

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief, I'm Eric Molinsky. And this is part two of our mini-series on sidekicks.**

**In September 2008, Disney announced that they were going to make a big budget Lone Ranger movie. Johnny Depp was going to play Tonto.**

**There was an immediate backlash to a white actor playing Tonto, even though Johnny Depp claims to have Cherokee ancestry. Adding to the bad press, the movie had production problems that delayed it for five years. Through it all, Disney kept insisting they were going to put Tonto front and center as an equal partner to The Lone Ranger.**

**Dustin Tahmahkera was intrigued. He's a professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Illinois, and a citizen of Comanche Nation. He wanted to give Johnny Depp the benefit of the doubt because Deep does claim to have some kind of Cherokee ancestry.**

DUSTIN: Folks didn't give him a chance and they didn't put it in the context of his relationship onscreen as well as off screen of his relationship with the American in the movement and his support of that movement, his own identification as native, however fuzzy or questionable that may be that he does have stories to support. And I think that's what a lot of this comes down to as the stories and the power, who has the power who has the jurisdiction to tell these stories and to distribute them.

**Dustin's aunt is LaDonna Harris, who is a famous activist for Native American issues.**

DUSTIN: And so in 2012 when she heard about Johnny Depp reprising the role of Tonto and was hearing of how he wasn't being accepted by Cherokee people that he was trying to identify with she stepped in and she heard about him playing not only Tonto but was going to play him for the first time as a Comanche version of Tonto that there would be no tribal ambiguity as there had been in the past and that would be unequivocally a Comanche raised character. And so she reached out to her relatives and her dear friends who served as consultants and said she'd like to meet with Johnny Depp.

**Depp was excited. He invited her to the set, and the two of them hit it off.**

JOHNNY: And we come from a people who are known for taking captives and building our tribe up in that way, and she said this with a sly smile and with a chuckle that she wanted to do like old Comanche women would have done back in the day. She said let's go capture Johnny Depp and she invited him to her home and there in May 2012 they held a formal adoption ceremony a traditional adoption ceremony and a Comanche way and brought him into the family. And so now he refers to LaDonna Harris as his pia, our word for mom.

**When it came to public relations, Disney continued to make all the right moves. They held a premiere on a Comanche reservation, renting out several theaters. It was a huge celebration with music and dancing. Johnny Depp was there. Then the movie started.**

*TONTO: If you are going to sneak up on an Indian, best to do it downwind.*

**Some Native Americans praised the film, including Dustin's aunt LaDonna Harris. And the people who like it focused on the work the Comanche consultants had done behind the scenes to make sure their culture was portrayed accurately, regardless of the script.**

**Dustin appreciated that – but other things bothered him, like the fact that the Comanche women in the film were subservient, and didn't speak, which was strange because Comanche women have always held leadership roles. Also, it's established that Tonto is the last of his tribe – or at least the last of his tribe in Texas. Either way that didn't sit well with Dustin.**

DUSTIN: Instead of a sense of surviving, of showing Comanches surviving and thriving as we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this film leaves us with just one Comanche, an outcast at that, being Johnny Depp's Tonto.

**Chad Allen is a professor at the University of Washington. He has Chickasaw ancestry, and he's written a lot about the depiction of Tonto in various media. One of the things that really bothered him was that Tonto never speaks to another Native American character, even though Tonto has to watch his people get massacred twice in the story.**

CHAD: Yeah he never has an Indian interlocutor. And even though there are a number of scenes where we were in the Indian camp or among Indian elders Indian warriors they talked to the Lone Ranger or they talked to each other but they never once talk to the Tonto character. And it's something I find really so

devastating about that film that here is this great opportunity for Disney to reintroduce the Tonto character and to update him. They really go the opposite direction in my opinion.

**This may seem like a non-sequitur, but two years earlier, Universal brought back another problematic franchise: The Green Hornet. Once again, the studio public relations made all the right moves, promising that Kato – played by the Taiwanese pop star Jay Choo -- would be portrayed with dignity, and Kato would be an equal partner to The Green Hornet, played by Seth Rogan. Then the movie came out.**

*BRITT: I'm Indie! You're Short Round. Simon...Garfunkle. Scooby...Do.*

*KATO: You hit on everything that moves. I'm surprised you haven't hit on me yet.*

*BRITT: I'm going to beat the living crap out of you.*

**It's interesting that these unsuccessful attempts to reboot The Lone Ranger and The Green Hornet came within a few years of each other because Tonto and Kato had been moving in parallel for 80 years. And looking at where those sidekicks originated, and why they keep coming back says a lot about the people who created them, and the generations of fans who bought into those fantasies.**

