

# How to Be an American Celebrity Interviewer in Tokyo



Author Allan Murphy

By Allan Murphy

## Introduction

Clifford (Cliff) Harrington was born in America but spent most of his life in Japan. He was involved in many remarkable activities that brought him into contact with the likes of Godzilla, Muhammad Ali, Buck Owens and Sophia Loren.

In 2019, my good friend Graham Bathgate and I co-wrote the book *American Celebrity Interviewer in Tokyo*. Generally speaking, that book covered the various things Cliff did. Here I am going to outline *how Cliff did so much*. It was a combination of his personality, his interests, and his ability to improvise. In addition, I will include some background information on the numerous endeavors Cliff undertook.

## Childhood

Cliff was born in 1932 in Seattle, Washington. In 1942, his family moved to Berkeley, California, just across the bay from San Francisco. This was when his interest in traveling began.

From my 1998 interview: “Well, when I was a kid in Berkeley, California, I used to read books about African true adventures by Martin Johnson and Osa Johnson, who filmed wildlife in Africa. And I always dreamed about going. So, I used to stay home from school, pretending I was sick, so I could read those books.

But, at the same time, the China Clipper, which was a flying boat, used to take off from Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. It would leave, circle over my house in the Berkeley Hills and then go out across the Pacific, out past the Golden Gate. I always dreamed of going.”

In his high school days, writing was Cliff’s best ability. This coincided with his interest in celebrities. In the late 1940s, he interviewed Basil Rathbone for his high school newspaper. Rathbone was acting in a play in San Francisco. Cliff waited outside the stage door and Basil obliged. This taught Cliff that improvisation can often lead to positive results.

## The 1950s – 3 Chapters

*Chapter 1* From 1950 to 1954 Cliff attended San Jose University and graduated with a degree in journalism. During this period, he became interested in photography, both still and moviemaking. He traveled to Alaska and the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico with his camera equipment.

*Chapter 2* In 1955 Cliff was conscripted for two years of military

service. He was assigned to the US Army Signal Corps as a motion picture cameraman. Most significantly, Cliff was transferred to Tokyo and he was delighted! He made training and news reel films, among other things. His work required him to travel extensively in Japan, as well as to Taiwan and South Korea. During this time, Cliff made many media contacts.

Cliff’s photography skills improved. He became a writer for *American Cinematographer Magazine*, a publication about the technical side of moviemaking – cameras, lenses, lighting, etc. He wrote about 20 articles for this specialized magazine. In 1957, he visited a coastal area near Kyoto where *The Barbarian and the Geisha* was being filmed on location. The director, John Huston, and the star, John Wayne, were both very famous and had a lot of media coverage. Cliff, on the other hand, interviewed the director of photography, Charles G. Clarke. Cliff’s article was in the January 1958 edition and he had the cover photograph.

*Chapter 3* When he completed his army service, Cliff fulfilled his childhood dream: he spent almost three years as an adventure travel writer. He visited many countries in Southeast Asia and wrote articles for a variety of publications. While travelling in the Philippines in 1958, he was an extra in the film *The Kidnappers* starring Burgess Meredith.

But the highlight in this period was the three-month voyage he made with the Japanese whaling fleet to the Antarctic and back. (He was able to do this remarkable feat through his connections.) It was an adventure that few people had experienced.

As I quoted him in my 1998 interview: “The attraction was, that while I was there, 600 whales were caught. They had a flotilla of catcher ships and the mother ship. I went out on a couple of different catcher ships. If I had fallen into the water, I had 5 minutes to live. It was ice water!”

## The 1960s

Back in Tokyo in 1960, Cliff was 28 and he’d done a great deal. What else could possibly happen? He spent the next decade working as a movie extra. He wrote in his movie memoir:

“By this time, I was on the lists of two agents who recruited foreigners as extras and for speaking parts. No talent was necessary. A person just had to look right to the director. As a result, Germans played Americans, and British played Europeans. It didn’t matter.

I worked at all the studios. Included were my favorite Nikkatsu (they needed foreigners all the time), Toei, Toho, Shintocho, Shochiku,

Daiei, Fuji Eiga, Kyoiku Studio, and others.

I worked at Nikkatsu almost every week for a couple of years. ...

The stars I worked with were Ishihara Yujiro, his wife to be Kitahara Mie, Nitani Hideaki, Kobayashi Akira, Shishido Jo, Nagato Hiroyuki, Tsugawa Masahiko, Minamida Yoko, Frankie Sakai and others.”

Cliff very much enjoyed being at both ends of the camera: acting with Japanese stars and seeing how the films were made. He'd often talk with crew members. He was in more than 40 Japanese films. His favorites were *Dangan Taisho* (Bullet General); *King Kong vs Godzilla*; *Mothra vs Godzilla*; *Saigo No Nihonhei* (Last of the Japanese Imperial Army) filmed on Aoshima, Kyushu; and *Togyu Ni Kakeru Otoko* (Bullfight Gambling Man) in which he had a speaking part.

