

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

On a hot and humid Saturday night, I took the subway up into the Bronx until I got to Daro's Gym. It's a wide space. No A/C. But there were huge industrial fans in the walls. To the side of all the exercise equipment was a wrestling ring, surrounded by rows of folding chairs. And above the ring was a banner for the BWF: The Bronx Wrestling Federation.

The place was packed. I got the sense everyone was local to the neighborhood. They have shows the first Saturday night of every month. Many of the wrestlers were working in the style of the WWE with oversized personalities, trying to get the crowd on their side -- with mixed results. Then the real star emerged: Bronco Internacional.

First of all, the guy was huge. His arms were so muscular; he looked like an action figure from the '80s. And he's a luchador -- he dresses in the style of Lucha Libre, which is Spanish for Mexican wrestling.

If you're unfamiliar with the costume a luchador -- the big part of it is the mask. It covered his entire head except for two teardrop shaped openings around his eyes, and an open slit for his mouth.

But the funny thing about Bronco is that he looks fearsome but he wears bright colors. That night his costume was hot pink. And he rode to the ring on a child-sized scooter, which corresponded with a video they projected earlier that showed Bronco chasing down a car-jacker on that little scooter.

The kids loved him. They cheered for him the whole match. And at the end of the night, they lined up to get pictures with him.

How long have you been wrestling as Bronco Internacional?

ASTRO (translating): He's been wrestling for 35 years.

Bronco is from the Dominican Republic. He doesn't speak English. So one of the employees, Astro Morales, helped to translate.

Tell me about Bronco, he's a good guy, right?

ASTRO (translating): He says his personality is catered towards kids, that's why he comes out with colorful colors, and stuff like that because he caters to the young fan base so yeah, he's a good guy.

Do you feel like a real life superhero when you know up here? Do you feel like Captain America showing up in the wrestling ring?

ASTRO (translating): Yeah, he says he feels like a superhero, his character, he can inspire younger kids, he did a movie where he was a young boy dreaming about being a wrestler and being a superhero, he did a movie based on a story like that.

In real life, Bronco runs the gym, helps organize the Bronx Wrestling Federation, and he worked in construction. But:

ASTRO (translating): Once I put the mask on, I transform myself into this character, this superhero, as opposed to my regular life, I'm regular me, when I put the mask on, I'm different, I'm a different guy, I'm a superhero.

A few weeks ago, I did an episode about the WWE. And that got me interested in Lucha Libre, which has been on a steady upswing in popularity in the U.S. over the last ten years

But what I find fascinating about Lucha Libre are the masks and capes because, well, you know...

GORDON: And you're wearing a mask

JOKER: Batman must take off his mask and turn himself in

BANE: No one cared who I was until I put on the mask.

That last quote from Bane in The Dark Knight Rises has running through my head ever since I talked with these luchadors – “No one cared who I was until I put on the mask.” And appropriately, Bane's costume in the comics is based on Lucha Libre.

So I was curious. Do they really get to feel like a superhero, or a super villain? And do they have some of the same problem of maintaining their dual identities?

We'll hear more wrestlers later on, but first, I wanted to back up to learn the history of Lucha Libre. How did it evolve to this point where it was so different from North American wrestling?

Heather Levi is a professor at Temple University, and she is one of the most prominent U.S.-based academics who studies Lucha Libre. In fact, as part of her research, she trained to be a luchador in Mexico City.

HEATHER: It allowed me to understand the physicality of it, and it helped me understand what draws people to it.

The masks are the most defining feature of Lucha Libre. But Heather says it was actually a wrestler from Missouri named Cyclone MacKey, who first introduced masks to Mexico when he wrestled there in the 1930s.

HEATHER: And there was this shoemaker who had developed a boot for the wrestlers. So all of the wrestlers were buying their boots from this guy. According to the son of that shoemaker, his father was approached by Cyclone MacKey who said to him, uh, you know, I want to wrestle in a mask can you make me a mask? Something like a hood, something like the KKK would wear. And also in Mexico in that period, the Klan would have been known for lynchings of Mexicans in Texas. So I mean, he was really going to be a rudo.