**Both franchises can be traced to the same man: George Trendle. In 1933, Trendle owned a radio station in Michigan called WXYZ. Westerns were hot. He wanted to jump on the bandwagon with a radio drama series that he could license into a million different products. Tonto was there just so The Lone Ranger had to someone to talk to, but the character quickly became a hit with audiences.**

*TONTO: Him stop*

*LONE RANGER: Yes he's turned he's looking at us. See how white he is?*

*TONTO: Him silver white*

*LONE RANGER: Silver, that would be a name for him. Here, Silver!*

*TONTO: Him plenty wild*

*LONE RANGER: Tonto! He's coming towards us!*

*TONTO: Hmmm.*

**So Trendle and the writer Francis Striker re-created the same formula with The Green Hornet, which is a detective series about a masked vigilante and his sidekick of color.**

*BRITT: Right, now I want to put in little plan I have in mind*

*KATO: This plan have to do with Green Hornet, perhaps?*

*BRITT: You guessed it Kato*

*KATO: Gas gun ready, we take masks and take Black Beauty.*

*BRITT: You got it Kato, let's go!*

**And there was a direct connection between the shows. The Green Hornet, Britt Reid, is supposed to be the grandnephew of John Reid, The Lone Ranger. And there was a style guide of rules for both shows that said The Lone Ranger and The Green Hornet only killed when necessary, but Tonto and Kato could be more brutal.**

**Daryl Maeda is a professor of Ethnic Studios at the University of Colorado in Boulder.**

DARYL: Both Tonto and Kato exist specifically to aid the white hero in the attainment of whatever his mission might be. And the violence that they that they perpetrate always serves not their interest but that of the white hero. And in some ways their violence and their facility with it absolves the white hero of having to dip deeply into the darkness of harming fellow human beings. So in that way the both of these sidekicks displace the dirty work and allow the white hero to remain the white hat.

**Kato and Tonto have an incredible array of skills. Kato designs their supped up car, their weapons, and does most of the fighting. Chad Allen says, Tonto is equally talented**

CHAD: He knows how to read every trail. He knows how to fix every injury cure every illness. So he gets idealized in all those ways that sort of the noble red man.

**But Tonto's identity kept shifting.**

CHAD: The earliest Tonto and The Lone Ranger radio show was not a full blood Indian not the same age as the Lone Ranger around 30. But was an older diminutive half-breed character But after 1936 the character changes and Tonto becomes a full blood Indian younger more robust.

**Meanwhile, Kato's identity kept shifting a lot.**

DARYL: The radio show first started out with Kato as a Japanese houseboy. When World War II broke out they changed his ethnicity to Filipino.

**Eventually Kato would become Korean and then Chinese.**

**The first radio actor to play Kato, Raymond Toyo, was Japanese-American. But he left. It's believed he was sent to a Japanese interment camp, but there's some debate about that. He was replaced with the white actor Rollon Parker who did a cringe-worthy Asian accent. Parker also did the voice of Tonto when the white actor John Todd, was not available.**

**They could get away with that on radio, but the problem of representation became a lot more complicated when Tonto and Kato made the transition to live action.**

**In the late '40s, George Trendle was excited about the possibility of television. The Green Hornet was a tough sell – in fact, he wouldn't get that show on the air for decades. But the networks were onboard with The Lone Ranger. It was a huge, kid-friendly, and Westerns are cheap to make.**

**They found their Tonto with Jay Silverheels. Interesting, he was not from the U.S. He was from the Mohawk tribe of Canada. Also, his real name was Harold Jay Smith. "Silverheels" was his nickname on his lacrosse team.**

ZIG: Jay was so fast that the shoes streaked, you know, you can imagine that right, like the Road Runner in the cartoons in a sense.

**Zig Misiak wrote a biography about Jay Silverheels.**

ZIG: And then of course the tongue in cheek was they could they say they couldn't call him Jay Whiteheels for obvious reasons they didn't know he was going to go over big, so they call him Jay Silverheels.

**Jay Silverheels played Tonto from 1949 to 1958 on TV and film – not to mention having his face on a myriad of products. He started out with high hopes for the role, or at least he thought it could open some doors. Dustin Tahmahkera says Silverheels quickly realized what he was in for when he read the script, written in that fake Indian dialogue which was standard for Westerns at that time.**

*TONTO: Lie still. Me not hurt you...*

DUSTIN: Even though he had very broken English and even his very first lines and his version of Tonto 1949 on television, his first words were telling Lone Ranger to quote, lie still me not hurt you unquote. There was a lot of behind the scenes work that Silver Hills did in trying to further develop that character.

