

The Great Survivor

David McNeill

The late Johnny Kitagawa was Japan's most successful talent mogul, enabled by an entertainment industry that turned a blind eye to his serial sexual abuse of children

As might be expected, the death of Johnny Kitagawa from a stroke on July 9th was met with grief and apparently genuine affection in Japan's entertainment industry. Kitagawa (87) had, after all, helmed arguably the country's most powerful talent agency. Johnny & Associates had ignited the careers of some of the best-loved Japanese pop acts of the last five decades, among them Four Leaves, Tanokin Trio, Hikaru Genji, SMAP, TOKIO, Kinki Kids and V6. Yakumaru Hirohide, a former member of Shibugakitai, an eighties boy band managed by Kitagawa, said he had "cried all night" on hearing about his death - a not untypical reaction.



Parts Colonel Tom Parker, Howard Hughes and Pied Piper, Kitagawa helped pioneer the boy band formula. Instead of waiting for pop groups to develop organically, Kitagawa's agency manufactured and launched them and kept a vice-like grip on their image and output. Britain's Take That and America's Nsync and The Backstreet Boys all owe a debt to him.

Japan's entertainment industry depended heavily on his agency's output. "His stars can sing and dance, they're well mannered, remember their lines and are never late," said Tamon Andrew Niwa, a former producer with TBS in a story I wrote for *Newsweek Japan* in 2005. "They run a tight ship. If someone quits Johnny's, I always assume there must have been a problem with that performer because it is so professional. They do things properly." Away from the tributes in the industry and the mass media, however, there were plenty of hints of something darker in Kitagawa's résumé. ([Source](#)). Allegations of sexual abuse dogged him around throughout his career. An open industry secret, these claims burst to the surface in 1999 when weekly magazine *Shukan Bunshun* ran a series of articles accusing Kitagawa of systematically abusing young boys. Kitagawa sued publisher Bungei Shunju for libel, but despite the testimony of two of 12 rape victims interviewed by *Bunshun*, the Tokyo District Court ruled in Kitagawa's favor, ordering the publisher to pay 8.8 million yen in damages to him and Johnny's in 2002. The Tokyo High Court overturned this decision in July 2003, however, and concluded the claims were true. "The agency failed to counter argue the allegations in the detailed testimony of the victimized youths," said presiding Judge Yazaki Hidekazu. Kitagawa's final appeal was dismissed in 2005. A civil court ruling that the founder of an organization in charge over the years of thousands of children was a sexual predator and serial rapist might otherwise have been headline news but it barely caused a blip on Japan's media radar. Few, even in the entertainment industry, profess to be aware of it. TV and newspaper tributes to Kitagawa after his death made

perfunctory references to the abuse claims, if they mentioned them at all. (Source). Two years after the ruling, *Bungei* was still angry. “We completely won our case in the Tokyo High Court but television ignored the judgment,” said Hitoshi Fujiwara, who managed the company’s legal affairs department. “These children want to join Johnny’s and become famous because they see other stars on TV, and Johnny’s uses this. The rape of children is not something you can overlook.” Tsunematsu Hiroaki, a journalist who helped cover the story, said not only was the story ignored, the abuse victims were offered money and offers of entertainment work to drop their lawsuits. “It was pretty awful treatment. Money is what keeps a lid on scandals. Everybody is happy.”

Miwa gave the industry view: “As a producer I’m not interested in rumors of sex scandals. It doesn’t concern people like us who are making programs,” he said. At least he was honest – the industry did not want to kill the golden goose. Kitagawa’s acts still sprinkle the pop charts and help grease the wheels of prime-time television, propping up ratings and selling products during the breaks. At one point his agency managed clients who appeared annually in over 30 television programs and at least 40 commercials. Before they disbanded at the end of 2016, the five members of SMAP alone had about 15 regular TV shows between them.



The agency Kitagawa ran was famously secretive. It mostly declined interview requests with its reclusive founder, except under strict

conditions. The few journalists allowed though the doors of his agency in Tokyo’s Akasaka district were warned not to discuss the abuse claims. Before he died, Kitagawa gave a “legacy” interview with public service broadcaster NHK where he was filmed only from the neck down, dispensing life lessons to a sobbing reporter. There was no mention of the *Bunshun* suit. The dearth of information was compounded by the mainstream media, which shunned confrontation with an organization it still depends on to supply product filler.

