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KAIJU BIG BATTEL!





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Greatly Colored Too Tall Monsters,
Irresponsible Pictures and Goodbye Kitty!

By Dana Morgenstein

You've seen the sliders. You've heard the buzz. Maybe, if you're lucky, you've even seen the monsters in action. Yes, it's that time of year again: on April 6, MassArt is going to host the mighty, fearsome beasts of Kaiju Big Battel and their most recent event, Matsuri Most Mayhem.

It seems at this point in Kaiju's history that everyone in Boston has heard about it, through word of mouth and the omnipresent Dr. Cube logos stuck on public property all over the city. But few people know exactly what Kaiju is. It certainly is difficult to pigeonhole with its combination of Japanese monster movies, WWF-style wrestling, physical comedy, cartoon violence, and Double-Dare-style games.

"A lot of it is appropriated from Japanese pop culture. I mean, it's kind of mocking it but paying homage to it at the same time. It's the same with the wrestling. We'll mock it, but we'll respect it for what it is and recognize it for what it is," says Dave Borden, Kaiju's main spokesperson and operations leader.

When it's suggested that Kaiju's success has ridden on the recent success of Japanese

imports like Pokemon, Dave demurs. "It's as American as American can be, with a nice Japanese wrapper on it."

Kaiju is the creation of Dave's brother, Rand, and his friends from his years as a student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Founded in 1994, Kaiju has evolved from what Dave describes as a "wacky art collective" into a performance-art troupe with a huge local following, serious aspirations, and, in light of America's increasing fascination with Japanese culture, enormous potential for national recognition.

The seeds of Kaiju Big Battel were planted in the 1970s, when the brothers Borden discovered Japanese monster movies on *Creature Double Feature*, Saturday afternoons on local UHF channel WUVE 68. Dave was just fascinated, but Rand quickly became obsessed. (When asked if Rand is a Japanophile, Dave laughs and says, "Ask his Japanese wife.") By the time he started college at SMFA, Rand was determined to make his name by making Japanese-style monster movies.

In 1994, he rounded up some friends and started a small collective in order to make his first opus, a short film in which several of the future Kaiju monsters clobbered each other and wreaked havoc in a cardboard city. The collective got its name from the Japanese word for "monster" (Kaiju) and a fortuitous misspelling of the word "Battle." Rand did most of the creative work; he spent the better part of a year designing the costumes and building them out of foam rubber.

After the movie was made and screened, invitations to bring the monsters to perform at parties started pouring in. The Kaiju creations made their public debut on Halloween night, 1994, at the Revolving Museum in Boston. The initial Battel featured Midori No Kaiju, Atomic Cannon, Puma Ranjuro, and Fuzzy Trooper Hobo, all formidable monsters indeed, but the fighting style was what Dave describes as "foxy-boxing"; the monsters lumbered around and slapped aimlessly at each other. It was certainly funny, but it wasn't wrestling—after all, none of the Kaiju crew were particularly interested in wrestling.

"It was more just about kids having a good time," Dave says. The shows weren't planned or choreographed, and there was no production, no good lighting, and no AV.

It quickly became clear that as sloppy as the execution might be, that Kaiju was a big idea, and crowds loved it. The Kaiju crew began staging full-scale shows every few months, in the Atrium at the Museum School, and Kaiju slowly grew into an underground phenomenon in Boston, attracting curious crowds at parties, Halloween events, and their own shows. By 2002, some real wrestling was incorporated into the show, which drew in WWF fans along with the performance-art devotees and Japanophiles that Kaiju had attracted from the beginning.

By spring of 2000, though, Rand was getting discouraged. Sure, people loved Kaiju, but what was happening in the ring still wasn't what he

had pictured. The wrestling was amateurish; the characters didn't really do much but flail around, much less evince the personalities he'd imagined for them. There was pretty much no money being made, so there were no funds to turn towards improving the characters or the shows. Everything was paid for out-of-pocket, and everyone involved had to have day jobs. The staff was constantly changing, since it consisted of mostly college students who were always leaving after four years, and there were many hangers-on who weren't doing much of anything. Word of all, after a few matches, the shows could get outright boring. Something needed to be done. It was time for an ultimatum.

Rand called together his staff and told them that if they weren't willing to put in the time and effort to help his dream project become a reality, he was going to quit. "He wanted to realize his dream of making a living off of Japanese monsters," Dave says. Rand also called in Dave, who had studied marketing and entrepreneurship at Northeastern University, and asked him for help pulling Kaiju together and turning it into a genuine entertainment-based business.

