



# A Look at American Talent in the Japanese Entertainment Industry

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## Introduction

As service exports cross into different markets, the entertainment industry is often overlooked. However, there are many Americans who have made it in Japan's entertainment industry, and their success demonstrates another example of an influential U.S. service export.

One may wonder how Americans, especially those with no prior Japan experience, can make it in Japan. However, Japan is the land where foreigners relatively unknown in their home countries can attain a shocking level of financial success and societal status. Heard of Leah Dizon? She was known as the game changer in Japan's swimsuit model industry with individuals comparing her arrival to that of Commodore Perry's when he came to Japan to open the country. Actress Charlotte Kate Fox has become Japan's darling after her performance in NHK's morning series *Massan*. She will now star in Broadway's *Chicago* that will have a stint in Japan. Commentator David Spector is a must for any programming with a U.S. element, and is probably one of the first Americans a Japanese person can name. These many Americans have succeeded to become household names in Japan.

In the Japanese entertainment industry, celebrities gain fame through various ways and foreigners are usually classified as *Gaijin talento* (外人タレント). *Gaijin talento* are non-Japanese celebrities that tend to be active only in Japan. *Talento* are different from celebrities in the U.S. because as *talento* become more popular, they begin to take on positions on TV that are unrelated to their original job scopes. Many are often shocked by the fluidity of Japanese entertainment careers where one can be an actor, singer, and comedian at the same time. This is the case for *Gaijin talento* as well, and the word *talento* serves to encompass individuals who serve a variety of roles within the entertainment industry. Leah Dizon started as a swimsuit model and then quickly released her first single before going on to start in television commercials and appear on talk shows. David Spector appears on news programming and has also starred in movies. Charlotte Kate Fox advertises yogurt, Nissan cars, LED light bicycles, and chocolate.

Just what is the secret to success and how does one enter the Japanese entertainment industry? This report would like to introduce a few case studies to pay respect to one of America's most influential exports into Japan.

## Singers

The size of Japan's music industry is about \$26.3 million USD according to 2014 sales data. The U.S. is about \$49 million USD. Germany is in third place 14 million USD. About 78% of Japan's sales still come from traditional CDs while 71% of U.S. sales come from online music (<http://www.garbagenews.net/archives/2149390.html>.)

The price of an album in Japan is roughly \$30 USD and the most popular album of 2014 sold 1 million copies. Japan is still a country dominated with the release of singles, and recently a single by popular girl band AKB48 sold 1.96 million copies. Consumers have the incentive to buy singles since they often come with tickets to see band members or links to special footage.

How can a foreigner make it in such an industry? Obviously having talent is the key to success. Singers who come with vocal skills can be noticed just like Japanese singers. Similar to singers such as Justin Bieber, Katy Perry, Lana de Rey, and Becky G, an online presence, vocal skills, and fan popularity can propel one to unlikely success—even in a foreign country.

Jerome Charles White is an American enka (traditional Japanese ballad music) singer of African American and Japanese descent. Jero began listening to enka from a young age because of his Japanese grandmother's influence and soon fell in love with enka. He comments that staying at home and listening to enka kept him out of trouble, and that he became passionate about the enka genre of music. He came to Japan in 2003 to pursue his dream to become an enka singer. Just two months after arriving in Japan, he passed the audition for the NHK TV singing competition program called *Nodo Jiman* (のどじまん). *Nodo Jiman* has been running for 69 years, and is the show in which to be discovered as it travels across the country, and allows for anyone to enter and have a chance at being on national television.

After this recognition, while working as a computer engineer, he entered various karaoke competitions before being scouted by Victor Entertainment. His first single, *Umi Yuki* (海雪), was released in 2008 and entered the Japanese billboard charts at #4. This was the first time ever that an enka singer's first single ranked in the top 10. The Japanese were captivated by his hip hop style, foreign face, and impressive singing skills. Jero was credited with making enka more contemporary by dressing in hip hop attire and adding dance moves. In 2008, Jero was chosen to sing on the annual *Kohaku Uta Gassen* (紅白歌合戦) music show; thus, allowing him to fulfill the promise he had made with his grandmother as a child. Only a select number of singers are allowed to perform in this annual show and being invited to perform signals true recognition in Japan's music industry.

