Twitter Thread by Mulboyne



Mulboyne
@Mulboyne

One popular foreign entertainer in Japan you don't hear much about today, is Roy James. Here he is, in a TV commercial for Nescafe instant coffee.



Roy James was born in Tokyo in 1929. While he might have looked like a Westerner, his family were Muslim Kazan Tatars who fought against the Soviets, and ended up in Japan. Roy James was a stage name: he was born Abdul Hannan Safa.



With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Roy James's family ended up as citizens of the Republic of Turkey. During WWII, Turkey had good relations with Japan but declared war in 1945, which caused Turks in Japan a few months of hardship.

Speaking about this time, James said he was questioned on the way to school, and would take a beating if he was deemed to be in an unauthorized place.



Roy James went to Japanese schools and was a native speaker of Japanese. He got his introduction to showbusiness through Taibi Okada aka E. H. Erick. Erick and his brother featured in this old thread: https://t.co/dLon1lciiJ

> This is Erick, who took the stage name E\u30fbH\u30fb\u30a8\u30ea\u30c3\u30af. His Japanese name was Taibi Okada. One of his talents was wiggling his ears. /7 pic.twitter.com/xi4YkJO36z
>
> — Mulboyne (@Mulboyne) September 27, 2017

As that thread says, E.H. Erick had been encouraged to start performing at the Nichigeki Music Hall. He needed a western-looking Japanese speaker to fill in for him one night, and Roy James stepped in as M.C.

James had done a short stint as a boxer in mixed martial arts fights with judoka, where he used the name "Straight Roy", so his stage name might have started there.

Roy James turned out to be an accomplished M.C., which led to work on radio and television. This clip from TV show Sound Inn S gives you an idea of his style. His Japanese isn't just fluent, it is confident and assured.



He could also carry a tune if asked. Here he is with a few bars of "Moonlight Bay".



You might notice from that short clip that Roy James wasn't a native English speaker. When he interviews Sammy Davis Jr, he is comfortable in English but you can hear his Japanese roots.



If you were on TV and radio, then you had to work well with sponsors, and James was a popular pitchman. When Nissan announced Sunny as the name of their new car, Roy James was chosen to host the PR event.

Along with his work for Nescafe at the top of this thread, Roy James appeared in adverts for a range of products.



One notable job he had was hosting the wedding reception for the marriage of Yukio Mishima and Yoko Sugiyama. Roy James' wife was Atsuko Yuasa, and the Yuasa family were close friends with the Hiraokas (Mishima's family).

Roy James wasn't just fluent in Japanese. He was brought up in the old Shitaya ward (now part of Taito City), which included Ueno, Yanaka and Akihabara. The local language here was sharp and colourful.

James was at ease with shitamachi Japanese. His Nissan sponsored radio show was called ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■, so speaking frankly was part of his schtick.



Perhaps the main reason James is not remembered as well as other Japanese or foreign entertainers of the same era, is that he died in 1982, at the young age of 53. This means we have fewer recordings of his TV work.

Roy James had naturalized before he died. He spoke about how much work the process involved, and how he was sad that Japanese had tried to reject their identity after the war, when he felt it was something to take pride in.