A “rudo” is a bad guy. The term for a good guy is a “technico.” Now a white hood is not practical to wrestle in. So the shoemaker designed a mask to fit very snugly around McKey’s head. And when he debuted in Mexico City as The Masked Marvel, Mexican wrestlers quickly started emulating his look.

HEATHER: I think the first Mexican to use it -- at least some of the things that I read said that it was, what was his name? Murciélago Velasquez, who means a Bat Velasquez who would come into the ring wearing a mask and releasing a swirl of bats.

It's like Batman.

HEATHER: Yeah, yeah, exactly. They don't all wear masks. They've never all worn masks.

But at least half of them do. Some people have theorized the masks caught on because there's such a long history of masks in Mexico from the Aztecs to Day of the Dead celebrations. But Heather thinks the reason masks caught on was because they allowed people to transcend social class – not in terms of money. Lucha Libre was never that lucrative. It was more about respectability.

HEATHER: You're talking to this guy and he puts on a mask and you're talking to something else after that, you know, you're talking to this figure. So one thing that the mask does is really makes people be larger than life. You know, it adds this aura of mystery. You don't know who this person is. And the other thing about it is that since a lot of the people who would go to Lucha Libre, the luchadors are coming from the same neighborhoods that they're coming from, right? So if the luchador is wearing a mask, on the one hand, he's this mysterious figure, this larger than life superhero. And on the other hand, he might be your next-door neighbor for all you know.

Television also shaped the way Lucha Libre evolved – or the lack of TV. Lucha Libre was televised very briefly in the '50s, and didn't come back to Mexican TV until the 1990s. So there is no history of luchadors boasting to the cameras.

HEATHER: You're not playing to the mic, you're playing to the third balcony.

That's why Lucha Libre is more acrobatic than the WWE. I mean, it's just as choreographed, but there are no epic storylines where they build up the characters outside the ring. And with less time devoted to trash talking, there's more wrestling. Even amateur matches can last for ten minutes.

HEATHER: Which may not sound like much, but if you think about what it would be to do laps of somersaults and leapfrogs, right? It's that level of aerobic activity. So 10 minutes of it is pretty intense. The last match of the night is a half hour and they're wrestling the whole time.

A week after I went to the Bronx, I took the subway to another end of New York. An organization called American Luchas was putting on an event at a community center in Corona, which is one of the last stops in Queens. The crowd was full of families. Vendors were selling masks at tables. All the announcements were all in Spanish, and a few of wrestlers had come directly from Mexico.

The Laredo Kid is the town of Laredo, which is just past the Texas border. And he was excited to perform in New York.

LAREDO KID: Yes, now in New York now or in the US, like Lucha Libre, we have a lot, a lot, a lot of people Mexicans here in this country and I think the is a great culture for the American people to, to saw the Mexican Lucha Libre here.

By the way, he was wearing a mask the whole time I was talking with him. All these guys were. And his mask was sparkly green, with white triangular shapes that came up over his head like a crown. But he said the design was based on an eagle. And looking at him, you'd have no clue what he looked like under that mask.

LAREDO KID: That's why we use the mask.

So that you even your friends and coworkers, do your friends back home, do they not know who you are? Like do you have like a secret identity? Like a superhero? Like they don't even know that you're this character?

LAREDO KID: Yeah. Some friends. Uh, no, no, no everybody just the most closest friends and my family know. Yeah.

If a luchador is unmasked – unmasked in the ring -- it could be the end of their career, or a significant turning point. Either way, the mystique is broken. Heather says it's easy for fictional billionaire playboy industrialists to hide their identities. But in real life, in Mexico:

HEATHER: If you're kind of starting out in wrestling and you're not a star and you probably aren't from a wealthy family, because if you were, you wouldn't be going into Lucha Libre and you wear a mask, you have to figure out how to get yourself from your neighborhood, which might be two hours away from the arena to the arena. And at some point put on the mask in a moment where nobody's going to see you do it and nobody's going to remember your face. You know so people would tell me these stories about how they do it. Like you know, at least the last part of it, you take a taxi, you slip into the taxi and just sort of assume that the taxi driver is not going to be paying attention and then you put on the mask, you know, or you just slip into a Cantina and going the bathroom and you come out and you're masked.

