

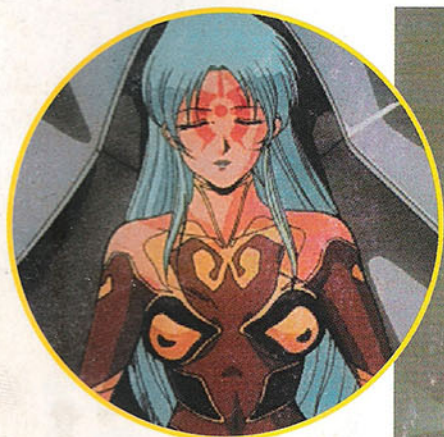
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As *Macross II* makes waves across the UK, PAUL DAVISON looks back at the legendary anime saga that kick-started it all – Space Cruiser Yamato, while PETER J. EVANS profiles “futurist” Syd Mead, designer of the new Yamato, refitted and ready for a stellar relaunch

# yamato

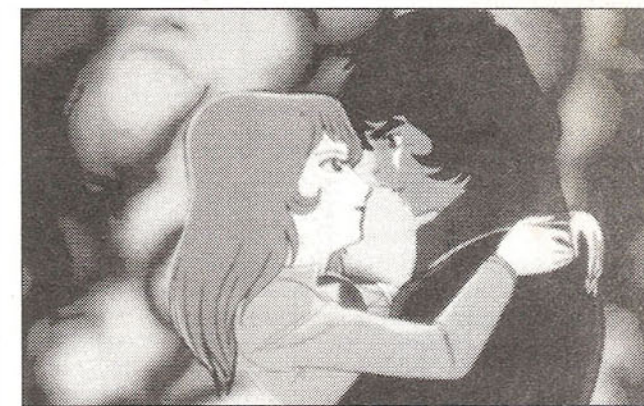
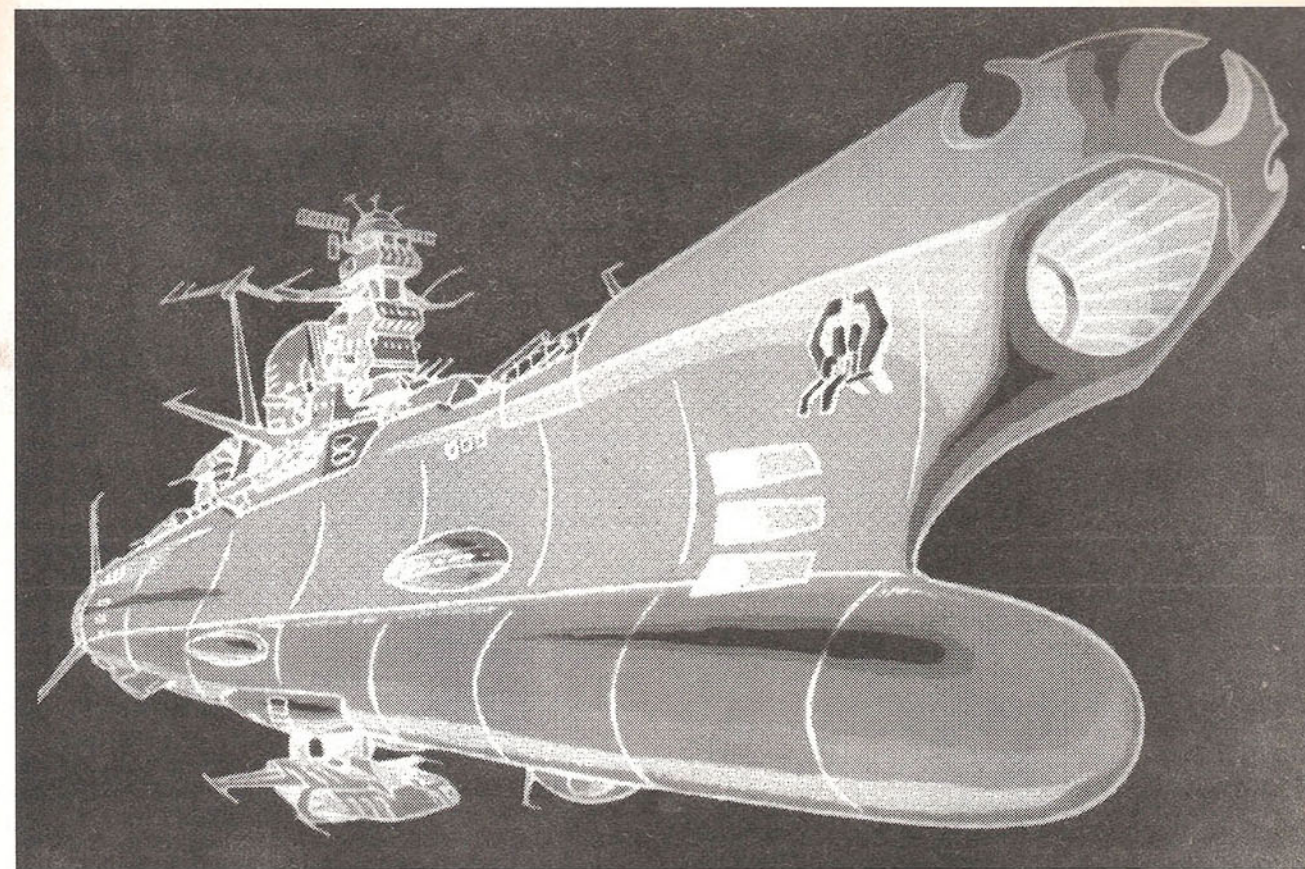
## voyages in a sea of stars