The running of Johnny’s was essentially split in two, with Kitagawa spotting and nurturing talent and his sister, Mary, taking care of business. Years of practice gave Kitagawa a connoisseur’s eye for potential male stars and he was known to personally peruse the thousands of resumes sent to his office every year (SMAP member Kimura Takuya famously joined Johnny’s after his aunt sent his photo and resume to the agency before his fifteenth birthday).

Once inside, the boys were molded for stardom. New recruits were taught how to dress, walk, dance, sing and speak to cameras, to convincingly wield swords and remember dialogue for all-important period dramas, a TV staple. “They’re very strict with a rigid *senpai-kohai* structure, which really suits the *Taiga* period dramas we make,” said senior NHK producer Yoshikawa Koji. Kitagawa often personally groomed promising newcomers. The image of a leering old sexual predator was not quite right, or at least not the whole story; some of his ex-protégées spoke with affection, even love, for a man they describe as a blend of friend, relative and lover.

“For me he was a big brother figure,” said one who also spoke off the record to *Newsweek Japan*. “I could talk to him about anything and he had a young heart. He would give me advice: ‘don’t hang with rough kids or your image will suffer.’ He is very affectionate,

nuzzling touching a lot, but nothing ever happened to me. But then I don't think physically I was his type. I was 15 and he prefers the bodies of younger boys, 11 and 12. And I went home at night but others stayed over."

Illicit sex was one part of the complex cocktail that stoked Johnny's creative boilers; another was money. Contracts were not discussed until debuts were made and lawyers were never involved, so who earns what was a perennially touchy subject. According to industry watcher Hiruma Masaaki, popular teenagers earned around ¥1m a month, but the handful of top stars earned a lot more. TV work itself is still not that lucrative: a drama series typically paid around three to five million an hour of broadcast time to its top star, and sometimes far less. But the TV work is in effect a shop window for concerts, records and advertising; SMAP at one point earned an estimated ¥120m to ¥150m per ad. At his peak, Johnny's top star, Kimura, reportedly earned ¥500m yen a year.

The years of expensive grooming and heavy dependency on advertising meant scandal could be disastrous and was ruthlessly snuffed out. "If the Wide Shows or magazines publicize a scandal involving the talent agencies they will stop their acts from cooperating with them, and that deals a blow to sales," said Niwa. "So they have the TV companies by the short hairs. It's very political but this is not just the agencies. It's like politics or the Yakuza: if you screw us we'll screw you." Over the years, multiple stories were suppressed. When SMAP member Inagaki Goro was caught in 2001 in a minor hit-and-run traffic accident in Shibuya, the agency leaned on TV networks not to use the career-killing tag *yogisha* (suspect). After a rash of cancelled contracts and a few months in hiding, Inagaki was back. Muckraking magazine *Uwasa no Shinso* once carried an interview with a young girlfriend of SMAP member Nakai

Masahiro, who said she had become pregnant with his child. According to the magazine, she was told to abort the baby and offered money by the group's management; she angrily severed ties and told her story instead.

It may be that entertainment as an industry facilitates serial abuse, as the revelations surrounding American film producer Harvey Weinstein and British radio and television star Jimmy Savile suggest. In any case scandal did little to dent Kitagawa's business, or his legacy. By the time of his death, the talent system he helped pioneer dominated the entertainment industry. Miwa explained how the agencies worked. "When drama schedules are planned it is not the TV companies that decide on who acts, it is the agencies. The producers may refuse [to accede to agency's demands] but the company will argue that we have to get future programs made. So in extreme cases, in a drama series where you have a regular cast of eight regulars, seven of them will be decided by the administration behind the scenes. That's the power they have."

Time will tell whether Kitagawa's death prods more victims to speak out. In the meantime, one way of gaining a fuller picture of a man described by actor Higashiyama Noriyuki, as like a "father" to two generations of Japanese male talent, is to revisit the *Bunshun* series. In one article, a former Johnny's protégée describes being ordered to submit to Kitagawa. "When I was lying in my bed, he suddenly burst in. I was alone, there was no one else in the bed. He slid in beside and behind me. He was holding something strange, I thought. He took it and rubbed it on my butt - it was a sticky lotion. Next he stuck his finger in, and finally his sex organ. I was scared so I didn't turn my head to look. It hurt, it hurt so badly."

In the morning, said the boy, 50,000 yen had been placed by his bedside.

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