I haven't read this particular title, but I'd like to publish it here.

GM: So, as a young man, did you originally come to Los Angeles?

HS: No, I actually went to San Francisco because a friend of mine was already there. But I didn't stay there long because he was surrounded by Japanese guys and I didn't like it. Why would you come here and to mingle with Japanese? So I left there, and I'd already registered with a school in LA, so I came down here and got my first apartment in Hollywood for \$85 a month.

GM: Oh my. Probably right in the middle of Hollywood.

HS: It was. Hollywood was still a big thing for me because of the movie industry. Though things were getting run-down and seedy in the 70s, it was still Hollywood. And while I was going to school, I got a small job doing odd jobs at Hanna-Barbara.

GM: Did you learn to be an animator in your father's studio?

HS: I was more interested in the business end of it because I can't be an artist because I'm so bad at drawing.

GM: I think the best job in animation is being the director because I imagine actually drawing the animation must be tedious.

HS: The best job is a job that you like to do. I've had a few jobs that I've hated.

GM: How long were you at Hanna-Barbara?

HS: Just seven months or so. Then I had a job in a photo-processing lab, where I had to work in the darkroom all day. But I thought that was all part of things I needed to know. So I did a lot of stuff while I was going to school.

GM: Where were you going to school?

HS: It's a place called Columbia College, on La Brea. It was the only school in LA that taught practical animation. Animators, cameramen, editors in the industry were teaching there.

GM: Is it still there?

HS: Unfortunately it closed a few years ago for some reason. It was a very small private school

GM: So how did you get from Hanna-Barbara to your own company?

HS: For a long time I was pursuing my dad's business, but then I figured out that I'm not good at running an anime studio, so I completely changed my entire outlook from an art-oriented business to a business-oriented business. I didn't have much money to get started, so I figured I'd better do something to make some cash. Then I remembered I didn't have a green card.

GM: Were you on a student visa?

HS: I was and I wasn't supposed to work.

GM: I've known people who came here on student visas and worked when they weren't supposed to. They were great at their jobs.

HS: But back when I was doing it, there's no one checking. Everybody was working without a green card. I got a job with a very large company in the (San Fernando) Valley, they were a manufacturer of the safety-belt, called American Safety, and all the airlines used their product. They were looking for someone who spoke Japanese and English and they really liked me, I didn't tell me I didn't have a visa, and three months later I was in training in Fresno, and I came

back to the main office and the Executive Vice President wanted me to go to Japan with him. And I was surprised that after three months, when I didn't know much about the business, but he said it was okay, he needed my help because they were in a serious discussion about forming a partnership with a Japanese company, so he needed my help. So, the next question was did I have a visa and I said I had a student visa that was expired. So they hired an immigration lawyer to get me a visa, but they couldn't change the law so they had to terminate me. And then I got another job in another company, I didn't tell them I didn't have a green card, but they found out and terminated me. So this happened twice, so I thought, "Oh shit, I have to get a green card."

GM: And how did you?

HS: So I asked around, and people told me that the easiest way to get a green card was to get a job that the average American can't do. So I asked, what kind of job that would be, and they said a sushi chef. I don't know how to make sushi. They said I didn't have to, I just had to get a kitchen helper job and apply for the sushi chef job, and the restaurant can get you a green card. At that time my wife was working as a waitress at one of the Japanese restaurants in West LA-

GM: Your wife? Did she come with you from Japan?

HS: One year later.

GM: So she had a job.

HS: So I asked her to ask her boss if I could work there, and I was lucky that there was a position, and I worked there for three years.

GM: So getting a green card was simpler.

HS: Yeah, but that was a hard job. Every single day I have to broil chicken, every day with Mexican guys, every day, nothing but chicken chicken chicken. Every Day.

GM: Restaurant jobs are hard work.

HS: But after three years, I opened my own restaurant.

GM: And never served chicken?

HS: *(laughs)* Only a little.

GM: Was it a Japanese restaurant?

HS: No!

GM: No?

HS: You see, this is where my spirit comes in. I don't want to do what everyone else is doing. "That's being Japanese," I said to myself, "okay let's do something else besides sashimi, tempura, sushi." So I opened up a Western food restaurant: spaghetti, meatballs, hamburger steak. But then I put a little flavor of Japanese seasonings, you know, Shoyu, soy sauce, and stuff, and they loved it. So I made a lot of money.

GM: What was it called?

HS: The Gourmet. It was in West LA, it's still there, they changed the name of it. It's on Sawtell, now It's called Sawtell Kitchen. I was on the front page of the Wall Street Journal because they thought my restaurant was so unique. It's a Western menu, but the taste was a hybrid of Japan and U.S. So they asked me how I came up with the idea. I didn't want to do a sushi tempura type restaurant, because that's what everyone is doing and that's not what the Japanese usually eat every day. It's so expensive. So I did something else and it really caught on.

I'm still keeping the same spirit in what I'm doing here. I'm always trying to do things not the ordinary way, but something a little more avant-garde.

GM: I would say so. How long did you have this restaurant?

