

# Atsugiri Jason

## Character Assassin



**A**MERICAN Jason Danielson, better known in Japan as “Atsugiri Jason,” has captured the public imagination with his hilarious high-energy skits ridiculing the complexities of the Japanese language.

**You have been living and working in Japan since 2005 as the corporate officer of a Mothers-listed IT company. How did you make the breakthrough in Japanese comedy?**

A few years ago I started a weekend course at Watanabe Entertainment Comedy School. I enjoyed the comedy on TV and thought I'd like to give it a try. The course lasted for a year and at the end of it a couple of TV shows picked me up for auditions. It just kind of blew up from there.

**Your skits have a common theme...**

My routines mostly point out the inconsistencies or paradoxes in Japanese kanji characters and language phrases. A character is usually made up of multiple little characters. If you take the meanings of those little characters separately and compare them with the meaning of the overall character, there often seems to be a contradiction. For example, the character for “hunting,” “狩,” comprises a character for “animal” and the character for “protect.” The character for walking, “歩,” means to “stop a little.” Those are single characters; when characters are combined, it can get even more ridiculous. The character for socks, for example (靴下), means “under the shoe,” but you'd get really dirty socks if they were *under* the shoe. The

Photo: Yuichi Itabashi

strangeness extends to phrases. If you do something bad, in Japanese as in English you “get your hands dirty.” But when you stop doing something bad, in Japanese you “wash your feet of it.” I don’t understand. Your feet were never involved.

### **How did you hit on the catchphrase “Why Japanese people!”?**

By chance actually. At comedy school, when I was not used to performing in front of a lot of people, I would sometimes panic and forget what I was going to say. In one of those moments the phrase just popped out. One of the Watanabe people told me the phrase in itself was funny and that I should pay more attention to it. From then on I made it a point to put that phrase in every skit. “Why Japanese people!” fits in with the stereotypical persona of an American getting overly excited and is simple enough English for most Japanese people to understand that he’s confused.

### **How would you characterize Japanese comedy.**

There are two main kinds. There’s the visual kind – people like [the comically made-up female double act] Nippon Elekitel Rengo or [swimsuit-clad] Kojima Yoshio – involving funny movements or other elements that are visually stimulating or surprising. The other kind would be the Osaka style of word-play comedy [*manzai*]. Comedy in the United States by contrast is more politically charged and tends to focus on social or political issues using exaggeration and sarcasm. You don’t really see that in Japan.

### **What comedy show would you recommend to readers who are studying Japanese?**

“*Enta no kamisama*” [The God of Entertainment] is one that I used to watch when I first came to Japan. [Atsugiri Jason is now a regular guest.] The show is a sequence of very short skits [by a variety of established and emerging comedians]. The skits are characterized by repetition and a bridge



Atsugiri Jason strikes his famous “Why Japanese people!” pose. “Atsugiri Jason” means “thick-cut Jason,” as in the homonym “thick-cut bacon.” The name also plays on the comedian’s place of work and residence: Atsugi in Kanagawa Prefecture.

Photo: Yuichi Itabashi

line marking out the laugh points in the same way that canned laughter is used in situation comedies in the United States. Subtitles run along the bottom of the screen.

### **How do you see your career in entertainment evolving?**

My focus recently has been less on comedy and more on commentator type roles connected with my IT and business background. I have two regular shows on NHK’s education channel: “*Eigo de asobo*” [“Let’s Play in English”] and “Why!?” programming,” which teaches children basic computer programming. So, less random comedy and more purposeful edutainment.

### **Do you enjoy your entertainment work?**

I do. You get to meet a lot of interesting people and do things you’d never be able to do otherwise. For example, I went deep-sea fishing. We’re talking deep, deep sea. I was pulling up these weird monsters, and because the water pressure is so different near the surface, the fish were exploding as I pulled them in. I was getting big reactions like, “Oh! What’s this fish!” and then [makes hand-to-mouth gesture] I had to eat it. So you get blessed with all these opportunities. 🍣

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Interview by ALEX HENDY

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