When I was in Queens, I talked with a Mexican-American wrestler called Mantequilla, which is Spanish for butter. He was wearing a mask that looked like an Aztec design of a sun with a mane of rays around his chin. The openings for his mouth and his eyes were big black shapes that were happy shapes, if you can imagine that. It's common for luchadors to design their own masks, even if they get professionals to sew it together.

MANTEQUILLA: I drew it out one day at work and just doodling with stuff and then it just came to life.

Tell me about that. Uh, what's the, what's it story of your character?

MANTEQUILLA: Story of the character is, you know, worked in a lobster house next to a radioactive facility and one thing led to another and now I'm the superhero named butter.

And so, I see it like all the yellow around you. That's, I had a feeling you look like you have like this sort of smile, a smile. Not a smiley face, but smiling face.

MANTEQUILLA: Yeah, for sure, always happy.

What do you do for work?

MANTEQUILLA: I work with autistic children.

Ah, nice.

Mantequilla wanted to be a luchador since he was a kid. He held off for a while until he realized he wasn't getting any younger.

MANTEQUILLA: You know, wrestling is a, a short stint in your life, you know, it's extremely physically demanding, so you have to do it when you can, not when you, you know, not when. Better, sooner than later.

So far, he enjoys the challenge of living a double life.

MANTEQUILLA: I don't like to, you know, mix worlds, you know, maybe some very few that like I come close friends that I might have at work, but I don't really try to publicize it too much. Two different lives. I like to keep things separately.

So even like on Facebook, you're not like, hey everyone, I'm wrestling this weekend.

MANTEQUILLA: Well, Facebook on Facebook and all my social media is all strictly wrestling. I don't have a personal account. That's it.

So who you're wrestling tonight?

MANTEQUILLA: I am wrestling, El Hijo La Park.

Is he from LA?

MANTEQUILLA: He is not, he's a Mexican guy, man.

Have you, have you, how much have you guys rehearsed this?

MANTEQUILLA: Never. I've never even met them. Nope. So it was the first time I meet him. I, uh, I'll figure it out when we get out there pretty much. And he speaks only Spanish! (Laughs)

El Hijo de LA Park is actually a pretty big deal. He's the son of a Mexican wrestler named LA Park. And his costume looks like Darth Maul with

aggressive red and black shapes. And his boots are white with Ha Ha Ha written on them like The Joker. So, he is a rudo – a bad guy. Mantequilla is clearly a tecnico – a good guy.

When Mantequilla got into the ring, he had to hype up the crowd to get them on his side because he's unknown. But when El Hijo de LA Park walked into the room – people ran up to take pictures of him. And his presence was huge. It reminded me of the time I saw Bruce Springsteen in concert, and the moment Springsteen walked on stage, the stadium suddenly shrunk down to feel like small club. That's what a luchador can do with pure physical charisma -- except El Hijo de LA Park had villainous charisma.

Again, Heather Levi:

HEATHER: In terms of what they do the rudos are supposed to cheat and they're supposed to show disrespect to the audience and disrespect to the referees. They're supposed to be rougher than they need to be. Uh, but mostly they're supposed to break the rules and get away with it.

I'm sorry to report that happy-go-lucky Mantequilla was no match for Darth Joker. When the match was over, Mantequilla sold getting his ass kicked so hard; I saw the ref quietly check to make sure he was okay. Mantequilla quickly nodded, as if to say this is all for show.

In a moment, we'll hear from a Mexican photographer who walks the line between revealing the secret life of luchadors without revealing too many of their secrets.

BREAK

Lourdes Grobet (LORD-es GRO-bet) lives in Mexico City. She's well respected in the world of Lucha Libre because she spent three decades photographing luchadors. Early in her career, she photographed two of the biggest stars of the day -- El Santo and Blue Demon.