In addition, Cliff taught English part-time. The school he was at had a quality recording studio. Cliff and other voice actors made audio materials for English-language textbooks and dubbed English onto Japanese films for JAL and other customers. Cliff had a mellifluous voice and could do a range of ages and accents. He was in demand. From the 1960s to the 1990s, he dubbed more than 50 films and was the voice of Tora-san. In addition, he dubbed more than 200 cartoon episodes including *Astro Boy* and *Princess Knight*.

## The 1970s – the Apex

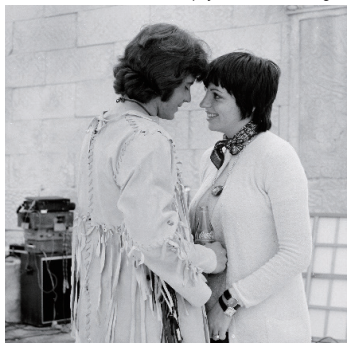
By now, Cliff had fulfilled many of his dreams. Then a new chapter began. In the 1970s, Japan was the most prosperous country in Asia and had a stable government. In contrast, for example, Indonesia had a dictator, Marcos was in the Philippines, China was in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, and there was the war in Vietnam. Japan stood out.

There were five reasons why foreign celebrities came to Japan in the 1970s. Cliff was in the right place at the right time with the right tools.

### 1) Making movies

#### *Marco* (1972)

Japan had been a popular place for making foreign films since the 1950s. In addition to having exotic locations, the studios were quality, and the crews were professional. In 1972, thanks to his connections, Cliff was part of the publicity department for the musical comedy film *Marco* which was being filmed, in part, on a beach near Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture. The star was Desi Arnaz Jr. (son of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Sr.). His girlfriend at that time was Liza Minnelli, who had just starred in *Cabaret* and would soon win an Academy Award. Cliff roamed about the set freely and, due to his warm personality, was able to take some special photographs. Due to his contacts, Cliff was able to write about *Marco*



Desi Arnaz Jr. and Liza Minnelli – only a special photographer could get so up close and personal.

in English-language newspapers in Tokyo. He had pseudonyms: “Alex Blaine” for the *Asahi Evening News*; “Les Gibbons” for the *Mainichi Daily News*; and “Syd Porter” for the *Daily Yomiuri*. Cliff would use these names for the next 10 years (*Photo 1*).

#### *The Yakuza* (1974)

Once again, Cliff was on the set with his camera working for the publicity department. He interviewed and wrote articles about director Sydney Pollack (who would win the Academy Award for Best Director for *Out of Africa* in 1986), co-star Brian Keith, and especially the star, Robert Mitchum.

### 2) Promoting films

Japan was a large market for foreign films. Stars would come to Tokyo for media events for their latest films and to attend premieres. Typically, they would arrive at Haneda Airport (Narita wasn't open until 1978) and were frequently greeted by fans and members of the press corps, often including Cliff. I was surprised that many stars carried their own luggage through the crowded arrival area, and out to the taxi stand (*Photo 2*).

The stars would stay at luxury hotels such as the Keio Plaza, the New Otani, and the Okura. Media events were held in reception rooms. The star, and often co-stars, would sit at a long table, and, with the help of interpreters, would answer questions from reporters. Many photographers were also there. Typically, Japanese reporters would ask low ball questions such as “Do you like Japanese food?” Cliff was respectful, but would ask about previous films, co-stars, future plans and so on. In some cases, when the official media event was completed, the star would walk over to Cliff for a one-to-one interview.

In May 1975 Sophia Loren was in Tokyo to promote her latest film, *La pupa del gangster*. Cliff was in the press corps at Haneda. The next day, he attended the media interviews at the Hotel Okura. He stood out, and Sophia gave him 25 minutes in a one-to-one interview that he'd never forget.

Cliff interviewed Charlton Heston in 1976 when he was in Tokyo to promote his film *Midway*. In 1979, he made a good impression on Mel Gibson who was promoting *Mad Max*, and they re-connected in 1981 for *Mad Max 2*. He also attended press conferences for *Grease*



Sophia Loren at Haneda greeted by fans and members of the press. Security was not what it is today.

with Olivia Newton-John in 1978, for *Rocky 2* with Sylvester Stallone in 1979, and for *The Empire Strikes Back* with Mark Hamill and Carrie Fisher in 1980.

