

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

When Raheem Jarbo was growing up in Philadelphia, he loved to play Nintendo – like a lot of kids. His favorite game was Mega Man, which is about a happy-go-lucky robot called Mega Man who jumps around and shoots bad robots with his arm cannon.

But what really sucked Raheem into the game was the music.

CLIP: GAME MUSIC

MR: And that was one of the first games where when you paused it, the music would still play.

I actually know a guy who said MM was the first video game character he connected with because Mega Man blinked.

MR: Ha! So because Mega Man blinked, that's a really interesting point, the only other one was Sonic.

Yeah.

MR: Stood, blinked, tapped feet and things like that, that's a really, really good point, I didn't think about that.

But he did give a lot of thought to Mega Man's internal world – like what was this little guy thinking?

MR: Although MM did blink he didn't talk and there was no dialogue in these games, that made me as a kid fill in dialogue, imagine what he would say, I used to write and draw and I make comics and make up my own video games and draw storyline out, I did a imaginary MM3 what if he got fed up with having to save the world, and Dr. Wiley same thing, and he exercises his free will and walks away he does something crazy, shoots Dr. Wiley

Doctor Wily is the bad scientist that creates the robots Mega Man has to fight.

MR: And now he's a killer, and he's trying to figure out who he is, so I would write elaborate stories for game surface level storyline, there was no dialogue therefore you had to imagine what the story was.

Eventually when Raheem grew up, he became a junior high teacher. But deep down he missed the creativity of being a kid and imagining the world of Mega Man. So he combined his two passions – video games and music - - to become the hip hop artist known as Mega Ran who raps about what it's like to be Mega Man.

CLIP: ENDLESS

In my last episode, I looked at the challenges of creating a concept album based on original material. This episode is about a different kind of challenge – how to create a world of your own out of someone else's source material. In other words, how do you create fan fiction with music?

MR: It's extremely difficult to create your own of course, but it's even harder to take existing world and twist it spin it, turn it upside down and extend it because people are so accustomed to the way that world looked, and so changing it can really upset people, so you have to be cautious and careful when dealing with existing universe.

But I was curious where he finds that of point of identification. What is it that makes him relate to this 8-bit video game character not as a kid but as an adult?

MR: I do feel like Mega Man being a creation used for good by Doctor Light and being born in rough world but yet having one mission to save people constantly and be the best he could be, I felt that pressure coming up as only child and being raised by a mother didn't finish college and so many regrets and she wanted me to be the best I could be in this world to make up for things she didn't come through all the way on, so I felt a little bit of that overwhelming pressure to be good, and to make the world a little better, Mega Man is a character that is so inherently good and he's just a good guy, he does what he has to do but he never stops to ask why and I feel like that's myself, I do what I have to do and I don't stop to figure out why, why am I here? What's going on created this? And why am I doing this?

But he did need to ask himself HOW do I do this? How do I create not just a concept album, but a series of concept albums? At this point he was still teaching, he hadn't quit his job yet to pursue music full time, so he did what any good teacher would do. He did his homework.

MR: I went back and I listened to Tommy a whole lot and listened to amazing concept records to try and figure out – I do feel like we're in singles world, and people want a

first song draw you in, and you don't want to give them chapter 7 of 27 page novel first, where they're like what's going on? So trying to create songs that are catchy as well as telling a story as well as working within concept of entire record is very difficult, but I was able to find middle ground with Splash Woman.

Splash Woman is one of the enemies Mega Man faces in the game.

MR: Everyone loves a good love story, and a love story is something I don't do a lot, and being able to tell love story within concept of album, catchy, and also has great beat, a huge challenge, and even more today I think that's you don't see concept albums from folks today because of 99cent single generation.

CLIP: SPLASH WOMAN

There's actually a whole genre called Nerdcore, where people made albums based on fantasy worlds.

MR: Literally when I started this I would Google every day to see if anyone was doing what I was do, none in Hip Hop but the closest was Megas and Protomen,

The Megas and The Protomen are rock bands but they are doing the same thing -- exploring the world of Mega Man through concept albums. Luckily, everyone was cool with having Mega Ran join the scene.