LOURDES: The parties were just amazing. It was like a dream place because at the beginning they were really very handsome and very well dressed. Now the economics fell down the, I mean, they don't dress that way, but by that time they, they look like prince.

Lourdes started watching Lucha Libre as a girl in the '50s when the events were on TV for a brief period of time. She begged her father to take her to a match.

LOURDES: But my father didn't want to take me to the wrestling matches because I was a woman. So when I became a photographer, when you're a camera, you can do whatever you want and you can solve all your needs and curiosities. And so, so I went into the arena to take some photographs and then I, cause a problem because, uh, I was, uh, a woman again taking photographs of the wrestling matches. They haven't seen a woman taking photographs. I mean, all the photographers were men.

Eventually she got permission to take picture. Also Lucha Libre organizations like the CMLL started having female wrestlers.

But what's most striking about Lordes's work is that she photographs the luchadors in their every day lives, but they're still wearing their costumes while sitting on their living rooms, or doing their day jobs. And looking at her photographs, I kept focusing on little details like the fabric on their couches – anything that would reveal their true selves. But it's also a strange juxtaposition because these are private spaces where they wouldn't normally need to wear masks.

LOURDES: Even if I go to their houses, when they see a camera in front, you have to have respect and you don't have, I mean you cannot photograph them if they are mask people. When I develop the, the part of the project that was called Lucha por la Vida because I, there's people that have to have other sort of jobs different from eh, the wrestling because, some ones they don't earn enough for the living. So, um, when I go and take photographs of them, I mean I, I cover their faces because you cannot take a photograph of a masked wrestler because you're destroyed all the, the myth of the, of the character.

What kind of jobs did a lot of them have outside of earning money through wrestling?

LOURDES: I mean, did you find a big range of work because you can find people coming out from universities, like a dentist, like medicine, there are body guards that are at people that make boots and make little dolls for to sell outside of the arena and all sorts.

The thing I find most compelling when looking at her pictures is that you're very aware of yourself being a voyeur in a realm where you don't quite belong. One of her most famous photos is of a female luchador feeding her infant son with a bottle while she's wearing a black and sparkly silver mask that covers her entire head.

LOURDES: And after the time I met her, I, well, I have been close to her and I have the same photograph, but with her grandchild and the, and she left the, the wrestling's and she became a police and I took some photographs of her as a police in her police car.

Did she have her mask on in the police car?

LOURDES: Yeah, and I told her, and could I take a photograph of you mask? And she said, of course. All my friends, all my chiefs are, are wrestlers. So go on. ***(Laughs) That's so funny. Did you had, did you ever see her without her mask? You know, if you just went,***

LOURDES: Yeah, yeah, I mean, Eh, just EL Santo, Blue Demon. I didn't met him, met them without mask. All the rest that I met them without masks, but of course when we had a photographic session, they, they've used the mask.

Lucha Libre has changed since Lordes started taking pictures in the early '80s. It's still deeply rooted in Mexican culture, but I noticed a lot of luchadors are now citing Hollywood movies and comic books as their inspiration.

For instance I talked with a wrestler called Rayo, which is Spanish for thunderbolt. All the wresters that I talked were wearing masks but Rayo's mask was the only one that covered his mouth.

RAYO: You know, I like Flash and what he wear all the time.

In case you can't understand him, he said the inspiration for his costume is The Flash. That's why he's got lightening motifs coming out of his wrist cuffs. He's got a secondary mask around his eyes that shoot up these lightning designs up over his head. The rest of his head is covered in a black mesh mask. The only part of his face that wasn't covered were his eyes. But he was wearing white contact lenses that erased the color around his eyes, making him look otherworldly.

RAYO: When I had my mask, I feel like superhero. I feel like nobody can stop me. I can do a lot of stuff that I can't do without my mask, you know, and I feel more confident all the time.

Rayo trained in The Bronx with Bronco Internacional – the Dominican wrestler that we heard from at the very beginning.

RAYO: Yeah. Yeah. He's the one who opened the doors for us actually there years ago. I didn't know anything about where to train and all that. So I came to that gym and he opened the doors for me. He opened the door for a lot of kids around here.