### 3) Music performances & music festivals

Country music star Buck Owens and his band The Buckaroos had been very popular in Japan in the 1960s. So much so, that they recorded a live album (“Buck Owens and The Buckaroos Live in Japan!”) at Kosei Nenkin Hall in Shinjuku in January 1967. In 1972, Owens released the song “Made in Japan” which became a No. 1 hit in the United States. It included the lyrics:

“My transistor radio comes from far way  
And when it’s night over here, over there it’s breaking day  
I remember all the good times I had walking in the sand  
With the beautiful girl that I met made in Japan”

In March 1974, Cliff interviewed and photographed Buck Owens in the star’s dressing room at Nakano Sun Plaza. Then he watched the entire performance from backstage. The show was recorded and released as a double album.

Glen Campbell was also popular. In 1975, prior to his tour in Japan, he altered the words to his song “Comin’ Home” for a Coke commercial, only for the Japanese market:

“Coming home to meet my brother  
Gotta get to know each other  
You miss a lot not knowing who he is  
Hello stranger, have a Coca-Cola  
Forget the past  
We’re coming home together  
Coming home at last.”

The Coke version of the song was a big hit, and tickets for his performances were soon sold out. In May 1975, Cliff and his camera were backstage and in Glen Campbell’s dressing room for a good interview. He watched the show from the wings. The performance on May 29 at Kosei Nenkin Hall was recorded and released as “Glen Campbell: Live in Japan”.

Just as Buck and Glen successfully catered to the Japanese market, so too Cliff gave the stars what they needed: a warm personality and interesting questions. This technique opened many doors: Cliff attended a rehearsal with Ray Charles and The Raelettes, interviewed Sammy Davis Jr. for 45 minutes in his hotel room, and gave a bouquet of flowers to Ella Fitzgerald.

The Tokyo Music Festival began in 1972. It was an international music contest that was held annually until 1992, except 1991, for some reason. I’m not sure how often Cliff covered this event. However, he attended the media event at the Tokyo Prince Hotel for the 10th festival in April 1981. He has photos of Jermaine Jackson, Stevie Wonder, and Susan Anton with her boyfriend Dudley Moore, among others. The Nolans won the grand prize.

In the latter part of the 1970s more rock bands came to Japan. In

1977 Cliff interviewed Kiss, in 1978 Foreigner and in 1979 Rod Stewart and Peter Frampton, among others.

### 4) International sports events

I’m not sure how many international sports events there were in the 1970s, but Cliff covered these two.

In June 1976, Muhammed Ali was in Tokyo to fight Antonio Inoki, a famous pro wrestler and martial artist. Cliff phoned Ali’s staff at the Keio Plaza Hotel and was told that an interview would not be possible because Ali would be leaving in the afternoon to meet Prime Minister Takeo Miki. Even so, Cliff thought he should visit the hotel to perhaps get a photograph. On arriving, he saw Ali walking along a long line of fans being greeted and signing autographs. Cliff seized the moment: he took out his tape recorder, walked beside Ali and began a 10-minute interview that “the champ” enjoyed. When Ali’s taxi set off to the prime minister’s office, Cliff waved and Ali waved back. Cliff had his camera ready and took one of his favorite photos.

However, the fight between Ali and Inoki did not go well. They chased each other around the ring, and there was almost no physical contact. After 15 rounds, it was called a draw.

In April 1978 the first Suntory Cup invitational tennis tournament was held. Although not considered an official tournament, the prize money of \$250,000 attracted the stars. Cliff attended the press conference and took photos of rivals Bjorn Borg and Jimmy Connors, among others. Borg won the event.

### 5) Charity sports events

In my 1998 interview with Cliff, I thought these were among his most interesting stories.

#### Celebrity Charity Tennis Tournament for UNICEF

In the middle of July 1975, half a dozen American celebrities arrived in Tokyo in order to play tennis with Japanese stars for UNICEF. As usual, Cliff was at Haneda and welcomed Fred MacMurray (*Double Indemnity*, *The Caine Mutiny*, TV’s *My Three Sons* 1960-72) and his wife, actress and singer June Haver; Robert Stack (TV’s *The Untouchables* 1959-63) and his actress wife Rosemarie Bowe; Peter Graves (TV’s *Mission Impossible* 1967-73); Richard Roundtree (*Shaft* films); Cathy Lee Crosby (former tennis pro, *Wonder Woman*), and actor and director Cornel Wilde.

There was a press conference at the Hotel Okura on July 14, and all expressed pleasure at being in Japan to help UNICEF. On July 17, a 90-minute dinner show was held in the Heian Room at the Hotel Okura. Tickets were ¥20,000.

