

Still Waiting for Santa



Perth born and raised, Chad Mullane now plays an active role as an Australian comedian in Japan. About a decade ago, before flying to Japan, he worked for a Perth-based Japanese magazine 'The Perth Express' and showed a talent for Japanese language. This is Chad's story; his road to Japan, the challenges, the successes and his current life there.

I remember when I was really young I used to enjoy saying 'Mitsubishi'. It seemed like a big word. It had a nice rhythm to it too. 'Mitsubishi!' And then there was 'Hyucky-chucky!' For those of you who are unfamiliar with that one, you'll have to ask my Mum what it means. For some reason she always said it when she Karate-chopped me. Well, that was pretty much all the Japanese I knew. I didn't have any interest in increasing my knowledge about the land of the deflating bubble either. I was never really into the Japanese cartoons. Never ate Japanese food. I liked the Japanese guys in the movie 'Black Rain' because they were really mean and nasty, but, well, that was pretty much it. Now I've been living in Japan for 10 years as a *Geinin*¹. I train in the art of *Manzai*². I will sacrifice any physical or mental quality I have for the supreme *Boke*³. It goes without saying that my ultimate goal is to *Butainouedeshinukoto*⁴. I live in one of the most deeply traditional and severely strict societies you'll ever find in modern day Japan. I'm a Japanese comedian.

Santa never gave me the present I really wanted, so I've always been a bit dubious as to whether he exists or not. Santa didn't come last Christmas either. Instead, I gave myself a nice present. I worked! On Christmas day I filmed the first of 100 net-programmes that Yahoo Japan has just contracted me to make for them. In that series I get to teach Japanese onomatopoeia to the Japanese in Japanese. It's called 'Chad's Onomatopoeia'. It stars me and me alone, which is, yes, lonely. So on Christmas day, from 7 a.m. till just after midnight I filmed Japanese lessons as a priest, as a hula hoop artist in a bikini, as a stubborn old Japanese man, as a silly

guy in a blue tuxedo, and as a celery. The sound guy kept on laughing so we had to retake, retake and retake again. That's my favourite compliment. In between takes for that I had interviews with three different magazines - every little girl's favourite 'Year 5', the ultimate cuisine and luxury lifestyle guide 'Tokyo Calendar', and the weekly comic magazine called, funnily enough, 'Magazine'. After the filming of the Yahoo routines I had a meeting about doing the English subtitles for the new Japanese comedy film 'Yatterman'. Translating Japanese jokes into English... That's a joke itself! After that meeting I went to a dark little studio to edit a short film I directed the week before. In that 5 minute flick I play a young guy who loves his basketball and his pet chicken, but keeps on getting beaten up by an old guy whose choice of weapon is a leek. It turned out quite nice. Then I had four shows at 'Lumine the Yoshimoto', a 500 capacity theatre my agency owns that sits right above the *Shinjuku* Station in *Tokyo*. In between shows there I went and interviewed a university professor who is currently busy creating artificial intelligence. He's giving his robots the ability to think for themselves so they can be more efficient carers for the elderly. He's received many death threats from people who seriously fear that 'Terminator' may become a reality, but he takes them in his stride. After that I went and played soccer with a dolphin. Before I knew it, Boxing Day had already been and gone. And I ate whale for dinner. It's nice. Mum and Dad are probably a little upset I didn't get back for Chrissie. Wonder what I'd be doing if I didn't come to Japan in the first place?

The beginning is always a nice place to start. Let's try to restart from there! The first thing I ever begged Santa for was a TV. I loved TV. I wanted my own TV. When Mum and Dad went to bed I'd tiptoe into the living room and slide the earphones into the socket and try to make a noise that didn't sound like I was making a noise - any kind of noise to try and disguise the 'bwoom' noise the TV made when I turned it on. 90% of the time Mum and Dad woke up which lead to a whole lot of noise and tears and bed. But oh, how I loved TV. In particular I loved Jerry Lewis. I was in pre-school at the time. He was a funny guy. And I wanted a TV of my own so I could watch it without being told off. I didn't get one, Santa doesn't do his job properly, I went to school and played footy and finished primary school and started high school.

When I was in Year 8, we had to learn Japanese. One lesson a week for one year. It was easy. My teacher was really nice. I chose it again in Year 9, and then again in Year 10. My school formed a sister-school relationship with a Japanese school. Someone had to go on exchange. I wasn't terribly interested until they said they'd pay for my airfare and give me 2,000 dollars for my trouble and that sounded a little hard to refuse. I jumped on the plane and I spent their money and when I came back I spoke better Japanese than my teacher. How was it? Terrible!

As an exchange student I had to stay with a Japanese host family. They were waiting for me at the airport. The Mother had purple hair. The Mother worked as an agent for the tax department. The Mother didn't smile much. The Mother took the spare house key from me when she found out that her husband had secretly given me one. The Mother sent me to my room whenever she wanted to eat ice cream. The Mother was the mother of all my problems. I had to do something about it, so I splashed out big time on a Mother's Day present. The Mother took one look at it, said 'I am not your Mother', and then she gave it back to me. I was on the verge of tears. She could not hide the sadist joy she found from my face. And that was the key to my success.