HS: Four years. I made some cash, good enough for me to start doing what I wanted to do, which was the agent business. I represented eight to ten CDR game companies in the U.S. Back then, CD Rom games were big. Everybody talked about the multimedia thing?

GM: Agent? Like a talent agent?

HS: More like a broker. I used to represent nine or ten U.S.-based game publishers.

GM: In the mid to late 80s?

HS: Yes. I didn't have any employees, it was just me for six, seven years.

GM: So what exactly did you do for these companies?

HS: I signed a representation agreement with each company and then I sold the rights for the game to Japanese companies, like Bandai. I made a lot of money because I didn't have employees, it was just me and all I needed was a small office, phone and computer.

GM: What did you call it?

HS: The Interactive Media Agency.

GM: How elegant.

HS: Towards the end of the seven years, I realized that I didn't like the job very well because the product wasn't something I created. Sometimes I had to sell things I didn't like, but being a broker, that's what I did. It was a lot of bullshit. So I decided to figure out what I really wanted to do and finally started Digital Manga in 1996.

GM: When we were talking before, you said you named the company Digital Manga because it was going to be manga in a format that you read on a computer or on a reader-tablet type thing.

HS: I had that idea for many years. I grew up with manga and manga is a very passive, static mode. Nothing moves. But the story and graphics are just beautiful. When Tezuka invented the manga in the Forties or Fifties, he always to make the movie, but the country was so poor, he couldn't get a camera, couldn't buy films and stuff. So he put his dream onto the paper medium. So when I am reading Tezuka's manga today, I always feel like I'm watching the movie. He put motion into the paper medium. So I thought, if that's what he intended to do, why don't I just bring it back? Why don't I put the live elements to it and make Tezuka's manga come alive. That's how I conceptualized this idea.

GM: Of Digital Manga.

HS: Right.

GM: So it was like a lightly animated manga.

HS: Actually I scanned each frame out of the book and hired people to manipulate some of the frames and make a little bit of animation and put sound effects, also I scrolled the frame, or dropped from the top whenever the action happened.

GM: Was it actually Tezuka's work you were working with?

HS: It wasn't Tezuka, it was another big name guy in the industry, Shoutaro Ishinomori, and I licensed his work along with "Lupin the Third."

GM: When did you do this?

HS: Around 1996.

GM: So this would be a product you'd read on the screen. Was it flash animation?

HS: There wasn't flash animation then. The software was called "Director."

GM: Oh, so it was almost like PowerPoint, where they could manipulate elements, but not as clunky as PowerPoint. So there would be action and flow as you were reading the manga.

HS: And I put multiple languages, I put English, Japanese, Spanish, and French, so that the reader can pick and choose whatever language they want to read.

GM: Were there sound effects?

HS: Yes, and a voice over, too.

GM: A voice over!

HS: In all the languages. There was also a bookmark so you could stop and come back to where you left off.

GM: So it was like somebody reading you a manga as you watch it go by. How delightful, but obviously ahead of its time.

HS: Yeah, a little bit.

GM: Sorry.

HS: It's always like that. I often come up with ideas too early.

GM: I'm not completely up on the manga industry, but I've never heard of anyone doing what you were trying to do in 1996.

HS: There is a company doing this and when I saw it, I just started to laugh.

GM: But you did it first. Very impressive. You founded Digital Manga Inc. in 1996, congratulations on ten years in business, that's longer than you've done anything else, isn't it?

HS: Yeah. And I feel very good about this company. Because when I came here, I didn't know anything, I didn't have money, I didn't have any connections, I didn't know the language well, but I kept trying. So even a small company like this, I'm still learning and working with American guys, I've been telling these young kids that work for me that I came here with nothing. You have a car, I didn't have car.

GM: You didn't even have a green card.

HS: That's right! I didn't have any girlfriend, nothing.

GM: You had a wife. What do you mean?

HS: Well, she didn't come with me, I was alone.

GM: So for one year you didn't have a wife or a girlfriend (or a car or a green card). That's awful.

HS: Yeah.

GM: I don't want to call it the American Dream because that's such a cliché and anyone under twenty-five reading this interview will immediately surf off or something, but there is a thing here in LA at least that if you've some guts and an idea and tenaciousness and willing to work really hard-

HS: Tenaciousness, that's a good word.

GM: -you really can have some kind of a life here. I mean, I don't have the guts to start a business. The whole idea of putting a lot of money into anything just terrifies me. But you, you started this on a shoestring.

HS: That's right.

GM: I mean, you had the broker business money, but-

HS: But when I changed from one job to another, whatever I could do, I just grabbed it. Action was the key word for me back then; don't think to much, just do it. Just do anything and get things done, whether it was successful, I learned something from it. So I just kept going. The restaurant business was something that I'd never imagined. But back then there was not so much of a choice. I didn't have money, but I still have to eat so if I run a restaurant I could still eat because I have to buy a lot of food stuff.

When I first came here, I thought the U.S. food was lousy. Maybe I couldn't go to good restaurants, but the food I ate in the Hollywood area was so bad. So I knew that if I put a little soy sauce on a hamburger, it would be so much more delicious, which is what it did. And people just loved it. They were like, "Wow! How did you do that?"