**T**he name Yamato has an almost magical sound, and the animated saga covering the tremendous voyages of this legendary vessel must surely make it the most memorable spaceship in Japanese animation history.

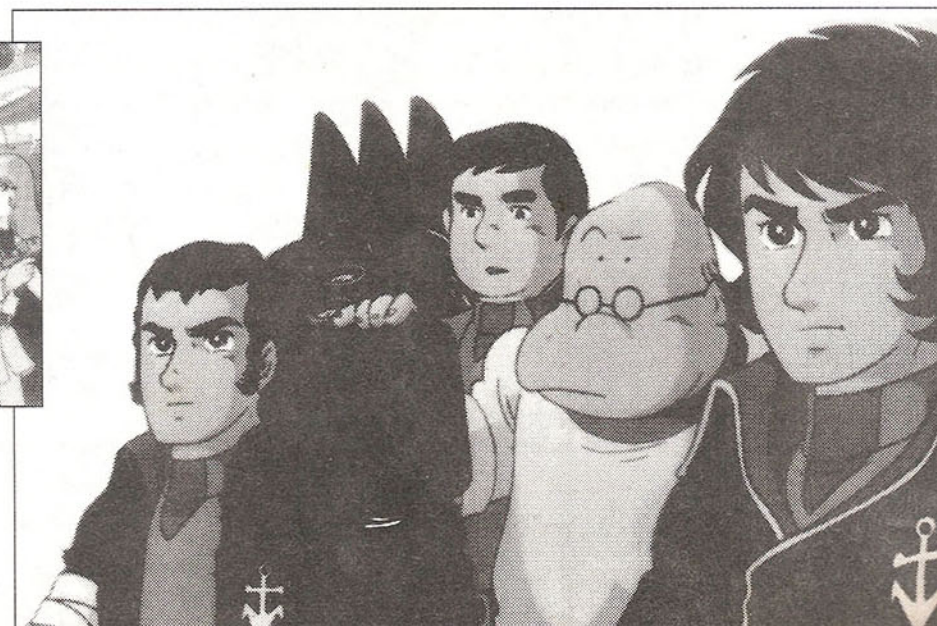
The Yamato was Imperial Japan's largest and most famous World War II battleship – the most powerful battleship ever built – which went to the bottom of the Pacific at the end of the war. Over two centuries later, rising like a phoenix from the ashes of its past, it stands forth boldly as a gleaming intergalactic warship ready to defend mother Earth from empire-building aliens in the year 2199.