The Japanese stars included Shintaro Ishihara (head of the Celebrity International Charity Committee, writer, film maker, who would become the governor of Tokyo from 1999 to 2012); Jerry Ito (Japanese-American film star); Chiharu Igaya (alpine skier, won the silver medal in the 1956 Olympics); Keitaro Miho (musician); Four Leaves (a boy band); Osamu Ishiguro (tennis pro 1960s); and Kazuko Sawamatsu (tennis pro who two weeks earlier had won the 1975 Wimbledon Women’s Doubles Championship with her

Photo 3: Allan Murphy and Graham Bathgate



Cliff, Fred MacMurray, and June Haver

Photo 4: Allan Murphy and Graham Bathgate



Stephen Boyd surprised by Cliff.

Photo 5: Allan Murphy and Graham Bathgate



Cliff and Stephen Boyd on very good terms

American partner Ann Kiyomura).

The tennis matches were on Friday 18 and Saturday 19. They played doubles and mixed doubles. Tickets were ¥2,000 in advance or ¥2,500 at the door. The events took place at Topirec Plaza in Toyochō. At the tournament, Cliff enjoyed walking around freely with his camera and tape recorder. He met all of the stars. Fred MacMurray and June Haver were not playing tennis. Rather, they were honorary “coaches” whose tasks were to attract media attention for the UNICEF event. Cliff was a fan of them both. They soon had a very good conversation, which Cliff turned into several articles (*Photo 3*).

I don’t know how many Celebrity Charity Tennis events there were in Tokyo. A previous one, perhaps the first, was held in November 1974. The stars included Peter Lawford, Davy Jones, and the Supremes. It raised ¥3,000,000 for charity. Cliff did not cover the 1974 event for some reason. Perhaps he was on vacation.

### Celebrity Charity Golf for UNICEF

Just two months later, in September 1975, another swarm of stars arrived in Tokyo. This time it was celebrity golf for UNICEF. A foursome was made up of a foreign celebrity, a Japanese celebrity and two donors who paid ¥35,000 each for the privilege.

The visiting celebrities were Adam West (TV’s *Bat Man*) and his wife Marcelle; Bobby Riggs (retired tennis pro; Cliff called him “madcap”); Efram Zimbalist, Jr. (TV’s *77 Sunset Strip*); John Forsythe (veteran actor who would later become famous in *Dynasty*) and his wife Julie Warren; Lee J. Cobb (veteran movie actor); Robert Sterling (*Topper*, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*) and his wife Anne Jeffreys; Stephen Boyd (60 films, most famous for *Ben Hur*) and his wife Elizabeth; and Wes Parker (pro baseball player for the L.A. Dodgers 1964-72; in 1974 he played for the Nankai Hawks; just beginning his movie career).

There were two golf matches. The first was on Sept. 4 at a course in Shizuoka. The next day, at the Keio Plaza Hotel, there was a fund-raising dinner and an after-dinner party at which donors could mingle with the celebrities. The second golf games were played on Sept. 7 in Mie, near Osaka. Then, on Sept. 8 at the Osaka Royal Hotel another fund-raising dinner and an after-dinner party took place.

Cliff attended the after-dinner party at the Keio Plaza Hotel on Sept.

5. Imagine being in a room with about a dozen stars who were there just to be interviewed and photographed. Paradise for Cliff!

One of Cliff’s best memories of this event was when he met Stephen Boyd. Earlier, at a press conference, Boyd had said that he was afraid to return to his hometown in Northern Ireland because of the violence caused by the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Then, Cliff had an idea for a story. He waited patiently. When he saw Boyd standing alone, he quietly walked up behind and tapped him on the shoulder. He had his camera ready. When Boyd turned around, he had a look of surprise, which is just what Cliff wanted. When Cliff explained what he had in mind, Boyd was pleased (*Photos 4 & 5*).

(On June 2, 1977, less than two years after being in Tokyo, Boyd had a fatal heart attack in Los Angeles while playing golf, one of his favorite pastimes. He was only 45.)

I do not know the amount of money raised by the charity golf events in 1975. Nor do I know if this was the only one of its kind. What I do know is that the logistics of organizing the golf and tennis events were remarkable: finding a number of celebrities who were available at the same time (for about a week) and were willing to fly to Japan to play one of the sports. Then, the airline and hotel reservations, welcome parties, press events and so on – and all done in the analog era!

### Conclusion

As a young man, Cliff wanted to travel, write, meet celebrities and become a photographer. Not all of our dreams come true, but Cliff was in the right place, at the right time with the right skills. It was the synergy of these and his work ethic and his personality that enabled him to be a successful American celebrity interviewer in Tokyo.

**Note:** Excerpts from the book *American Celebrity Interviewer in Tokyo* and other information are available on the Finline Press website: <https://www.finlinepress.co.nz/harrington.html>

**JS**

Allan Murphy is a freelance English teacher, writer and photographer. He has lived in Japan for more than 30 years and has travelled widely. He has published articles on many topics such as the fireworks at Suwako, the manjushage festival near Hanno, and the John Lennon Museum in Omiya.