*TONTO: That's right, me Tonto. Me take care of you.*

**And he found an ally in Clayton Moore, who played The Lone Ranger. Apparently Moore was upset when he discovered that his co-star didn't even have a trailer to change in.**

ZIG: Clayton just came to his rescue and said, listen you can't have this guy changing in the back seat of the car or in a washroom at a gas station you get a trailer.

**And Silverheels did manage to sneak in a few digs that only people who spoke Mohawk would be able to catch.**

ZIG: When he was speaking a language in our native language he was in fact saying something like you know the cow is doing cartwheels into the bowl of cereal. Nobody knew other than the people the Mohawks because he was Mohawks that were sitting there saying oh my god, he's just making fun of you know what he's saying out there.

**But he was getting mixed reviews among Native peoples in North America.**

ZIG: Jay Silverhills was interviewed in 1957 by the local paper, and the question was what do you think of the character Tonto. And he says Tonto he's stupid. Which is that couple of words (laughs). And yet he didn't participate in AIM like the American Indian Movement. He wasn't he wasn't that active again that see that's his personality that quiet personality that that calm demeanor if he has he did what he could using his I guess his stardom. But he did it in his own way. Because even in the United States he was being looked at as a Uncle Tomahawk which is you know as you know a play from you know kind of derivative from Uncle Tom so that he that he was moving away from his own people. So he was caught and he had divided loyalties. He was a man in two worlds and didn't seem to matter what he did. He was going to get criticism.

**As a child, Dustin felt a mixture of pride and sorrow for Jay Silverheels. He knew Silverheels was in a tough spot, but at the same time, Silverheels was the only Native American actor with a major speaking role on TV and film.**

DUSTIN: But something that I think is also very important to highlight about Silverheels is the legacy that he's left behind was trying to ensure there would be opportunities for native actors to secure roles in Hollywood and elsewhere in the film industry. And so to that effect he and the Muskogee Creek actor William Sampson who is famous for his role as Chief Brompton in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* from the 1970s Silver Hills and Brompton started the Indian Actor's Workshop in which they basically just found local spaces whether it was in apartments or nearby there and L.A. and Hollywood to hold a space for teaching aspiring natives who wanted to break into the film industry.

**But he struggled for years to find real roles that weren't just another version of Tonto. Although he always kept his sense of humor. In 1969, he appeared on the Tonight Show in a sketch where Tonto goes on a job interview.**

*JOHNNY CARSON AS INTERVIEWER: I'm just looking over your application here and I'm not sure we have an opening for a faithful sidekick who can make a tasty dinner out of desert roots.*

*TONTO: First you take our land, then you knock our skills.*

*INTERVIEWER: No, no I didn't mean to knock your skills. Maybe if we had an interview in depth here. Tell me, who was your last employer?*

*TONTO: I work 30 years as faithful sidekick for Kimosabe.*

*INTERVIEWER Mm hmm*

*TONTO: Hunt, fish, sew clothes, stay away all night, listen for enemies for Kimosabe.*

*INTERVIEWER Mm hmm.*

*TONTO: Risk life for Kimosabe*

*INTERVIEWER Hmmm!*

*TONTO: 30 lousy years.*

*(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)*

**When I was a kid in the '70s, I remember a joke we used to tell on the playground – and this was back when *The Lone Ranger* was still in reruns, but even we knew the politics of the world had changed so much since the '50s.**

**The jokes goes: The Lone Ranger and Tonto are surrounded by Indians. The Lone Ranger says, “Tonto, we’re surrounded!” And Tonto says, “Who’s we, white man?”**

**Chad Allen heard the same joke growing up, but he says it didn’t start on playgrounds. It began with political cartoons in the Native American press at the time, and he thinks those jokes are speaking to a deeper truth.**

CHAD: The White fantasy is that the Indian would always be in the service of dominant culture. But there's always that worry that what if he weren't. What if Tonto really looked after his own interest or his own people's interest instead? And I think that's also part of the interesting tension that keeps the Lone Ranger Tonto pairing of interest over decades and generations that tension. We think he's going to help us no matter what. But there's always that fear that he might not.