Space Cruiser Yamato (*Uchuu Senkan Yamato*) was launched on an unsuspecting Japanese public in 1974 as a TV series that was the brainchild of manga artist Leiji Matsumoto and producer Yoshinobu Nishizaki. Matsumoto, whose first manga was published at the age of 15, went on to create such enduring strips as *Captain Harlock*, *Galaxy Express 999* and *Millenium Queen*. Throughout his career, his work has exhibited a deep love of the mechanisms and machinery of war, and a penchant for creating sympathetic yet strong, and often driven, characters.

The first 26-part TV series depicted how the Earth, in 2199, is suffering under merciless bombardment from warlike, blue-skinned aliens out to conquer the solar system in the name of the Gamilan Empire. Earth space forces have been all but destroyed, and the planet itself has become virtually uninhabitable through radiation. Humanity's last hope rests with the secretly refitted hulk of the truly ancient battleship Yamato, now lying in the dried-up seabed of the Pacific Basin.



Love and War. Scenes from the near immortal Space Cruiser Yamato, featuring romance with Kodai and Yuki (middle right) and SF action aplenty from Kodai's intrepid crew (right) and Queen Starsha of Iscandar (above, left)





In the midst of battle a message is received from another world offering aid in the form of a radiation-cleaning device, to give life back to the Earth. The message – from Queen Starsha of the planet Iscandar – also gives details of a wave-motion engine which will enable a ship to travel the 148,000 light years to her planet.

The Yamato is kitted out with the device and promptly departs on a year-long voyage to Iscandar, under the leadership of veteran Admiral Okita. Its journey is studded with ever-larger conflagrations as the Gamilan leader, Desslar, becomes increasingly obsessed with destroying the vessel. Some of the Yamato's recruits came of age during the tremendous conflicts and one, Susumu Kodai, emerges as the main protagonist in Yamato's story.

The ship reaches its destination, only to find that Iscandar is the twin planet of Gamilas; the heart of the evil empire. A titanic battle ensues, in which Desslar is defeated and the Yamato completes her mission.

Three years after the TV series was aired, the events of the series were compiled into a two-hour film, released in 1977. The movie became immensely popular both in Japan and around the world, and was instrumental in renewing Japanese interest in anime.

Its success demanded a sequel, so in 1978 the film *Arriverderci Yamato: Soldiers of Love* was released. This revealed a revitalised Earth boasting a fantastic new fleet of spaceships; no place for an old warhorse like the Yamato which has been retired from service. Naturally this peace is shortlived as the Earth is invaded by another empire builder, this time housed in a huge artificial comet.

Once again the Earth receives an offer of help, from a world already conquered by the Comet Empire, but it is turned down by the smug Earth commanders. The re-united crew of the Yamato decide differently, and take off in their stolen battleship. Learning of the Comet Empire's strength, the Yamato returns to Earth and comes face-to-face with Desslar who, having survived the events of the first film, is now allied with the White Comet Empire.

In the inevitable epic battle that follows, Kodai loses his love, Yuki, who takes a fatal shot meant for Desslar. Desslar, for his part, finally sees the error of his ways and helps Kodai destroy the Comet Empire, but at the (apparent) cost of his life. With all hope lost and the ghosts of his fallen comrades at his side, Kodai smashes the Yamato into the enemy, kamikaze-style, ending it all.

*Soldiers of Love* was a powerful and exciting film, deserv-

ing of its enormous success. But in trying to capitalise on that in a 26-episode TV series, broadcast the following year, the producers made some injudicious changes to the story and watered down its emotional tone.

