



SUB POP: Fansubbers (above) add English subtitles to pirated videotapes of anime like *Princess Mononoke* (right) and *Pokémon: the First Movie*

# The Anime Underground

THE HOT CARTOON GENRE HAS ONE DRAWBACK: JAPANESE DIALOGUE. ENTER THE "FANSUBBERS"

**A**N IMPORT BROKER BY DAY, 26-YEAR-OLD "JOEY" SPENDS HIS nights on a peculiar, labor-intensive hobby. A huge fan of Japanese animation, or *anime*, Joey buys up anime DVDs direct from Japan, meticulously translates the dialogue into English, then produces high-quality, subtitled videotape copies to give away or trade with other fans. • In Los Angeles's thriving underground of Japanese animation fandom, these "fansubbers" are the ultimate anime evangelists, delivering obscure classics like *Vampire Princess Miyu* to the non-Japanese-speaking masses. There's only one hitch: Fansubbing is technically video piracy, prosecutable under a host of international copyright laws. Fansubbers counter that they're in it only for the love of anime and as a matter of principle never sell their wares. "I know that, in the eyes of the law, what we're doing is wrong," says Joey. "But without us fansubbers [creating hype], the anime industry in the U.S. wouldn't be nearly as big as it is."

And anime in Hollywood is big business. In October, Miramax released *Princess Mononoke* (featuring the voices of Claire Danes, Gillian Anderson and Billy Bob Thornton) after the film grossed a record-breaking \$163 million in Japan. Two weeks later, *Pokémon: The First Movie* cashed in on the grotesquely lucrative Japanese video game/TV show/trading card franchise, earning \$52 million in five days.

Fansubbed tapes circulated months and sometimes years ahead of domestic releases are credited with jump-starting the anime craze in Hollywood, which

**LABUZZ**  
the industry

has made for an uneasy working relationship between mammoth anime distributors like Sony and tiny L.A.-based fansubbing crews like Team ABCB, Anime West and Hana Yori Anime. While fansubs are invaluable in generating buzz about upcoming releases, fansubbed tapes can easily become bootlegs. Fansubbed versions of *Princess Mono-*

Months before its theatrical release, *Princess Mononoke* was available on videotape with translations provided by L.A. fansubbers.



*noke*—subtitled by L.A. groups months before its U.S. theatrical release—have turned up on eBay priced at more than \$50. Fansubs are also routinely found for sale at local video stores, right next to their legitimate counterparts.

True fansubbers are mortified when their work ends up in the hands of bootleggers. According to Carl Horn, an editor at Viz Communications, a major distributor of anime in this country, the studios probably won't go after them. "It would be really bad publicity," he says, adding that, like himself, "there are former fansubbers working throughout the Industry."

But the fansubbers may be done in by their own success, as the art form they helped popularize explodes: With Blockbuster now stocking hundreds of anime titles, why would anyone need a fansub? Still, there will always be anime that will never be released in the United States. "Like *Marmalade Boy*," laughs "Madeline," a fansubber who works for a mainstream studio. "A girl's parents go on vacation, meet another couple and fall in love, swap mates and then they all live together in the same house." The length, a whopping 76 episodes, is not a great selling point, either. "That series," she predicts, "will never make it here."

—ROBERT ITO