***That's a really interesting to think that that tension is underneath all the way through – it's almost like well we made it to the end of another adventure without you turning on me.***

CHAD: Exactly. You're really right to pick up on it that the playground joke tells us as much or maybe more about what's really going on with the characters than the kind of official representation.

**In a moment, Bruce Lee starts out in a similar position to Jay Silverheels, playing Kato under the thumb of some of the same TV producers.**

**But Bruce Lee ends up in a very different place.**

**BREAK**

**Bruce Lee was born in San Francisco, but as a kid he went to Hong Kong, where he became a child actor. He came back to California as an adult, and was discovered by Hollywood talent at a martial arts demonstration. Interestingly, Jay Silverheels was also discovered through athletes, when his lacrosse team was playing a game in L.A.**

**Also, like Silverheels, Bruce Lee had high hopes when he went on the audition process.**

*DIRECTOR: Now Bruce, look into the camera and tell us your name (FADE)*

**In fact, if you want to watch his screen test, it's on YouTube.**

*BRUCE LEE: My last name is Lee, Bruce Lee. I was born in San Francisco. I'm 24 right now.*

**Again Daryl Maeda, who teaches ethnic studies at the University of Colorado in Boulder.**

DARYL: What you see in the screen test -- an incredibly charismatic performance by somebody who has a real chemistry with the camera.

*BRUCE LEE: Karate punch is like an iron bar. Whah! A kung fu punch is like an iron chain with an iron ball attached to the end and it go whack! And it hurts on the inside.*

**Initially, Bruce Lee was supposed to be cast as the lead in a show called Charlie Chan's Number One Son. There are many horribly offensive things about that, but Bruce Lee didn't see it that way.**

DARYL: At this point, Bruce was very excited about the possibility of playing Charlie Chan's number one son. And this is despite the fact that Charlie Chan is a character written by a white author. In all of the movies Charlie Chan is played by white actors in yellow face. So he saw this as an exciting opportunity and he really looked forward to being able to play the role.

**Charlie Chan's Number One Son did not get picked up. Instead he was offered the role of Kato alongside Van Williams as The Green Hornet. And in the publicity leading up to the show, they promoted Kato as a modern day version of Tonto. And when Lee got the scripts from the producer, William Dozier, his dialogue was even worse than the old radio show.**

*KATO: Excuse me, please. ("Oriental music cue") (Kung fu sounds)*

DARYL: And what he really tries to do is to humanize Kato by making him a more central figure and making him actually a more rounded character. Dozier responds by essentially by blowing him off.

**Matt Polly wrote a biography of Bruce Lee. He says Dozier told him that they couldn't give him more dialogue was because his accent was too thick.**

MATT: And so he worked with an acting coach to try to soften his accent. Eventually petitioned the producer to help give him more lines of dialogue and they eventually wrote one episode. It was specifically about Kato going to Chinatown and fighting a kung fu match against another master.

**But he had to win over the Stuntmen as well.**

MATT: This is one of the misconceptions that Bruce Lee sort of was born into these roles. He had he had only done comedic or melodramatic roles. So this was his first action series. He didn't know how to do kung fu choreography for movie or TV cameras. And so he went too fast basically and faster than the stuntman could follow him and it became a real problem and so they had to slow him down and talk to him about like what worked for TV and what didn't.

**The biggest clash came over a crossover episode with Batman. The same producer, William Dozier, ran both shows, but Batman was a hit and The Green Hornet was struggling. So they hoped the crossover would boost the ratings for The Green Hornet.**

*BRITT: We're heading towards another clash with the Caped Crusader. And I don't like it.*

*KATO: Why not? We've never run away from trouble before*

*BRITT: Yes, but this double identity poses extra problems this time.*

**Bruce Lee not happy when he read the script because he and The Green Hornet were supposed to lose in a fight with Batman and Robin. And it was hero-to-hero, sidekick-to-sidekick so Robin was going to defeat Kato.**

MATT: And as soon as Bruce read the script he threw it down on the ground and said there's no way I'm doing this. No one's going to believe that Robin's a better fighter than me and it will be embarrassing. And I just I refuse to lose to Robin. The funny story was that Dozier agreed OK will rewrite the script and will have it be a stand off at the end. A Mexican stand off neither one wins or loses but Bruce told everyone he didn't care what the script was like he was going to show Robin what real Kung Fu was like. And Robin heard this and started to get scared. Burt Ward and when they went on set to film the scene Bruce came in all

serious staring hard stares at Burt Ward and Burt Ward got more and more nervous and as they were filming the scene Bruce starts inching towards him and Burt Ward backs off backs off backs off until he runs into a corner. Finally he starts jumping around saying. It's just pretend! It's just pretend! And somebody from the side says look it's the Black Panther versus the yellow chicken. And that caused Bruce to crack up any you know to reveal he wasn't actually going to hurt Burt Ward.