The series sank to an equally deserving grave, languishing there briefly until later in 1979, when the Yamato made a triumphant return in a made-for-TV movie called *New Voyage*. The film relates how (the seemingly indestructible) Desslar finds his home planet Gamilas has been plundered by aliens from the Dark Nebula. Gamilas is destroyed and the twin planet, Iscandar, is flung off into deep space.

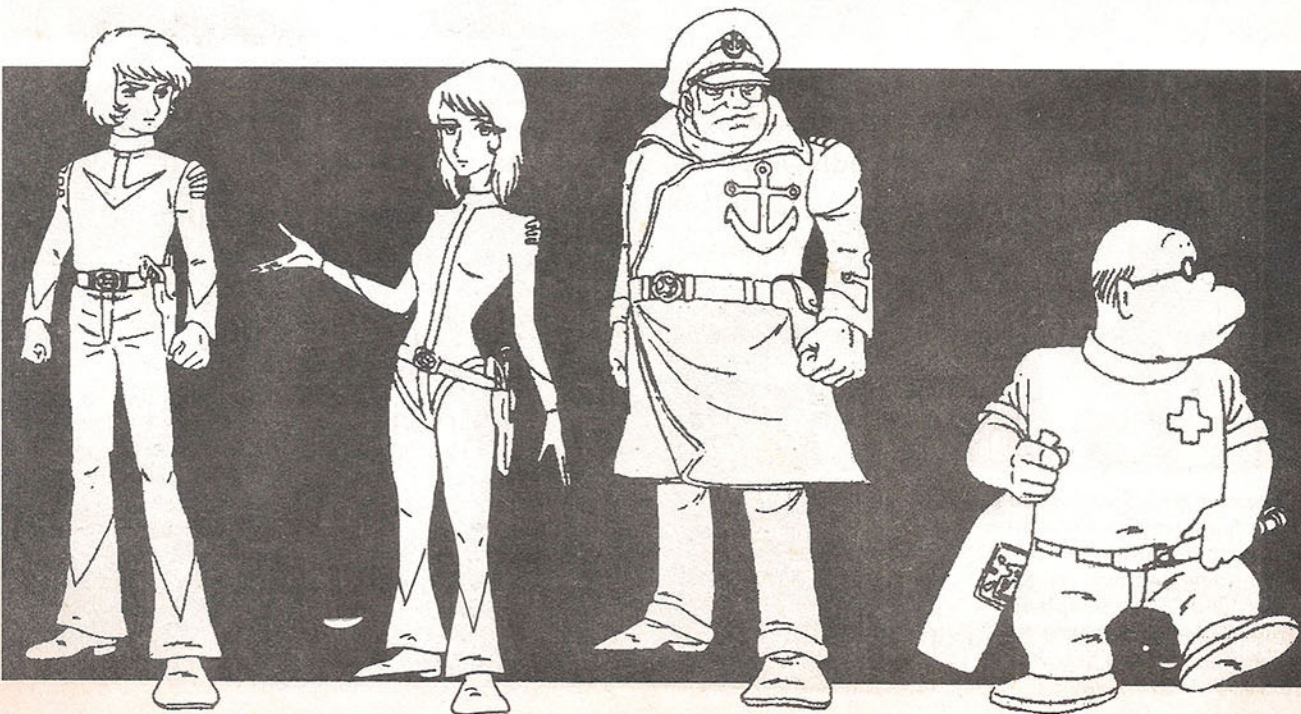
Luckily the Yamato and Kodai, in an unashamed disregard for continuity that was to become a trademark of the saga, had also survived Arriverderci's cataclysmic end. Desslar calls on them for help, and Iscandar is pursued on its journey. This takes the Yamato into Dark Nebula space and into battle with the Dark Nebulans, who have claimed Iscandar as their own. Eventually, Queen Starsha (remember her?) self-destructs Iscandar, thus saving Yamato and Desslar, but at the tragic cost of her own life.