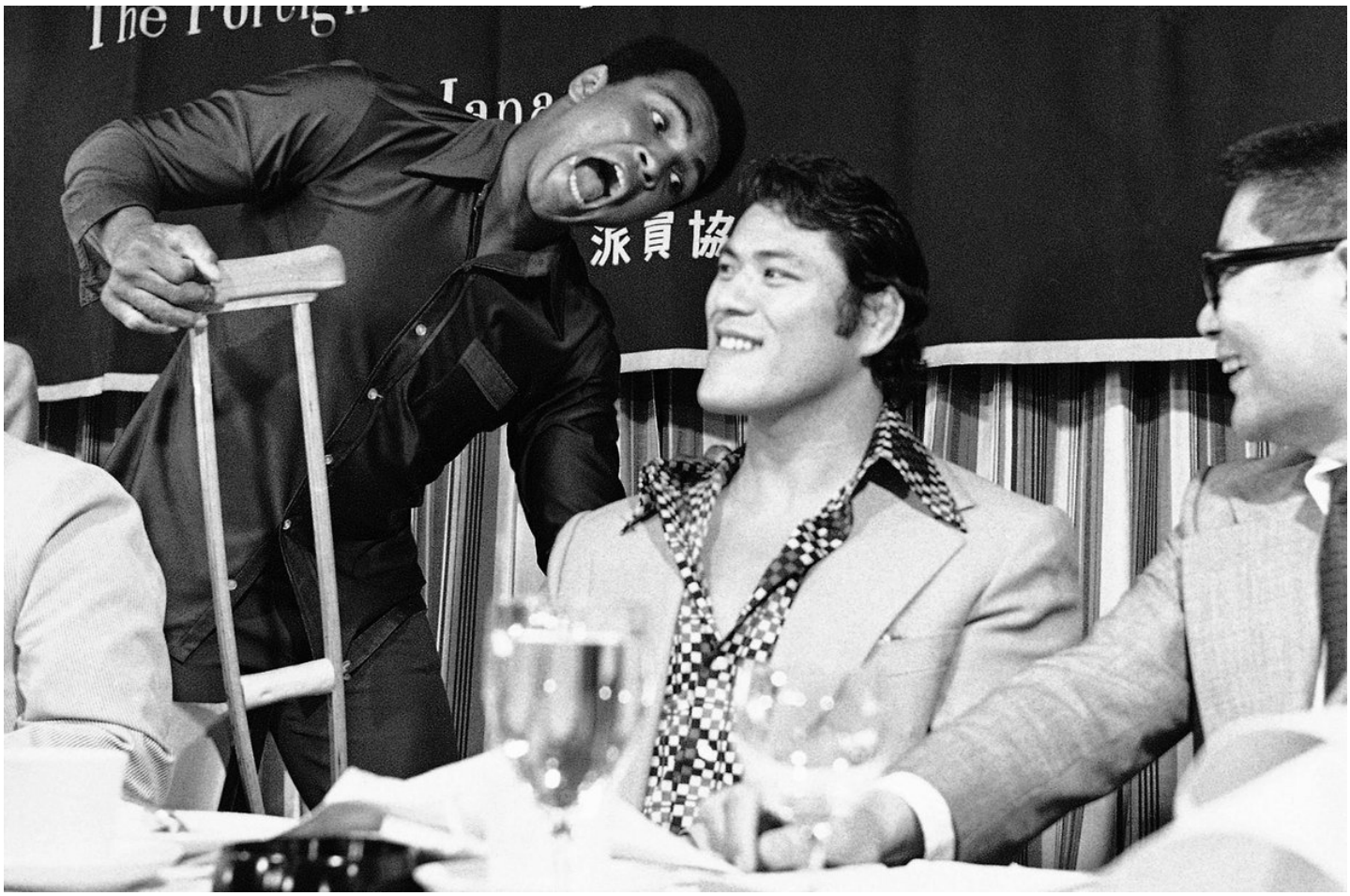


When he naturalized, Abdul Hannan Safa took a Japanese name. He eventually switched to his wife's family name of Yuasa, and so died as ■■ ■■. He was given a muslim burial.

Perhaps one of the sad aspects of his early death is that Roy James wasn't just form any old muslim family. His father was the Imam at the largest mosque in Tokyo, in Shibuya ward.



When Muhammad Ali came to Japan to fight Antonio Inoki in 1976, he clowned around in public but also attended services at the mosque. The photo on the right shows him sitting next to Aynan Safa, father of Roy James.



This clip of his funeral has footage featuring his family. His father outlived him by two years. Some of the other videos uploaded by this YouTube account have been used in this thread. https://t.co/XsgINfddrw