Rayo has been training for 10 years outside his day job, working in IT.

RAYO: We work every day. There's no day we don't work. The wrestling guys, they weren't so hard. You know, they worked every day. You have no idea. We wake up at 6:00 AM, you go to the gym we go to our regular jobs, we come back to train again. And that's how we do the whole week until we have a show. I live two hours from here, you know, so I come on the way from Connecticut and I get and I train in The Bronx, you know, so every, almost like every three days I come like Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I travel every two hours to come to my gym and travel two hours back to my house. It's really a lot of traveling but it's worth it at the end. It's worth it, you know.

Who are you going to wrestle tonight?

RAYO: Tonight? I don't know yet. But whoever it is, I'm ready. Always ready. Always ready. Yeah!

Rayo ended up being part of a tag team. His opponents were two guys that were more of a hybrid of U.S. and Mexican wrestling.

You probably noticed that none of the guys I talked with were "in character." But Jay Lyon and Midas Black definitely were.

Midas wore a sparkly ringmaster uniform. Jay Lyon looked like a very muscular version of Scar from The Lion King done up Lucha Libre-style. They wouldn't even tell me what their day jobs were, at least not on mic.

LYON: When all is said and done, main event brings greatest show in professional wrestling.

MIDAS: That's right, Lyon!

LYON: Roar! Big Man. Lion like to eat, do flip roar.

MIDAS: This man, this lion excuse me because he's just so freaking impressive. He could do it all like he's such a big body. He could dive through Hula Hoops. This man could do handsprings back flips like he's one of a kind.

How did you decide to go up to design the mask? Did you work with like a guy to make the mask?

LYON: Yes. Yes. Lyon hide face hide real face, real ugly.

Ha!

LYON: Midas pretty face. He no wear mask.

So when you put on that mask, you become Lyon.

LYON: Yes, I am lion, in the mask and in my heart.

Watching them wrestle against Rayo was interesting. They were super acrobatic, with lots of body slams, and vamping for the audience.

And it was a taste of what's going on in North America and Latin America – because the two styles of wrestling are starting to blend. For North American audiences, having luchadors crop up here is an interesting novelty.

But Lourdes Grobet is fiercely protective of Lucha Libre as a cultural icon, and she does not like seeing these changes happen in Mexico.

LOURDES: Because that's what I'm telling you about the United States. I mean, wrestling suffer this way of living that you impose, which is a business. I mean, it's show business and commercial and it changed a lot. I mean, there's people that are real aficionados. How do you say aficionados?

Yeah aficionados.

LOURDES: Yeah. And then they don't want to go anymore to the arenas, the main ones because of those are the ones that are the coliseum, the, the biggest ones are the main ones. That changed a lot. But fortunately, wrestling is so strong in this country -- around the city and in small places and cities. It's the same as the same ambiance is not about business. And that's why I believe that this will never finish in this country.

Whether the shows I saw in New York were classic Lucha Libre, or a hybrid, the thing I found most encouraging were the kids. On a Saturday night they were not glued to screens watching movies, or YouTube or playing video games. They were watching something live. The sound of the wrestlers hitting the floor was real. The suspense over who was going to

win was real – at least for them. And these masked heroes and villains – even if they were cartoonish – felt very real. In mean they were right in front of your eyes.

And the next time you see a cab driver, a construction worker, a special-ed teacher, an IT consultant, a police officer – think twice. You might be in the presence of a star, not that they'd tell you.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Lourdes Grobet, and Lucina Melesio who recorded Lourdes in Mexico. And thanks to everyone at Nueva Era Lucha Productions, everyone at The Bronx Wrestling Federation, and Heather Levi. Her book is called "The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity."

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. Whether she has a secret career as a masked wrestler, I don't know and she probably wouldn't tell me. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. I have pictures of the wrestlers I talked with on the Imaginary Worlds Instagram page.

The show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org. And if you want to get the full back catalog of over 100 Imaginary Worlds episodes, subscribe to Stitcher Premium. You'll get your first 30 days of binging for free if you use the promo code Imaginary.