GM: Coffee shop food (I've had in Hollywood and elsewhere)-

HS: Coffee shop food, they only use salt and pepper and that's it.

GM: You could be eating salt and pepper on cardboard.

HS: Yeah, so I figured that's an easy business, I gotta do it. I didn't like it though.

GM: Really? I don't know how restaurants survive, really I don't.

HS: It's just a twenty-four hour business, with prep and employees-

GM: And you're at the mercy of everyone: your clientele, your employees, food prices, the City, the weather, and so on. But you did it.

HS: And I made a lot of money and then got to do what I wanted to do.

GM: The brokerage?

HS: I enjoyed the brokerage in the beginning. It's a very sophisticated business because you have to know the industry and each company in it and how to make strategies.

GM: And by then you were in the unique position of having been in America and understanding Americans as well as, well, anyone can, and being able to make deals for American companies in Japan.

HS: I took American businesspeople to Tokyo and made deals for them there. It was very interesting.

GM: Isn't that what you're doing now with Digital Manga? You're finding licenses and making deals...

HS: But with DMI, I feel like I can own something.

GM: You're producing beautiful books.

HS: Thank you.

GM: Their extremely well done, well made, and because some of them are yaoi, the reader can really obsess on them and read them over and over and over and certain parts over and over and over and you can't break the spine, ever. You can't destroy these books. And they've got the dust jackets, so your grubby little hands, well, anyway, for those of us who have grubby little hands while we're reading our yaoi books, these are the books to read.

HS: I don't read them.

GM: Then how do you pick them?

HS: There's a funny story about this. When I went to Japan four years ago, as I usually do, I visit many publisher, and I went to a company called Tokuma Shoten, they published *Only The Ring Finger Knows* manga [3]. I had the chance to meet with the president of the company and he asked me "Do you know this manga called yaoi?" And I said, no, what is it? He told me it was homosexual manga. And I was shocked, because he's like a seventy year old guy and originally in the banking business. And he told me I had to try it because it was selling so well in Japan. I said, no way, there's no market. I never believed that there was a market for yaoi. But he was very stubborn and very insistent, so I said, "Okay, but only the one title."

GM: *Only The Ring Finger Knows*?

HS: Yeah.

GM: He did you a helluva favor, didn't he?

HS: I didn't even read it as a favor to him.

GM: It's totally harmless, there's just a few smooches and the boys look like girls, so it's harmless.

HS: But when it hit the market, it was BOOM, and I said, "What? Damn. There's something here."

GM: *Only the Ring Finger Knows* was the first yaoi, actually the first manga, I'd ever seen. In 2004 I read, on the Comics Reporter (I think) that DMI had licensed "Yellow" and I read a little about it and wanted a copy for review so I called the office and talked to Tom Schwartz, I think that's his last name, and he was extremely nice.

HS: Oh, that was in the Carson office, you never went there?

GM: No.

HS: Good, it was a terrible location.

GM: So, I guess Tom talked to Isaac Lew, who said must have said, "Well, we don't have 'Yellow,' but send her a box of whatever.' And they put *Only the Ring Finger Knows* in the box and being a total neophyte and not knowing what I was doing I opened it the wrong way, so I know how it ended.

HS: (laughs)

GM: But I became completely obsessed with that book.

HS: Really. Why?

GM: I really don't know why.

HS: I still cannot understand why the girls like this kind of thing. I just don't.

GM: You know what, I'm sorry to say, I don't really understand it either. I once asked Dan Savage [4], the sex columnist, why women were such fans of the "Oz" program, where there's a lot of sexual violence. And he thought it was a revenge fantasy, that it was women seeing what happens to them, happen to men. I realize there's sexual violence toward men outside of prison, but somehow that's different from women being raped.

The yaoi thing, I dunno. I've asked every manga artist I've interviewed here why they're attracted to drawing yaoi and only Toko Kawai [5] had an answer that made sense to me.

HS: What did she say?

GM: She said that in yaoi, it's romantic, but there's no jealousy factor because there's no women in it. So, as a female reader, you're not comparing yourself to the love interest.

HS: Oh... I see.

GM: She had the best answer, I thought. I think Mokoto Tateno [6] just said she drew yaoi because she likes it. So, yeah, that made sense to me.

Why I became so engrossed in *Only the Ring Finger Knows*, I think it's because the characters are so wafer-thin, those characters are about as deep as a Petri dish, they're literally paper-thin. And if you're a woman who has an imagination, and all women who read this kind of thing have imaginations, when you read shallow, but appealing characters, there's a lot of depth that you add consciously or unconsciously, but automatically. And those two characters are attractive boys, and the story is complex enough, you can add layers in your own thinking and make those characters your own.

HS: Wow.

GM: And that's why everyone went crazy-

HS: So it's a little more interactive.