*New Voyage* marked a welcome return to form, and in 1980 the fourth film, *Be Forever Yamato*, was released. In this sequel, the Dark Nebula empire, still smarting from its previous defeat, turns on Earth and the Yamato. The space cruiser escapes, though the Earth is subjugated and threatened with destruction unless the ship is surrendered. Instead, Kodai destroys the Dark Nebulans' homeworld, Desarium, freeing Earth in the bargain.

*Be Forever Yamato* proved less successful than its predecessor, favouring a more wordy script and looser structure. For all its gorgeous animation, it lacked the tension and drama of the best of the saga.

Yet the Yamato itself was popular enough for a third series to be made, which was shown on Japanese TV in 1981. *Space Cruiser Yamato III*, cancelled after 26 episodes, revisited Desslar, now building a new empire on the planet Garuman and caught up in a border war with the Bolar Federation.

During a skirmish, a stray proton missile strikes the Earth's sun, which threatens to explode, extinguishing all life throughout the solar system. The Yamato, with Kodai at the helm once more, sets off to find an alternative home for the Earth's population. In its search, the cruiser comes across other space travellers who, in return for helping defend them against the Bolar Federation, give Kodai the knowledge of how to stabilise the sun. Earth is saved once more.



Space Cruiser Yamato III garnered only mild interest in Japan and the producers realised that it was almost time to send it into drydock permanently. Almost...

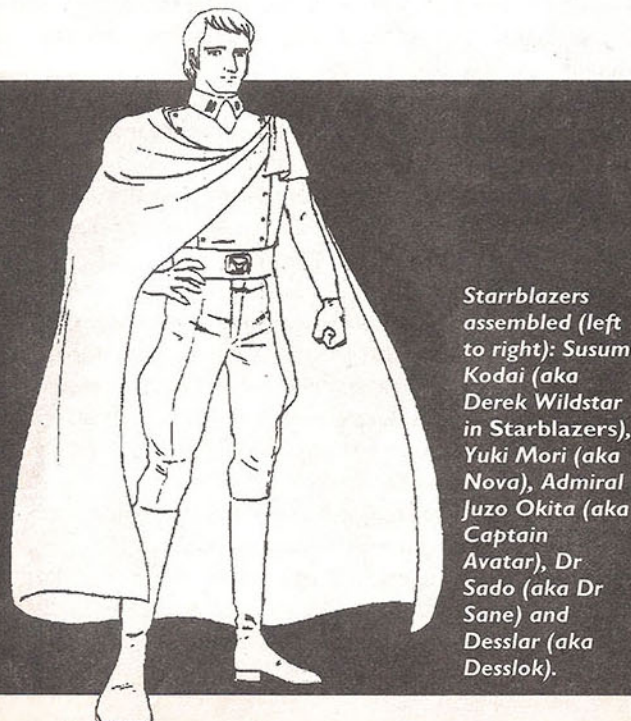
Yamato returned for the last time in the 1983 movie *Final Yamato*. Beautifully animated and 160 minutes long, the film tells of how the legendary warship finds Desslar's planet, Garuman, lifeless as a result of a stellar collision. The Yamato also discovers the fabled water planet, Aquarius, which traverses the universe, flooding and reviving dying planets. However, it is now controlled by the evil Lugal de Zahl, who sees Earth as a perfect new base to replace his own lost world.

The Yamato engages the enemy and faces certain destruction, when it is miraculously saved by (you guessed it) Desslar. Aquarius, however, cannot be stopped and a despairing Kodai stands down as captain. Then, to everyone's surprise (well, not everyone's), Admiral Okita reappears to pilot Yamato into Aquarius, destroying it. The final scene rings as much poignancy out of the occasion as possible, as the Yamato sinks into the vast ocean of stars. This was finally the end...