*(SFX FIGHTING)*

*ROBIN: It's a good thing those guys aren't in town every week!*

### **Again, Daryl Maeda.**

DARYL: We do need that think about Kato in the context of the 1960s. Probably the best known other Chinese character on television was Hop Singh on Bonanza who is a cook and whose foreignness is played for laughs throughout. So in that sense Kato certainly is an improvement. There's absolutely no way in which you can watch Kato on the Green Hornet and think that he's anything other than a bad ass.

MATT: Kato actually got more fan mail than the Green Hornet. And so Bruce would go around bragging about the fact that you know he really wanted to think of himself as the main star and when he did interviews he would say well I'm the one who does all the fighting and one of the things he never found out was that Van Williams got paid five times more than he did. Bruce was making \$400 a week and Van Williams was making \$2,000.

DARYL: When William Dozier found out that the show would not be renewed for a second season he wrote two notes one to Bruce and one to Van Williams the lead. To Bruce he said Confucius say Green Hornet buzz no more. In contrast his letter to Williams said well it looks like our friend with the Green Hornet is just going to buzz off into oblivion. What this tells us is that Dozier continued to see Bruce as an oriental and exclusively so.

**So did the rest of Hollywood. Bruce Lee tried to find more work but all he found were stereotypical roles, and he got work as a stunt coordinator.**

**So he went back to Hong Kong. That is something Jay Silverheels didn't have – an escape valve where he could start over.**

**And Bruce Lee had not been a big star before he left, but he discovered The Green Hornet was a hit in Hong Kong. They actually called The Kato Show. So he used his newfound stardom to get his film Enter the Dragon financed – and that movie turned him and kung fu into a global phenomenon.**

DARYL: Bruce Lee was a hero to all of us who grew up in the 1970s as Asian Americans. The discourse on Asian American masculinity remained one that constrained us that insisted that to be Asian American was to be the opposite of male. So to see a strong inspiring hero was something that I think many young Asian American boys in the 1970s and 1980s can point to.

**So when Daryl watches The Green Hornet, it frustrates him to see how much of Bruce Lee's talent was squandered because the white people in charge lacked the imagination to think of him as anything other than a one-dimensional sidekick.**

DARYL: But what this shows us is that figures like Bruce Lee who crossed the Pacific incessantly back and forth back and forth can really bring something new and different and enliven the culture that we consume here in the United States. So in that sense we should take the story of Kato as on the one hand a cautionary tale, in the sense that we can see the role that racism played in constraining Bruce Lee, but we can also take it as an inspiration because what he managed to do by slipping the bounds of national borders was to become a truly worldwide figure and in doing so draw us into a much broader conversation about representation and culture that's going on across the globe.

**Last year, Black Panther and Crazy Rich Asians were a great start in representation with a black lead superhero and a film about Asian leads where no one knows kung fu – which unfortunately became a new stereotype about Asians after The Green Hornet.**

**But we have so much catching up to do. I was thinking about the Marvel films, and trying to count how many of them featured a white hero with sidekicks of color, and after a while I lost count. Many of those sidekicks are fleshed out characters. There's a lot of mutual respect between them and the heroes. They're not stereotypes, but they are still sidekicks – at least for now.**

**That is it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Dustin Tahmahkera, Chad Allen, Zig Misiak (miz-ee-ack), Daryl Maeda and Matt Polly.**

**Next time: she began as a sidekick, and a sidekick to a villain who abused her. But she is no one's sidekick anymore. In the conclusion of our mini-series – how Harley Quinn liberated herself.**

**And if you live in the New York area and have always wanted to start your own podcast, I'm teaching a class at NYU this summer called Creating a Narrative Podcast. The course begins on June 3<sup>rd</sup> and you can register on NYU's website before May 27<sup>th</sup>.**

**My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show's website is imaginary world podcast dot org. I also have an Instagram feed now at imaginary worlds podcast, with pictures of Tonto and Kato through the years. And if you want to get the full back catalog of Imaginary Worlds, and listen to the show ad-free by subscribing to Stitcher Premium. And you get the first days of binging for free if you use the promo code Imaginary.**