GM: Yes! In that particular manga. There are other experiences as a yaoi reader, but *Only the Ring Finger Knows* was the one where it became "mine" in a funny way. Because reading is so private, and the internet is like that, too, and then be shocked that others know about it. What happened with *Only the Ring Finger Knows*, at the end of that damn book, there was the author's note that said, I paraphrase, "If you liked this manga, you should read the novels about these two after they become a loving couple." And thousands of women screamed in unison, "WHAT NOVELS!?" Unbelievable! That had to be the biggest tease on earth. I called Isaac and said "WHAT NOVELS?" And he was like, "You're about the 80th call I've had today about this." [7] (*Only the Ring Finger Knows Novels: Only the Ring Finger Knows* (vol 1); *The Left Hand Dreams of Him* (vol 2); *The Ring Finger Falls Silent* (vol 3))

HS: Maybe that's why Isaac came to me and said maybe we should try novels. And I said, "Oh c'mon, give me a break."

GM: So, were you the one who made us all do that online voting thing to see if there was enough interest to license and publish?

HS: Yeah.

GM: Yeah, well, I only voted twice, but I was glad to do so.

HS: (*laughs*) Well then you contributed. They're selling so well.

GM: With the *Only the Ring Finger Knows* novels, they're, um.... Now I love Digital Manga very much, okay?

HS: Thank you.

GM: But those novels aren't great literature, but they were extremely rewarding to read. So it's possible for something not to be super fantastic, but very rewarding. I own two copies of each of them, and I give them as gifts, but the writing is rough. I understand that the writing in Japanese is rough. I don't read Japanese, but I understand that the original *Only the Ring Finger Knows* novels are not good, flowing Japanese prose-

HS: I don't either.

GM: What do you mean you don't read Japanese?

HS: I mean don't read those books.

GM: Oh, well, if you were going to read-

HS: No, no, I won't!

GM: Now, now, try this one, try *Cold Sleep* [8] because the translation I read was very very good. It was one of the best books I read last year.

HS: Really? Maybe I should read the English version.

GM: Well, yeah! And maybe it's even better in Japanese. And there's nothing in there that's going to make you uncomfortable. I don't know why it's even considered a yaoi novel, it could just be an amnesia story. Maybe there's some sex in the next two volumes. I couldn't tell if it was the writing or the translation, because a good translator will take small liberties with the prose. That didn't happen with *Only the Ring Finger Knows* novels, there were a lot of awkwardnesses that I'm told are in the original Japanese. But that's okay, that's okay, all we wanted to know was a little bit more about these characters and it delivered that. I understand there's going to be a second printing.

HS: That's a good sign.

GM: Yeah. So are the novels being profitable for DMI? Are they at least paying for themselves?

HS: The initial roll-out indicates that we can make a business out of it. So we've been grabbing more novels. I think we're the only company publishing yaoi novels.

GM: You are. I think Tokyopop is publishing novelizations of things like "Gundam Wing." VIZ doesn't acknowledge yaoi at all. They're publishing pop novels, like "Socrates in Love."

HS: Is that yaoi?

GM: No, it's a teenage romance.

HS: Okay, that's not yaoi. Yay!

GM: Yay, indeed. It's interesting because as far as I know, we don't have a genre like yaoi in the Untied States.

HS: That's right! That's why I like it!

GM: We don't have it! We'll have it next year, but for now, it's just what you publish.

HS: And the good thing about the novels, Ginger, is that there's no censorship because it's all text.

GM: That's nice. There were some drawings in them, there were some illustrations in *The Man Who Doesn't Take Off His Clothes* that were an eye-full.

HS: Oh really? I didn't see that.

GM: You should try to read one. Next time you're on a plane, just try to read *Cold Sleep*. You can read it in three or four hours.

HS: Nah.

GM: It's good, it's good, it's an amnesia story, I love amnesia stories!

HS: Hmmm.

GM: This (yaoi novels) is an interesting genre and I salute you and I commend you for bringing another aspect of Japanese literature and culture that we otherwise wouldn't get.

HS: I'm just looking at this as a business. Tokuma's president told me I should do it and when I did, it went very well in the first roll-out. And this is where my strategy comes in, that once I was profitable, I went at a high speed to get all the licenses I could.

GM: Go get 'em.

HS: Yeah.

GM: You get really good licenses, the best really.

HS: We try.

GM: There's got to be a lot of publishers chasing licenses in Japan. Like Toykpop, they're a machine. Are they based in Japan?

HS: They registered the main office in Toyko, but the guy who's running it is Stu Levy, he's an American guy.

GM: Are you friendly with the people at VIZ? It's a Japanese company.

HS: I know the founder, his name is Seiji Horibuchi, and he came here in the same year as I did, 1973. So he used to be a hippie, he used to be in a commune.

GM: Oh God.

HS: So he and I've been talking about the hippie movement. But just a couple of years ago he got kicked out. The parent company, Shogakukan & Sueisha, hired a new president, he's from Merrill Lynch, a financial guy.

GM: Japanese or American guy?

HS: He's Japanese and he's running the company. Horibuchi got kicked out and now he's doing something else. So, it's a very cutthroat business.

GM: It is! But I really like what you and DMI are doing with these novels. You know, because, eventually there's going to be a really good literate yaoi novel-

HS: And eventually it's going to be a movie. That's what I really want to do.

GM: -because we tend to only get translations of really serious literary Japanese novels. Until recently, we didn't get Japanese pop novels. We got things like, Yukio... what's his name? Mishima-

HS: Oh my God, that's so old.