MR: And so my first weekend performing Mega stuff was at SDCC I got chance to play with Megas, I got a chance to play with them.

Of course the other challenge of creating music based on someone else's intellectual property – the fear of being sued. And Mega Ran was seriously worried about that. And he was eventually contacted by CapCom, the company that makes Mega Man. But they weren't going to serve him with cease and desist letter. It turns out, they were fans of his work, and they wanted him to create an alternate soundtrack to a new version of Mega Man they were putting out.

MR: So yes, CC got involved, they didn't sue me which was amazing I thought that was real possibility and so I give them so much respect for coming tome and enabling me to do what I do.

When Mega Ran is on stage, he certainly doesn't wear the character's signature helmet or boots, but he does have a homemade arm cannon, like the video game character.

MR: During Splash Woman take out arm canon and it lights up and does cool stuff too so it makes for fun change of pace at hip hop show.

And it turns out Mega Ran is not the only hip hop artist embodying a 1990s video game character – or using an arm canon in concert.

He found a friend in Sammus, who models herself after the main character in the game Metroid. They even went on tour together under the billing “Rappers With Arm Cannons.”

S: People freaked out, saw me and to this day it's this cool thing that I can do outside comic con or a convention that I can do at any show and there's going to be someone who played Metroid who played Smash Bros whose excited by it and recognizes it.

CLIP: CYBERNETIC ARMOR

As I got to know Sammus I was fascinated by the ways her story parallels Mega Ran but deviates in interesting ways. But more importantly, it became clear that what she and Mega Ran are doing isn't just a fun exercise in video game nostalgia. Their albums tap into deeper issues around race, gender and representation in pop culture.

More on that just after the break.

BREAK

As I mentioned earlier, Raheem Jarbo aka Mega Ran used to be a junior high teacher before he started rapping.

It turns out Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo used to be a high school teacher before she started rapping under the name Sammus. In fact, she's still working on getting her PhD at Cornell.

Her parents are both professors, which I related to because my Dad's a professor, my mom's a teacher, and they thought I'd go into academia like

my brother did. So I wondered how Sammus's parents felt about her pursuing music, which is now her full time career.

S: Now they understand it more but initially, I think it was a shock to them, I was a shy kid, introverted, you know, I was always kind of a nerd, bookish doing my work so this also deviates from their idea of a careers path never in a million years thought pursue a rap career.

Have they had those are you going to be doing this at 50 conversations?

S: Yeah, we haven't had those conversations, where see yourself in 20 years? But I had conversation with Dad and he said whatever you do be the best.

That's nice.

S: Yeah that was really sweet shift a couple years ago do well in academy move down track.

Her deviation from that track started when she was seven years old.

Her brother was playing the game Metroid – where you control a warrior in cybernetic suit called Sammus who is running, rolling and blasting through a maze while killing aliens. The game was initially inspired by the Alien franchise starring Sigourney Weaver.

But when the video game came out in the '80s, you don't know that Sammus is a woman because she's in full body armor. It's not until you complete the game, when she takes the armor off and waves at you.

S: I do remember being surprising and latching on to that character and deeply connecting there is this woman can do all these things, I couldn't verbalize that, I felt had connection because I knew she was a woman there was relationship I had with her that I didn't have with other characters.

She'd always been a big hip-hop fan. And when she became a teacher, she started developing a hip-hop curriculum to get the kids more interested in the reading material. But after a while, she realizes this project was more about her own artistic development – and she wanted to perform these songs herself. But at first, they weren't about video games.

S: I remember early on I was starting to rap I didn't have rap persona at that time, I went to an open mic situation, and I played beats afterwards I said that was me, I produced this, and I got off stage and this guy came up to me, who makes your beats? No less than 15 seconds after had conversation, and that continues to happen to this day.

Wow, still!

S: Yeah, it's crazy; it's really strange,

In fact, she was venting to a friend about this, and her friend said you're just like Sammus. Boys would play Metroid and not know she was a woman until the big reveal, they had to grapple with the idea that they were playing a female character for weeks. Some boys were cool with it but others thought they had cooties.

So Enongo decided to call her Sammus and to create concept albums around this character and her interior world. She also loved the idea of mixing video games with hip-hop because hip-hop has always been about repurposing pop culture.