The quality of animation across the entire Yamato saga, produced by **Academy Productions**, varied from mediocre to magnificent. But the originality of the character and ship designs (the mecha designs were handled by the prolific **Studio Nue**, headed by Haruka Takachiho, creator of the *Dirty Pair* and *Crusher Joe*. The studio was also responsible for the design of *Superdimensional Fortress Macross* and *Mobile Suit Gundam*), the rich musical score and the dramatic interaction of all these elements has ensured that it will go down in history as one of anime's most memorable series. That the saga also spawned a phenomenal array of merchandise, from books to toys and models, certainly hasn't hurt its reputation.

The three TV series were dubbed into English, and in 1977 they were released in the US as *Starblazers*, where the saga enjoyed a huge following and introduced a generation of fans to Japanese animation.

The continuity throughout has been virtually (and intentionally) non-existent, confirming a Lazarus-like ability on all the main characters, who would reappear at strategic moments throughout the saga. However, far from detracting from the show's narrative thrust (it is a space opera after all), it proved to be one of the more enduring and endearing aspects of an anime phenomenon whose motto must surely be "Forever Yamato". ●



Starblazers assembled (left to right): Susumu Kodai (aka Derek Wildstar in Starblazers), Yuki Mori (aka Nova), Admiral Juzo Okita (aka Captain Avatar), Dr Sado (aka Dr Sane) and Desslar (aka Desslok).

## Back to the Futurist

When the *Space Cruiser Yamato* next lifts off, her lines will be subtly altered from those seen in her earlier voyages. Syd Mead, the artist who gave *Blade Runner*, *2010*, and *TRON* their distinctive looks, submitted the new design to producer Yoshinobu Nishizaki over three years ago. Now, according to an interview in October's *Anime V* magazine, the new-style cruiser, conforming to Mead's vision and a model constructed by mecha guru Makoto (Gundam) Kobayashi, looks finally ready to fly...

Mead was born in St Paul, Minnesota in 1933, and has headed his own industrial design company since 1970. He has long been one of the most sought-after illustrators in the field of modern and futuristic design, lending his talents to film studios and major industrial companies alike, and has turned his hand to the design of everything from spaceships to luxury yachts.

Vehicles have always been Mead's first love. He became interested in fantastic machinery at an early age, and sent some car designs to the Ford Motor Company while he was serving in the army. A chief designer at Ford replied to Mead with encouraging advice, suggesting a course at art school: advice which he readily took upon leaving the army. Majoring in Industrial Design at the Los Angeles Art Centre School, he went on to work for both Ford and US Steel on advanced design projects, having some of his work published in a US Steel promo book called *Concepts*. A few years and several public showcases later, he formed Syd Mead Incorporated (SMI) as an independent design house.

Mead's influences include Chesley Bonestell, the veteran illustrator who was first to paint realistic views of other planets. He also lists the fighter aircraft of World War II, illustrated encyclopedias and the scenery of America's National Parks as the seeds of his interest in the future. His extensive knowledge of production techniques and materials gives him a solid grounding on which to extrapolate the technology of tomorrow.

This 'hard' look to technology has made Mead a favourite among film makers. In 1979, he designed 'V'ger' for *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, both inside and out, and as "Conceptual Futurist" on the team of *Blade Runner* (1980) he was responsible for the film's vehicle designs, as well as interiors and street scenes. His work was translated into computer graphics for Walt Disney's *TRON* (1981), and sharp-eyed viewers may notice certain similarities between Mead's Lightcycles and Kaneda's bike from *AKIRA*. Above all, the look he established for *Blade Runner* has provided a blueprint for subsequent cinematic cityscapes, which has made other unofficial jumps from West to East, most noticeably in the set designs of *Bubblegum Crisis* and *Silent Mobius*.

However high-profile his film work becomes, Mead does not intend for it to become the mainstay of his business, making sure that no more than a third of SMI's income is derived from a single source. His work on industrial and architectural design remains of equal priority. Such good business sense has already seen Mead successfully through the recession: his skill and vision as an illustrator will ensure his workload into, appropriately, the foreseeable future. PETER EVANS