GM: We got Junichiro Tanizaki-

HS: Oh, even older.

GM: And now we're getting, Haruki Murakami, the "Wild Sheep Chase" guy, one of those heavy-duty books. I mean, it's like, Japanese literature will kill ya.

HS: Yeah, I know, it's a very difficult stuff to read.

GM: But, you know, for decades Japan's been translating and publishing American Westerns and Detective novels, books you read on airplanes. I think even before the war, I think they were publishing the latest Chandler novels because whatever else they are, they're fun reads. And now, for the first time with DMI, there's a flow in the other direction. I'm always curious about what are they reading on the subway in Japan. That's what I want to know.

HS: Have you been to Japan?

GM: Nah. I would love to go, except for the sensory overload I'd get in the cities, I'd probably love it.

HS: You know in March or April, we have a Bishonen, Boys Love Tour, you know.

GM: That's just too funny. But it's a wonderful marketing idea.

HS: It's a great tour.

GM: I was at Yaoi-con two years ago, listening to a panel on Yaoi-Henti-whatever it is games-

HS: *(laughs)*

GM: Yeah, I know, that's even beyond what I'm willing to look at. But this woman running the panel was an American woman and she said it took her a while to figure it out because she doesn't speak Japanese (I think she said she didn't speak Japanese), but eventually she hooked into the right people and places and now she knows where to buy everything and she had an hour-long PowerPoint presentation on what were the hottest games and where to get them. I think she's a buyer for some retailer here. So if you have an interest in this stuff, your tour is a great way to go. Me, I'd rather go to Kyoto and look at shrines and art and parks and museum-type stuff.

HS: Oh, we have several types of tours. Like right now we have a tour in Hokkaido for the snow festival-

GM: Ooooooh! But very cold.

HS: But we still take them to the traditional things, like temples and shrines.

GM: I hear it's hard to get around in Japan because there's no street signs, deliberately confusing and held over from the feudal period, or at least that's what they tell me. I do think Tokyo would be hard on me, even though I've been in Istanbul and Almaty and other big cities; but I hear Tokyo is... different.

HS: You should definitely visit the country where yaoi was born. *(laughs)*

GM: Yeah, the birth place of yaoi. You mentioned in the Publishers Weekly interview that yaoi had been around for thirty years. Where?

HS: In Japan.

GM: Yeah, but where? Like, under rocks?

HS: I don't know where it was but it was around.

GM: Somebody needs to do a History of Yaoi.

HS: And, now when you go to the manga store in Japan, it's just yaoi yaoi yaoi, yaoi shelf after shelf of yaoi.

GM: And do you know why it's so popular?

HS: I have no idea. I'm a guy.

GM: And I'm a little too old for it, and yet still enjoy it.

HS: Oh, yeah, I've seen women your age come in here and they buy up all the yaoi stuff and giggling the whole time.

GM: Oh please.

HS: They're laughing at yaoi. They think it's funny more than sexy.

GM: What's her name, Kodama? The "Kizuna" woman, she gave an interview [9] last year, I don't know if was here or in Japan where she pretty much said that her books were not about men, that her characters were not really men.

HS: Oh?

GM: And I read some very negative reactions to that idea. But she's writing about a hybrid species, a conglomeration of traits she finds sexy, it's like men acting, excuse the language, but in slash fanfiction there's a term, "chicks with dicks," it's "men" acting like women.

HS: Oh.

GM: So I think the "chicks with dicks" trope is going on in yaoi, because most of the time the characters appear to be guys but their behavior is very girly, very feminine.

HS: So when they're (women) reading the manga, they're seeing themselves there.

GM: Yeah, projecting, sort of a boomerang projection, but yeah. So, yaoi has sort of taken over your business, yes?

HS: I would say almost seventy percent of the revenue is coming from yaoi, I must say.

GM: Wow.

HS: I like the money, and if that's what they want...

GM: Do you really want to expand into film?

HS: Yes. That's my ultimate goal.

GM: Production?

HS: No, licensing and overseeing it for the U.S. Here's a film I licensed to DreamWorks, it's called "Millennium Actress." You can take it home and watch it. You'll enjoy it.

GM: Oh, thanks, but I don't have a VCR.

HS: You don't? You're so high-tech.

GM: Sorry. I even watch DVDs on my laptop. "Millennium Actress"?

HS: I brokered the deal between the Japanese company and DreamWorks.

GM: Is it out?

HS: Yeah, three years ago. It was only in limited theaters, so that's why you didn't see it.

GM: Let's see (*rustles paper*), I actually have a list of questions here. Do you feel there's a contraction in the manga market in Japan? Is it shrinking?

HS: Yes, in the past couple of years it's been going down because the kids are spending more money on cell phones, games and stuff. The manga is going down. I think three years ago it used to be a six billion dollar business, but now I think it's about less than four billion.

GM: Ew. That's a third.

HS: A year, but it's still big.

GM: But it's booming here.

HS: I can see that Japan is going down, but the U.S. is going up. Based on the fact that I see merging of the culture between U.S. and Japan, I can see that manga is going to be really big.

GM: It's big already here.

