



### 'Blue Giant': The Challenge of Animating Vibrant Jazz Soloists

Director Yuzuru Tachikawa discusses the difficulty in capturing the raw power and energy of the musicians behind his new film's young saxophonist, Dai Miyamoto, and his ambitious trio, when every solo is unique, and recording live performances picks up every little unwanted sound; film playing in U.S. theaters October 8-9.

By **Victoria Davis** | Monday, October 9, 2023 at 10:11am

In 2D, 3D, Anime, CG, Comics, Films, Music and Sound, People | [ANIMATIONWorld](#) | Geographic Region: [North America](#)



'Blue Giant,' playing October 8-9 in U.S. theaters. All images courtesy of GKIDS.

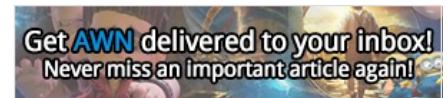
Over the last eight months, anime film and series director Yuzuru Tachikawa reports that jazz clubs across Japan are experiencing what he calls, "the *Blue Giant* phenomenon," after the February release of his jazz-centered feature, *Blue Giant*.

"Some jazz clubs here, that only had five or six regulars before *Blue Giant* released, are now completely packed, and with younger audience members," says Tachikawa. "Before working on this movie, I only had a general appreciation for jazz. I also hadn't read the manga until I was approached about directing this anime. But now, like a lot of these new club members, I also have a bigger love for the music and the performers."

Previously known for directing anime series like *Death Parade* and *Mob Psycho 100* and films such as *Case Closed: Zero the Enforcer*, Tachikawa notes that GKIDS and Toho Animation's *Blue Giant* – showing in U.S. theaters Sunday, October 8 and Monday, October 9 – is the first music-themed story he's directed. Tickets can be [purchased here](#).

Based on the award-winning 2013 manga of the same name by Shinichi Ishizuka, *Blue Giant* follows the grueling and ambitious journey of saxophone player Dai Miyamoto, who is determined to become one of the greatest jazz musicians of all time. He leaves his sleepy hometown for the bustling nightclubs of Tokyo, but soon finds the life of a professional musician is not for the faint of heart.

Dai's passion wins over the cocky but talented pianist Yukinori Sawabe, and after Dai convinces his friend Shunji Tamada to learn the drums, the trio launches a new jazz group. The three musician's rough sound contains a raw energy that quickly wins attention from local audiences. But Dai and his friends have to wrestle in their own ways with what it takes to truly be great, and to have



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confidence in your own craft.



A moving ode to the power of music and the artist, *Blue Giant* releases during both Toho and the manga's 10th anniversary; the film features electric performances and a stunning jazz soundtrack. It's also Tachikawa's first time directing an actual musician's performance.

"The person who played the sax for Dai in the movie, Baba Tomoaki, has a more sexy and sensual playing style," explains Tachikawa. "Meanwhile, Dai is more wild and green. He still has that strength and power, but the techniques are different. So, Baba-san really studied who Dai is in order to reflect that in his playing."

The film crew hosted worldwide auditions – which included several sax players from Berklee School of Music – before eventually landing on Tomoaki as the official saxophonist. But little would the audience ever guess that the team actually used the performances and talents of two sax players to capture the full essence of Dai's jazz.



"In jazz, there's a performance structure where you have the music theme and then you have the solo," notes Tachikawa. "For the theme part, there's sheet music and everyone's following that. But when it comes to the solos, that's where the personal expression comes in. And it's never the same, because it's always going to reflect that moment between the musician and their instrument. So, for the movie, when we asked the musicians, 'Could you repeat this part again?', the answer was no."

Tachikawa's approach, whenever they went in to record the musician, was to make sure to take both video and audio recordings at the same time and get the performance documented in its entirety. So, they had the video and audio reference for the animators. But then there was the problem of sound quality.

"For the actual recording of the jazz music, the one that would be put in the film, the musicians couldn't move at all," says Tachikawa. "Everyone would need to be still because you can pick up any of that rustling or any of those smaller sounds on the mic. But, as you know, Dai moves a lot in the movie. It's part of his expression. And it's part of the soloist's expression. We wanted that authentic soloist performance but, if you were to ask them to reproduce it, it's not going to happen. So, we recorded the soloist's original music, transferred it to sheet music, then had a different saxophone player, Baba-san, learn that music so I could actually direct that saxophone person's movement."

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All together the process took an inordinate amount of time. But it was necessary to infuse the authentic jazz sound into the film. Sound was undoubtedly a priority during the production as it was also one of the reasons the team decided *Blue Giant* would be adapted as a feature in the first place.



"I thought, after reading the original manga, that it should be a series instead of a feature," remembers Tachikawa. "But the producers really wanted it to be a movie, because they wanted the audience to be able to experience jazz at its fullest volume in a theater."

The crew also had to be conscious of the time they were spending on the anime's 2D animation and find ways to get as much fluidity out of the performances as possible while not killing the NUT animation team in the process.

"We did start out in 2D drawn animation with the drum, the piano, and the sax, but we learned it takes an extraordinary amount of time to produce all those movements in 2D," says Tachikawa. "To give an example, Tamada's solo, toward the end of the movie, took us three to four months to create. We learned from that experience that it takes too much effort and time, and that was not viable."

Especially when so much time was already being spent on capturing authentic soloist music and motion. So, like many sports animes have also done, the team made use of 3DCG animation for some of the film's jazz performance sequences.

"We definitely used a lot of CG when we were in the audience's point of view," notes Tachikawa. "And to help with the transitions of going back and forth between the 2D and the CG, we went back to the original manga, where they use a lot of vertical and horizontal lines to express shadow. We brought that into both the CG and 2D sequences to express those shadows and build some continuity."

The director notes that some of his favorite jazz clubs he's attended during the research process for this film were Blue Note – which has locations across the globe including New York, NY; Waikiki, Hawaii; Napa, CA; Tokyo, Japan; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; São Paulo, Brazil; Milan, Italy; Beijing and Shanghai, China – as well as the Tokyo jazz club Cotton Club. Tachikawa encourages everyone who sees *Blue Giant* and gets a spark of curiosity about the jazz genre to check out these clubs, and others local to their area, to see face-to-face the magic of jazz and get to know the performers and their passion for musical storytelling.

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"I've gotten to talk with these musicians about expression and emotion and how that all works in the world of jazz," said Tachikawa. "I'm really happy to hear that others are getting curious about this as well."



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at [victoriadavisdepiction.com](http://victoriadavisdepiction.com).

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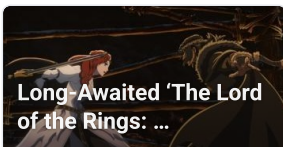
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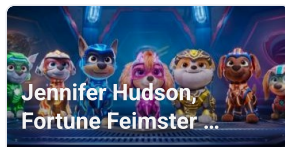
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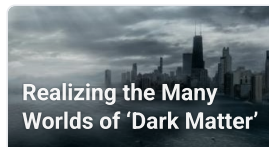
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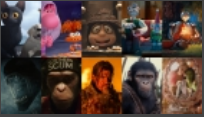
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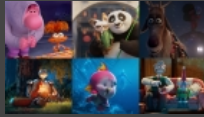
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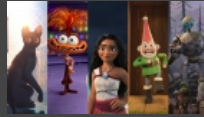
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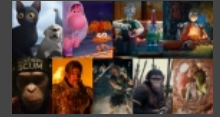
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