Another American whose vocal skills landed recognition is Chris Hart. Born and raised in San Francisco, he did a homestay program in Japan when he was 12 years old and fell in love with Japan. He went on to major in Japanese and music in college, and sing Japanese songs in a band. After college, he pursued jobs that allowed him to use his Japanese and moved to Japan in 2009 to pursue a music career. He started by posting videos of himself singing various Japanese songs which lead to him being invited by Nippon TV to participate in the singing competition show called *Nodo Jiman THE World* (のどじまん THE ワールド), a variation of NHK's traditional contest that first recognized Jero. He won the contest in 2012 astounding the audience and judges with his vocal skills and choice of songs. He has been recognized for "singing Japanese songs better than Japanese." He is often referred to as being an "Angel Soul Singer" and having a "Miracle Voice" because of his heartwarming voice that has touched the hearts of Japanese people.

One will then wonder whether there are options for those whose vocal skills may not be so high.

In a country where one can be a singer/actress/comedian all in one, actual singing abilities are not always a must. Depending on the genre one wishes to enter, looks and some Japanese skills may help meet the requirements. AKB48, Japan's largest idol group, grossed \$226 million USD in sales in 2012. With 48 singers simultaneously singing the chorus and select singers singing occasional phrases, looks and an amicable personality will take one a long way over actual singing skills. Similarly, Johnny's Entertainment sends out group after group of popular boy bands. While each band usually has eight members or less, boyish looks take priority over vocal skills and popular band members transition into acting on television series, hosting news programs, or even participating on variety shows. The road to being a singer in Japan may not be as hard as one thinks.

### **Comedians**

While singing is a skill that is more easily associated with crossing over cultures, comedy is more of a challenge. Can non-Japanese comedians make it in Japan? The answer seems to be yes. According to the Yano Research Institute, the market size of Japan's comedian training industry is JPY 820 million, approximately \$7.8 million.

So what exactly is Japanese comedy? Japanese comedy involves comedians doing skits live or on television. Once they become popular, comedians are invited to do their own television shows, appear in magazines, or even work as commentators on programs. In fact, becoming popular means adding a comedic edge to other activities beyond traditional comedic skits and performances.

Sanma Akashiya, a famous Japanese comedian, has several shows. In fact, he no longer does comedic skits, but focuses on Mc-ing for his many shows. One famous show focuses on featuring a group of women and listening to their relationship woes. Sanma usually offers blunt advice, but usually with a comedic twist.

Hiroiki Ariyoshi is another famous comedian. He originally was part of a comedic duo in the late 90's making about \$170,000 a month, but the duo split up, and Ariyoshi became destitute. He made his way back to success in 2006, and now hosts a series of shows. One show features celebrities apologizing to the audience for wrong doings, and Ariyoshi scolds all participants with what has now become known as his "poison tongue."

Comedian Ayako Imoto has become coined the "reptile hunter" and one of many programs has sent her around the world climbing major mountains such as Kilimanjaro and Manaslu. She even attempted Mount Everest, but had to withdraw after an avalanche occurred.

Comedic duo London Hearts was known in the early 2000's for their show that set up unsuspecting male or female cheaters, and outed them on national television.

From such career examples, one can see that Japanese comedy is rather unique.

An American comedian that is popular now is Jason David Danielson. He quickly rose to popularity with his comedic skits on learning kanji, and is known by his stage name, *Atsugiri Jason* (厚切りジェイソン). As a student, he briefly lived in Japan working on a project for

Asai Kasei. It was then that he watched Japanese comedy shows, and became interested in Japanese comedy. He then came to Japan to start the Tokyo office of an American IT venture company, and is currently working as an executive for a Japanese IT company while also being a popular comedian in high demand.

Jason was encouraged by Japanese comedian Ayumu Kato to attend Watanabe Comedy School. Unbeknownst to most, Japan has a series of comedian training schools sponsored by entertainment companies. Upon graduation, students are to be hired and promoted by the companies themselves. Watanabe Entertainment and Yoshimoto Kogyo both are famous for their training schools.

After graduating from Watanabe Comedy School, Jason joined Watanabe Entertainment Agency. Just four months after beginning his career as a comedian, he made it to the final round of the R-1 Grand Prix, which is a Japanese competition for comedians. He was the first ever non-Japanese comedian to make it to the final round, and he also became the new record-holder for the comedian with the shortest career to make it to the final round.