HS: Not compared to-

GM: Marvel and DC?

HS: No, just manga in Japan. The whole revenue in America is only a little over two hundred million, compared to four billion in Japan. So it could grow that big in the future, I think, so I'm very excited. People are telling me that the market is being saturated here, and I have to tell them that they don't understand.

GM: How did you meet all your contacts in Japan?

HS: Just going there and calling them up. I was just a go-getter.

GM: Yeah. Is the publisher, Tokuma, that had *Only the Ring Finger Knows*, are they an old publisher? Do they publish other things?

HS: Yes. They're the publisher for Studio Ghibli's publications. They split with Studio Ghibli so they don't have that business anymore. But Tokuma's been in business more than a hundred years, I think. It's a very old, established publisher. After the founder died, about seven years ago, the company has been going down a little. I was surprised that they were doing yaoi because they're such a well-known publisher. But I'm glad they told me.

GM: Is it too soon to talk about the Japanese original language manga you've been commissioning? Did you think that up? It's brilliant.

HS: I did because I've always wanted to own everything and not just license because we only have limited rights, which is only to publish in America. Nothing. Just publishing rights, no film right, no online rights, no gaming rights, and that's not good. So, given that I saw how the market is going here on yaoi, why not?

GM: As long as you don't have to read them.

HS: The difficult part is working with the artist, because we have to do the editing and packaging part. So now we have to create from scratch.

GM: Don't they have book packagers in Japan?

HS: Yes, there are.

GM: So you just bring it over here, translate it and publish it. But it's a Japanese product that's never actually published in Japan.

HS: Right, right. There's one other plan I have and that's to sell these English yaoi manga back to Japan.

GM: That's kind of evil, isn't it?

HS: That's what I like about it!

GM: So, you're commissioning a Japanese creation, translating it into English, publishing it here, and if it's successful enough, you sell it back to Japan in English?

HS: Yes. There're so many kids in Japan that read English, these manga can be a language learning tool and entertainment.

GM: So you're pursuing commissioning work in Japan for the U.S. market mainly for the rights? Or are you running out of licenses?

HS: Oh, no no no. Licensing is still our main business, and since we dominate the market here in yaoi, a lot of publishers in Tokyo want to give us their licenses.

GM: You have a very nice product, so anything licensed to DMI is going to be well produced here. When are the original manga going to be launched?

HS: Sometime this year.

GM: Comic-Con? Yaoi-con?

HS: Probably for Comic-Con in the summer.

GM: I think original manga commissioned in Japan is a great idea. I know that Tokyopop is having a certain amount of success with their Original English Language manga-

HS: But they're not the yaoi though.

GM: I think they have a few yaoi titles, however, they're not separating them out from the other OEL titles.

HS: Oh, shit, they're copying me.

GM: No, no, they're not commissioning work from Japanese artists in Japan, it's all American. And the sensibilities are different. Without getting into a lot of trouble, I can't really explain what I feel are the differences between Japanese translated and OEL yaoi that I've seen. I will say that because yaoi has been on the Japanese market for thirty years, the people who draw and write it have perfected its codes and conventions, and American readers have gobbled up those codes and conventions, bones and all, at times, perhaps, not really completely understanding what they were consuming. They just knew it was enjoyable. American yaoi writers and artists are still forming the codes and conventions of the emerging American yaoi genre. As I said, we don't have an accepted, commercial yaoi novel genre here in the U.S., but look-out, because we will soon and it will knock your socks off. Same with the U.S. yaoi market, lookout, she's a comer.

HS: Well, if there's a market for it, U.S. publishers should do it.

GM: See, I want Marvel and DC to figure out the yaoi thing and have their writers and artists produce those books. That would really be terrifyingly wonderful. It will never happen because the fanboys would rise up and kill us all, but a woman can dream, can't she? Until then, we have your Japanese original manga to look forward to.

HS: I very much enjoy the process of creating something. I'm going to Tokyo and will be asking (Yuno) Ogami [10] to get the next title going.

GM: What title is that?

HS: Can't tell you because we haven't signed the deal yet.

GM: Ah.

HS: One other very interesting movement we're creating here, because the market is getting a little more competitive than before. Although we dominate the market, so it's not too difficult to grab anything we want, but further down the road, when I get retired, I have to let those guys (*waves at DMI cubicles outside the conference room*) and without me, because they don't have publisher connections, I want to do some groundwork for them to take over. So what I've started doing from this year is what we call "co-label" publishing.

GM: Co-label?

HS: Right. Right now, up to today, all the books that we license and publish just have our name, DMI or June or 801, on the covers. This is how it is with all publishers - VIZ, Tokyopop, anybody in this country - when they publish the licensed manga, they only put their own label on the books. They don't put the licensor's label, and I've never thought this was right. So I thought this is what we're going to do, we're going to put our name on top and the original publisher's name underneath. So that people can see who the original publisher was.

GM: So, like, "Digital Manga presents Tokuma's whatever it is."

HS: And the publisher is extremely happy, it's like a dream come true for them.

GM: That's almost like getting married.

HS: Yeah! But, in exchange for that, for making extra efforts to promote your label, you give us first look.

GM: Right of first refusal?