Making Kaiju work as a business was going to take some doing. The Kaiju staff was composed of students and artists, most of whom were in it for fun and weren't necessarily disposed to hard work. "In time, we just had to put a lot more effort and resources into it. A lot of people who weren't willing to make the commitment kind of faded into the sunset because we're a lot more demanding now." And somehow, Dave would have to simultaneously get his staff to refine the artistic aspects of Kaiju and find new ways to fund the endeavor.

So first came the new T-shirts. There had been some T-shirts sold before, but they were often made unilaterally by Rand, and "there was no quality control. If it was crappy, it was crappy; if it was good, it was good." The new shirts were standardized and put up for sale on the website.



Then came the Dr. Cube skull-and-crossbones logo, and the stickering campaign. A few years ago, Rand had made "Dr. Cube has a posse" stickers, parodying the famous "Andre the Giant has a posse" guerilla-art campaign. Now, Dave was handing out stickers and giant stamps to the new Kaiju street team, who stuck Dr. Cube's face and the Kaiju logo on everything from buses to boarded-up storefronts to dumpsters, and stamped his likeness on walls and sidewalks everywhere.

"I've heard so many people say, 'I saw these stickers everywhere and I had no idea what it was, and then I asked the right person,'" Dave says. He plans on putting the URL of the Kaiju website (<http://www.kaiju.com>) on the next run of stickers, so that passersby who have their curiosity piqued by the Dr. Cube logo can solve the mystery more easily.



There had always been a Kaiju Big Battle! web-page, but Version 2.0 made its debut around this time featuring extensive bios on the characters, video footage and photography from the events, and ongoing explanations and elaborations of the rivalries between the characters. ("They need a reason to fight.") The current version, which Dave describes as Version 2.5, also features a message board and fan-art sections, giving the growing fan population a place to gather and share their obsession.

That fall, the first Battle under the new system, Mayhem at the Atrium IV, was a marked improvement from the earlier events, but still needed work. The first few matches still consisted of "foxy-boring" matches between the larger, clumsier characters like Multi-Moog (whose head and arms fell off in the ring) and Mota Nuru. The action didn't really pick up until the final match, where Super Akuma,

Space Bug, and Dr. Cube battled each other for the title belt, concluding with Dr. Cube elbow-dropping Super Akuma through the announcer's table. While it started off slowly, Mayhem IV was a harbinger of better things to come.

"We just made it more deliberate," Dave says. Ever since Mayhem IV, each match has been scripted, choreographed, and rehearsed, and with each subsequent show, the action gets better and better, including complex acrobatics in the ring and even aerial spots.

Curiously enough, though, none of the Kaiju wrestlers have ever had any background in wrestling, and very few of them are even fans. "We don't pride ourselves on the wrestling," Dave says, but points out that a lot of Kaiju wrestlers have backgrounds in dance and other performance art. The actor inside Silver Potako is a breakdancer, and Uchu Chu, the Space Bug, used to be a gymnast.

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Being in the ring might look like fun, but being inside the monster costumes is actually pretty grueling: the costumes are heavy and hot, and smell funny. Even Rand gave up being in costume early on, due to a knee injury. But Kaiju is rapidly coming up in the world, and despite all of the obstacles involved, it's constantly growing in popularity and notoriety. They've already outgrown their usual performance space, the Atrium at SMFA, and at the last Atrium show, they had to turn away hundreds of people who had formed lines wrapping all the way around the block. The Kaiju staff have even gotten offers from management companies who see potential for TV shows and children's toys, but they're determined to go it alone.

"We're not short on ideas. It's just a matter of getting the financing and the resources. Slowly but surely."

The first Kaiju Big Battle of 2002 is set to explode. Come join 1,200 Kaiju fans, 25-plus monster wrestlers, and more crushable mini-cityscapes per square foot than ever before, as Kaiju Big Battle and Les Sauv' Fau star in Matsuri Mass Mayhem at Mass Art in Boston (621 Huntington Ave.) on Saturday April 6. Doors and DJ Brian at 7:30PM. All ages. For more info check out: <http://www.kaiju.com>

photos / courtesy Kaiju Big Battle!

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"It was more just about kids having a good time," Dave says. The shows weren't planned or choreographed, and there was no production, no good lighting, and no AV.

However, the first Battel drew considerable attention, and soon friends began asking Rand if he and his ragtag band of creatures would perform at their parties and events. It quickly became clear that as sloppy as the execution might be, that Kaiju was a big idea, and crowds loved it. The Kaiju crew began staging full-scale shows every few months in the Atrium at the Museum School, and Kaiju slowly grew into an underground phenomenon in Boston, attracting curious crowds at parties, Halloween events, and their own shows. By 1997, some real wrestling was incorporated into the show, which drew in WWF fans along with the performance-art devotees and Japanophiles that Kaiju had attracted from the beginning.

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