The Japanese have a tendency to treat foreigners as guests. Forever. They'll bend over backwards for you. By not being Japanese, you are automatically categorized as a special invitee to their country, and since they like their country and they want you to leave with a nice impression of it, they treat you right. And it's really nice to be treated like royalty. They let you get away with many things. But, if you don't break down that wall, you'll never be a member of their society, which can be a pretty lonely experience. But, if you're not Japanese, you're not Japanese.

What can you do? Have someone like The Mother 'break you'. That's about as good as the advice I give gets. Anyway, being nice and understanding, or at least trying to do that, will probably get you a long way in any country.

So, The Mother ended up getting sick of me after 1 month, and the school frantically searched for a replacement family. It was still only a few months after the big earthquake hit *Kobe*, and my school was only about 30 minutes away from the epicentre. Surprise, surprise! The replacement host family they found for me was living in a temporary slap-together-in-ten-minutes box. Their house had totally collapsed during the quake, and it was a miracle they were still alive. By the way, that's one thing you have to beware of when you come to Japan. Not miracles, quakes. Well, actually, there's nothing you can really do to prevent them, so I suggest you enjoy them! Japan has less dangerous animals, and they have an ozone layer above them, so, choose your poison! At least there you can learn what little seismic hiccups feel like!

Getting back to my 2nd host family, this time The Mother was a lovely lady. But she was a single mother. Who had just lost her home. Who delivered newspapers in the morning. Who worked at a hospital during the day. Who worked at a convenience store 'til midnight. Who now found she had to feed my extra mouth... I simply couldn't handle watching her get thinner and thinner every day, so I got the school to do some more host family searching. Eventually they found me the perfect one. My new family had a house and a brother my age who loved TV - in particular, comedy.

From then on I spent all night, every night, in front of the TV with my host brother, and I learnt Japanese as we watched videos of comedy shows together. I was fascinated by it. It was funnier than anything I'd ever seen. And as I gradually became able to understand more and more, it grew on me even more and more. I also discovered that 90% of the comedians on TV were all members of Yoshimoto Inc, Japan's largest entertainment company, so it made sense that 'Yoshimoto' was a synonym for 'comedy' in Japan.

*Then I had a strike of genius...
Join Yoshimoto.*

— Chad Mullane

2 years later. I'd finished high school back in Perth, done my TEE, and was stuck with the big problem of deciding what I wanted to study at Uni. Then I had a strike of genius... Join *Yoshimoto*. I'd done my first comic act in Japanese at the Australian National Final Japanese Language Speech Contest, and I won that, so, why not? I soon figured out that *Yoshimoto* ran a comedy school called NSC⁵. I had no idea of what they could possibly teach you that would make you funny, but all the guys I loved on Japanese TV were graduates of NSC, so I looked up the number and gave them a call. They hung up on me. I called them again, and, after telling me not to waste my time and money, they hung up on me again. After a third call with the same response, I bought a plane ticket and went to see them in person. When I got there, there were several newspapers and TV cameras waiting. Apparently the guy who kept hanging up on me told his boss that he was having problems with a weird kid from Australia. The boss thought that was a great laugh, so he called the media! I was on TV from the 1st day of school! The novelty wore off after 3 months. I could laugh at Japanese programmes, but I probably didn't understand even 1/10 of it. I hit rock bottom. And stayed there for many, many years.

Since then, I've done shows in Las Vegas, New York, as well as several thousand in Japan. I've cleaned plenty of toilets for food. I've been on countless radio and TV shows. Walking dogs was my only source of income at one stage. I currently have a weekly show filmed on location in which I introduce all the amazing things you can do in Shanghai, which I do all in Japanese. I lived in my friend's wardrobe for 2 years. I write and perform for NHK⁶. Some *Yakuza* who didn't think I was funny made me put my privates on the table at a sushi restaurant and threatened to slice them. I got some laughs at the Cannes Film Festival. My nose has become permanently munted after sticking too many clothes pegs on it. I was the first foreigner to get a Cultural Activities Visa to learn *Manzai*, the traditional Japanese art of the double act, and then got an Entertainer Visa to do that professionally. I learnt to appreciate the fermented *Natto* beans after living on them for 3 months. I was an apprentice for 2 years to *Bonchi Osamu*, the Jerry Lewis of Japan, and my best friend is the funniest guy in the world.

So, Japan is a nice place (laugh). *Omorokattaraenen!*

1. Geinin = a comedian. 2. Manzai = A popular style of high-paced stand-up comedy with roots that trace back to the Heian Period (8th-12th Century). 3. Boke = A noun describing a word or phrase that is deliberately stupid. 4. Butainouedeshinukoto = 'To die on stage'. 5. NSC = New Star Creation - Yoshimoto's Comedy School. Approximately 30,000 people have enrolled since its establishment in 1987. About 100 of those have become professional comedians. 6. NHK = Japan's public broadcaster. Equivalent to Australia's ABC.



Chad Mullane was born in Perth in 1979. He went to Japan for 6 months on a student exchange programme, and after finishing high school he went back there to become a Japanese comedian. 10 years later, he's one of the most famous Aussies you've never heard of.