HS: Yeah. Under this co-label publishing deal, whenever they come up with a new title, they have to send a sample book to us first. And within thirty days we have to decide whether to publish or not, and if not, then it's up for grabs. But we have the first look rights, meaning we can grab anything we want.

GM: When will those books roll out?

HS: Probably next Spring. This will be the first co-label yaoi published in the U.S.. In yaoi history, actually, even in Japan they don't do that. They don't have to.

GM: So, Yaoi is certainly paying the rent. What projects are closer to your heart?

HS: "Vampire Hunter D."

GM: That's with Darkhorse, right?

HS: We co-published the novel with Darkhorse, but we're making the manga now. It's a hundred percent original. We own it. It's mainstream, not yaoi.

GM: You own "Vampire Hunter D"? Did you commission it?

HS: I didn't commission (the original novel) from the author, but the author said we can do anything we want. So we have the merchandizing rights, publishing rights, online/internet rights.

GM: Is Darkhorse co-publishing the manga?

HS: No, just DMI. Actually, Darkhorse didn't know anything about manga. I took Mike Richardson, President of Darkhorse, to Toyko and I told him we should grab this property, and we licensed "Vampire Hunter D" together, but we put both our names on the contract and the novel is selling very well.

GM: You published a few other manga with Darkhorse, didn't you?

HS: We did, because we needed the big name to get the mainstream titles. And it worked well for a while.

GM: What's that word? Synergy. Did you have a good synergy with Darkhorse?

HS: Yeah, synergy. As you can see I'm trying various strategies to make DMI more and more successful.

GM: I think that's smart, not putting all your eggs in one basket.

HS: I don't think my way of running business is the Japanese way, because I've never worked for a Japanese company in my life. I've only worked for U.S. companies. So I learned everything from them.

GM: How did your father run his anime studio?

HS: He started on his own and he was a good artist. He showed me the prizes that he won when he was younger, but he started that studio on his own, just a small mom and pop studio.

GM: Are you an only child?

HS: No, I have two brothers and used to have one sister, she died.

GM: Are the brothers still in Japan?

HS: They're still running the studio, yes.

GM: So you could always have a job if you went back to Japan?

HS: Oh, no, like I said, I hated it.

GM: If we could go back to the novels for a moment: are you planning to license and publish novels in genres than yaoi? Maybe mysteries or science fiction?

HS: Science fiction maybe. I'm in discussion with several publishers about this.

GM: That's good, because we only get "Serious Japanese Literature" here, we don't get Japanese pulp fiction. We need Japanese pulp fiction. Well, I need it. What do you think you'll be doing in ten years?

HS: From today? I'm going to get retried in about four years from today.

GM: Really? You have so much to do.

HS: I want to enjoy my life while I'm healthy-

GM: You're not enjoying this?

HS: -and still able to chase girls.

GM: Oh, come now.

HS: I can't chase girls with a cane.

GM: It's harder; you have to throw the cane at their legs so they fall down and then you chase them.

HS: Hey, no violence.

GM: So, in about four years you'll have enough co-labeling and production in the pipe to be able to walk away from all this?

HS: Yeah, we already signed the co-label with two companies and I'm expecting to sign with three more.

GM: Oh yeah? Which two publishers have you signed for the co-label deal?

HS: Taiyoh Tosho Publishing and Oakla Publishing.

GM: Are you going to sell DMI?

HS: I'd like to sell it to my employees.

GM: Oh, employee owned. How cool.

HS: I hope they'll be ready.

GM: I hope so, too, I mean, you might sell this company to someone who doesn't love and understand your employees as well as you do.

HS: That's right.

GM: I bet they're all out there saving their lunch money so they can buy DMI.

HS: I hope so.

GM: That would be nice, and another first. I don't think I've heard of any employee owned manga publishers.

HS: And I thought this would be a great incentive for them (my employees) to grow better and be more motivated. I mean today's kids don't seem very ambitious to get a life. So, here's a real opportunity for them, that if they're good enough, I'll sell the company to you.

GM: They're great people who work here. I'm sure they're out there figuring out how to get the company from away you.

HS: Everything is ready, going, it's a great opportunity.

GM: It could be a great opportunity for anyone to buy it. But there's four years to think about it. You don't have to make decisions right now. Do you have more than one kid?

HS: I have a daughter.

GM: How old is she?

HS: Fourteen.

GM: Ah, a teenybopper. Do you let her read yaoi manga?

HS: If she wanted to...

GM: Well, she could read *Only the Ring Finger Knows*, there's nothing in there that would scare anyone.

HS: Um... She reads VIZ.

GM: The only thing I thought about *Only the Ring Finger Knows*, was that if it's aimed at sixteen-ish year-old girls, it would be very confusing if they thought boys behaved the way they do in that manga, because boys just don't act like that. That was my main criticism of the manga. So, if you read this manga and think boys are going to act like that, they DON'T. Boys are great, but they don't burst into tears every five minutes. Let's see, so four years from now, you're going to be retried.

HS: Yes.

GM: That's great! I liked your picture on the Publishers Weekly interview. What kind of dog is that?

HS: It's a Shiba.