Jason's kanji comedy skits are entertaining not only for people who are learning kanji, but also for Japanese people, because Jason brings attention to aspects of the Japanese writing system that Japanese never pay much attention to while making them realize how confusing and unnecessarily complicated kanji can be. He also is known for his phrase "Why Japanese people?" which he shouts in a loud voice to bring attention to interesting aspects of Japanese culture.

Another household name is Patrick Harlan, known by his stage name, Pakkun (パッくん). He is an American comedian who is part of the comedy duo Pakkun Makkun. He was a member of the Glee Club when he was a student at Harvard University, and he became interested in Japan when he came to Japan during a Glee Club Tour. He then decided to move to Fukui, Japan to teach English, and eventually moved to Tokyo to pursue a career in the entertainment industry.

Patrick and Makoto Yoshida formed the comic duo called Pakkun Makkun, and while Pakkun Makkun did gain popularity, Patrick eventually transitioned to taking on jobs in other areas of the entertainment industry, such as hosting a late-night English TV show called *Eigo de Shabera Night*, becoming a commentator on TV shows discussing social and political issues, and representing the U.S. on a TV show that compares different countries' cultures, views and trends called *Sekai Banzuke*. He has also published several books about how to learn English.

The Japanese love Patrick, calling him "the Harvard comedian" and respecting his intellectual commentaries and ability to deliver Japanese jokes.

Success in the comedic world is possible even for non-native Japanese speakers, but all who have succeeded have been able to get to a level of Japanese where they are able to make Japanese jokes. Being able to make culturally appropriate jokes in Japanese has gained them the respect from not only the industry, but the Japanese audience, and they have become popular at a much faster pace than Japanese counterparts. Entering this industry seems to center on entering

proper comedic training with strong Japanese skills, and then using agency backing to effectively market one's self.

### **Models**

The sector of the entertainment industry that has the most Americans would definitely be the model industry. Japan's modeling industry has a preference of mixed race models, and magazines often carry feature sections on how to make one's facial features look more foreign. Certain features including having an eyelid fold, a pronounced nose, and light brown hair are considered to be attractive. There is a preference to look cute as opposed to looking sexy or glamorous. A look at Japanese fashion magazines will quickly show the preference for feminine colors and styles with ample lace, ribbons, and sparkles to be found.

Japanese teenagers idolize Miranda Kerr and Emma Watson, but find greater comfort in figures that have Asian features. Such factors have contributed to the rise of mixed race models in Japan. While mimicking a Caucasian face has its challenges, trying to look like a mixed race model is not too far out of a challenge.

In fact, there is a certain obsession with mixed race individuals for the industry in general, giving rise to the terminology *haafu talent*. The Mori sisters, related to designer Hanae Mori are one such example. So-called American models in Japan are plentiful including Anna Tsuchiya, Jun Hasegawa, Lina Fujii, Shelly, and Ema Miyazawa LaFleur to name a few. These models also appear on television and in movies so they have easily crossed into the *talent* category beyond their original job preference.

The most popular models tend to have a mix of Japanese and Caucasian features, but Japan's new Miss Universe, Ms. Eliana Miyamoto, is half African American and Japanese. Her selection is leading towards greater acceptance and popularity of different types of "Japanese" beauty standards.

So, how does one become a model in Japan? As in the States, the natural process is to join an agency or to be discovered and join an agency. In either case, one needs to have backing to secure opportunities with magazines and shows in Japan.

Occasionally, models can be discovered in new ways. Leah Dizon was discovered via YouTube videos and audition taps she sent into agencies. A current completely American model with no family ties to Japan would be Dakota Rose. Dakota is referred to as "the real Barbie" in Japan. While being completely Caucasian she has soft features, is petite, and embodies what Japanese find "cute." Her fluent command of Japanese has rocketed her into a *talento* and she is often seen on television.

While growing up in the U.S., Dakota became interested in Shibuya and Harajuku fashion, so she began copying the makeup, hairstyle and clothing that Japanese girls were wearing in Japanese magazines and posted YouTube videos of herself introducing such Japanese style makeup and hairstyles. Her YouTube videos became a huge hit, and accumulated over 10 million views, which lead to her being scouted by a modeling agency in Japan. She then made the bold decision to leave the U.S. and move to Japan alone.