S: Yeah I think that can be a cool aspect of repurposing a character that allows me to feel like I'm doing the right thing, it's okay to repurpose the character instead of creating an entirely new one just yet.

But she still worried about the challenges ahead.

S: The first thing I did looked back, my name, Sammus is still spelled the same from Nintendo and a few months I added an extra M because I got stressed about Nintendo hearing about it, but also at that moment was when I realized the kind of deep relationship that people had with the character of Sammus whether prepared to deal with taking on the weight of this particular character and not just doing her justice in terms of being a great rapper or maybe doing project about her, but the dark underbelly of geek culture, I wasn't sure if I wanted to engage with the trolls or the people who were going to tell me Sammus isn't black, why are you taking on character? Even in '09 I had some anxiety it wasn't the moment currently internet spaces.

Leaning about backstory, points of connection for you said. okay I can identify or emotionally I understand that part of Sammus's story and she could tell my story or I could tell her story?

S: It was really daunting task, there isn't a lot of dialogue you have to, not just Nintendo game, it's so much about isolation it's puzzle like and labyrinth different corridors.

And doing awesome flips

S: And doing amazing flips, and rolls and throwing bombs, I took quite a long time how to approach game, you could speak about it in terms of levels, like there's different stages but it didn't feel to me the right way to approach the game, I connected deeply with the darkness and isolation that the game embodies in the music, you know growing up in upstate NY winters, they are so dark and deep and cold and isolating and so I wrote some

of the songs for Metroid project during upstate NY winter, and it was perfect. And I think it allowed me embodying the character allowed me to do things in hip hop I don't do in the rest of my canon, I don't have songs flexing how awesome I am but this project allowed me to take on a more quote on quote traditional persona look at my swag I'm so amazing pretending to be someone else.

That's so interesting, you won't be like I've read all seven volume of ...

S: Right, it doesn't work as well but yeah, you know I'm rolling around, dropping bombs, that is stuff I feel confident talking about, the coolness of it.

CLIP: MAE JEMISON

In my last episode, I talked about how music has a unique ability to stimulate our imagination while we're listening, and the songwriter can be a guide while your mind wanders. Sammus thinks that phenomenon takes on a different aspect with her music, depending on who the listener is.

S: People who love Metroid and love Sammus if they like my music they have to engage with my blackness, have to engage with my black identity it permeate everything I've written my feminism, my identity as a woman, my experience all part of the storytelling I do, so I think while taking on this character understand merits of new worlds and new universes has allowed the space for conversations to happen that I don't know would've happened otherwise.

In fact, both Sammus and Mega Ran have artwork on their albums that imagine their video game alter egos as being black.

Mega Ran says initially he didn't do that to be socially conscious.

MR: Initially it was funny it would get laugh to paint mega Mega Man black what I was doing beaming me into Mega Ran suit and it's a quantum leap situation so I wasn't trying to reclaim it and make it bigger than it was it but over years it has becoming something signal and beacon for representation in games, comics, video games, music, whatever we're into and I'm really happy with the growth the scene has made since then.

Another parallel between their careers – both Mega Ran and Sammus started out worrying whether people would accept them in the roles of these established pop culture characters. But now that they've both found success, they want to move away from their video game identities and explore about other ideas and they hope their fans will come along for the ride.

MR: As weird as it sounds I want to move from MM, it still something I want to build mythology, world, universe outside being connected to someone else's copyright or source material.

S: I really agonized about it but I had this realization performing at a festival the music and gaming festival, MAG FEST. I decided to perform some video game tracks but I decided to perform my canon about my lived experience and people were so receptive and that made me realize I had been doing disservice to myself and supporter in terms of thinking when I get into geek and nerd spaces, I can only perform video game stuff as if we don't go through the things everyone goes through depression or anxieties about doing right things, relationship issues, these are thing all of us deal with.

And that's what my podcast has always been about. These fantasy worlds didn't come from other planets or parallel dimensions. We made them up, right here. They're always about us, whether the characters look like us or not.

CLIP: INFINITE LIVES

Well, that's it for this week – and this two-part episode on musical worlds. Thank you for listening and special thanks to Mega Ran and Sammus.

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