GM: Japanese dog?

HS: But he was born here.

GM: He's a Nisei dog. You have three dogs? All the same breed.

HS: No, two are Kishu, I brought two puppies from Osaka.

GM: And the USDA just let you bring foreign puppies into the United States?

HS: Well, after quarantine, yes.

GM: What's the breed?

HS: They're Kishu, very rare, I think I'm the only one in the U.S. who has that breed.

GM: What do you read for pleasure?

HS: Nothing.

GM: Nothing?

HS: Nothing. But I'm going to write my own book.

GM: Oh good.

HS: A publisher thinks my life is interesting for a book, so I'll write one.

GM: So no reading for pleasure.

HS: I don't enjoy reading so much, no time for it. I used to love it.

GM: How's the Beatles band doing?

HS: We're still playing at the club every month.

GM: What club?

HS: The Red Car. It's a restaurant brewery, we're there the last Saturday of every month.

GM: What's the band called again?

HS: The Mockers. It's Mock 'n Roll.

GM: The Mockers! I must remember that. But I think your bass drum has the Beatles on it.

HS: It does, but we're the Mockers.

GM: That's what confused me.

HS: Do you like the Beatles?

GM: Yeah, I do, but I like the Rolling Stones better. The Beatles were a little too easy to listen to, I'm more of a Rhythm and Blues person. I've only seen the Mockers perform in the office here at parties and the first time you were in regular clothes, but this last time you had those gray Beatles suits. They're adorable! Do you have any publicity stills?

HS: No, we should.

GM: You should. So you play rhythm guitar?

HS: Yeah, I'm John.

GM: Who else is in the band?

HS: Well, Hiro, who just joined the company, he plays lead guitar. And then Yoh, he plays bass, and we have Kayoko, who plays keyboard/synth, and the drummer is an American guy, whoever we can get.

GM: Your keyboardist has a hard job because she has to play everything that isn't the rhythm section, and the Beatles had strings and horns and lots of other instruments on their later work. And she had to do all that.

HS: She's really cool.

GM: Well, I've really enjoyed coming to parties here.

HS: Actually I was thinking of doing a tenth anniversary party.

GM: That would be great. I would come to that.

HS: Good.

GM: I guess that's it. Thank you very much.

HS: Thank you.

GM: I always enjoy speaking with you.

HS: It was a pleasure.

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[1] DMP's Sasahara Speaks Out. This story originally appeared in PW Comics Week on December 12, 2006 by Kai-Ming Cha, PW Comics Week -- 12/12/2006 (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6399114.html?nid=2789>)

[2] 01/03/2005 Archived Entry: "Manga review: Phoenix, vol 2" by Osamu Tezuka Published by VIZ, Review by Tom Good (<http://liheliso.com/buzz/archive/00000247.htm>)

[3] *Only the Ring Finger Knows*, by Satoru Kannagi, Published by Digital Manga Publishing, Review by Ginger Mayerson, Why older women should read yaoi manga redux. (<http://liheliso.com/buzz/archive/00000225.htm>) scroll down a little.

[4] 08/02/2003 Archived Entry: "An Interview with Dan Savage" by Ginger Mayerson and Laurel Sutton (http://liheliso.com/Issue1/Issue1.html#Dan_Savage)

[5] 10/29/2006 Archived Entry: "Interview with Toko Kawai" by Ginger Mayerson (<http://liheliso.com/buzz/archive/00000664.htm>)

[6] 08/03/2006 Archived Entry: "Interview with Makoto Tateno" by Ginger Mayerson (<http://liheliso.com/buzz/archive/00000626.htm>)

[7] *Only the Ring Finger Knows* Novels: *Only the Ring Finger Knows* (vol 1) (<http://liheliso.com/buzz/archive/00000573.htm>); *The Left Hand Dreams of Him* (vol 2) (<http://liheliso.com/buzz/archive/00000617.htm>); *The Ring Finger Falls Silent* (vol 3) (<http://liheliso.com/buzz/archive/00000666.htm>)

[8] 10/24/2006 Archived Entry: "Book review: Cold Sleep" by Ginger Mayerson (<http://liheliso.com/buzz/archive/00000661.htm>)

[9] Kazuma Kodaka Interview with Giant Robot (Issue #42)

"Giant Robot: How much connection do your stories have to gay culture?"

"Kazuma Kodaka: My manga is yaoi, not homosexual, and there's a subtle difference between the two. I could draw real homosexual comics, "slash," if you will, but female readers wouldn't accept it in the same way. To tell you the truth, I want to draw more realistically--realistic love scenes, for example. But I have to be careful to make it soft and mild. It's an essential point.

"The psychological aspect plays an important role, too. It's about how the characters feel and how they struggle to obtain love until it's finally achieved. The story is usually about the characters' feelings of pain and longing for each other, which is a more feminine sensibility." (http://comics212.net/2006_08_01_archive.shtml) Scroll down to August 18 and August 9, 2006 entries. The complete interview is not online, but you can probably get a back issue at Giant Robot (<http://www.giantrobot.com>).

[10] Ogami Yuno's Blog (<http://ogamiyuno.blog90.fc2.com/>)

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