She was introduced on a Japanese TV show as being one of the people who would be likely to quickly become popular in Japan, and received offers for fashion shows. She has now become an exclusive model for Popteen, a popular fashion magazine for teenage girls in Asia.

### **Methods to enter the Japanese entertainment industry**

As demonstrated by the *gaijin talento* above, there are various ways for Americans to enter the Japanese entertainment industry.

#### ***For Singers***

There are Avex auditions held in New York, Los Angeles and Hawaii that have various types of auditions for individuals aspiring to be models, comedians, singers, and dancers. Often, these auditions held in the United States are restricted to Americans, so they are great opportunities for Americans who want to enter the Japanese entertainment industry.

More information about Avex auditions:

<http://avex-audition.jp/audition/81/>

<http://avex-audition.jp/audition/>

In addition, there is the Japanese TV show *Nodo Jiman THE World!* (のどじまん THE ワールド!), a singing audition show for non-Japanese who love singing Japanese songs. Through various stages of auditions, this TV chooses winner. Chris Hart is one such winner who later embarked on a successful career in Japan.

*Nodo Jiman THE World!* (のどじまん THE ワールド!):

<http://www.ntv.co.jp/nodo/>

#### ***Through an Agency***

There are also several Japanese talent agencies that specialize in *gaijin talent*, for example, Inagawa Motoko Talent Agency (稲川素子事務所) and AVOCADO. These talent agencies focuses on finding and offering jobs that require non-Japanese personnel, such as modeling, acting in commercials, dramas and music videos.

Inagawa Motoko Talent Agency (稲川素子事務所):

<http://www.inagawamotoko.com/>

AVOCADO (有限会社 アボカド)

<http://www.avocado.co.jp/>

#### ***For Models***

Aspiring models can aim to break into the market through Japanese modeling agencies. In order to join a Japanese modeling agency, in general, there is an application process, a photo shoot, and an interview. ACQUA Modeling, JUNES Acting & Modeling, BONAPRO (Bonamil Model Production) and Sugar & Spice are modeling agencies that have many mixed race models.

ACQUA Modeling is an agency specifically for non-Japanese models and mixed race models.

ACQUA Modeling(アクアモデル):

<http://www.acquamodels.com/>

While JUNES Acting & Modeling and BONAPRO don't specialize in just non-Japanese models and mixed race models, they have many non-Japanese models and mixed race models.

JUNES Acting & Modeling (株式会社 ジュネス):

<http://www.junesmodels.com/>

jhalf (website that promotes JUNES most popular mixed raced child models):

<http://jhalf.jp/>

BONAPRO (ボナプロ):

<http://www.bonapro.jp/index.htm>

Sugar & Spice is an agency that has many non-Japanese and mixed race child and teen models.

Sugar & Spice (シュガー&スパイス):

<http://www.sugar-spice.co.jp/index.html>

### ***For Comedians***

For aspiring comedians, there are several comedian training schools one can attend. Two of the most famous schools are Yoshimoto Kogyo and Watanabe Entertainment, and these two schools have the largest number of comedians. For those interested in joining a comedian training school, there is an application process followed by auditions.

Yoshimoto Kogyo is headquartered in Osaka and numerous famous comedians and comedy duos are part of Yoshimoto Kogyo, including, Sanma Akashiya, Koji Imada, Downtown, Ninety-nine and Tutorial. There is the famous Yoshimoto Theatre in Osaka where people can watch live stand-up comedy shows and Yoshimoto Kogyo even has its own amusement park. Yoshimoto Kogyo has four rounds of auditions starting in January and results come out in March.

Yoshimoto Kogyo (吉本興業)

<http://www.yoshimoto.co.jp/>

Watanabe Entertainment is another major comedian training school and it is headquartered in Tokyo. Famous comedians include Atsugiri Jason and Ayako Imoto, as well as comedy groups such as Neptune and Angirls. Watanabe Entertainment holds auditions every month.

Watanabe Entertainment (ワタナベエンターテインメント)

<http://www.watanabepro.co.jp/>

## Conclusion

While CS Japan cannot directly aid individuals interested in pursuing a career in the entertainment industry, we support Americans breaking into Japan's entertainment industry. For U.S. companies interested in business opportunities in Japan, CS Japan may be able to provide assistance.

For more information, please email [Office.Tokyo@trade.gov](mailto:Office.Tokyo@trade.gov).

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