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ALAN: Hello, and welcome to this episode of the Talks at Google podcast. Where great minds meet. I'm Alan bringing you this week's episode with comedian, author, singer/songwriter, and original member of Monty Python Eric Idle. Talks at Google brings the world's most influential thinkers, creators, makers, and doers all to one place. Every episode of this podcast is taken from a video that can be seen at youtube.com/talksatgoogle. Eric Idle found immediate fame with "Monty Python's Flying Circus". Following their TV success, the group began making films which include "Holy Grail" in 1975, "The Life of Brian" in 1979, and "The Meaning of Life" in 1983. Idle, who also founded the Rutles, authored the smash Broadway musical "Spamalot" which won three Tonys. While in town promoting his new Sortabiography, "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life", Idle sat down with Googler Yigal Petreanu to talk about his illustrious career.

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Here is Eric Idle. "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life".

[applause]

ERIC IDLE: Hello.

YIGAL PETREANU: Hello.

ERIC IDLE: Hello. Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Hello. Good afternoon. Hi. Well, that went well.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah, yeah.

ERIC IDLE: What are these? Hamsters? What are they? Are they Google things? Are they sort of the set design?

YIGAL PETREANU: They record whatever you say. They use it against you, so you--yeah. Sorry.

ERIC IDLE: Oh, dear.

YIGAL PETREANU: Okay, so what are we going to do today? So many people are here, so in my opinion, you are truly a Renaissance man. You did everything, and--

ERIC IDLE: You know, I've been dead since the 15th century.

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YIGAL PETREANU: So what I decided to do, again, over the last couple of weeks, I asked for people to send me questions, and I go through piles of questions. I felt like Ringo Starr receiving all these mails with questions. And I divided them into different topics. Some of them I just threw away. I'm taking credit for all the questions, by the way.

ERIC IDLE: Excellent. That's the tech world we know.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah, so again, you wrote somewhere, again, regretfully, at some point I'll read quotes that you made back to you. I hope it's okay with you. So you wrote in the book that there is nothing funnier than no one laughing, so I'll try to provide the part in this talk, and you can make them laugh as much as you want, if this is okay...

ERIC IDLE: Okay, okay.

YIGAL PETREANU: With you.

ERIC IDLE: Okay. I mean that was specifically about when you mean to be funny, and there's an audience, you know. And then it happened to us once, on Python, when we were on "The Tonight Show" in 1973, and we'd just toured Canada, and they laughed at everything we did.

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If we went onstage and farted, they applauded and stood up, but we were in America, and we were on "The Tonight Show". And we started off by, "Hello, Mrs. Thing. Hello, Mrs. Entity." And the audience was like this. [laughter] And we did--we had--after that material, we did it in 20 minutes, and then we all ran outside, in Burbank, and lay on the ground, and laughed our asses off, 'cause it was just so funny. It was just really funny. That's what I meant by that.

YIGAL PETREANU: Anyway, so let's talk about music, if you don't mind. One of our mutual loves. Like many [music] English teenagers who grew up in the 50's--

ERIC IDLE: That's the President.

YIGAL PETREANU: The crucial liberating moment was watching Elvis and hearing "Heartbreak Hotel". And can you recall what you really felt when you first saw Elvis? And did you ever manage to meet him in person, later on in life?

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ERIC IDLE: I never met him, but I was 14, so it was 1957, so he was--you know, he was everywhere. "Well, since my baby left me," you know. We never see him. He was on television eventually, but they'd only shoot him below the waist. American television. They're very prurient about that, 'cause he was jiggling about, you know. Eh.

PERSON: Above.

ERIC IDLE: Above the waist. Sorry. [laughter]

YIGAL PETREANU: That's even better.

ERIC IDLE: That was a different film. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. As I said, we were 14, you know, so we were very interested in what went on below the waist. But then eventually, I found out, to my complete and total--I still can't come to terms with it--that he was an enormous Python fan. And he had all the tapes on his plane, and he called everybody Squire after my nudge, nudge sketch. Which was absolutely mind-blowing to me, until I met Linda Thompson, who was his penultimate girlfriend, and she said that, in Nashville, at night, when the television went off at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning...

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Elvis would make her sit up in bed with her and do Python sketches. And not just any Python sketches. It was, "Hello, Mrs. Thing. I need a new brain." Now, I don't know if you can imagine Elvis sitting in bed doing that, but apparently that's what he did with Linda Thompson, so I just--it's still mind-blowing isn't it? I mean it's boggling.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah. Anyway, moving from the 50s to the 60s--okay, if you don't mind, Python are often referred to as the Beatles of comedy, so my question to you is did you really meet the Beatles, the Stones, the Who, the Kinks--all those great bands in the 60s in real life, in real time or--

ERIC IDLE: Yeah. I mean, but that's because we were all the same generation. We all came out of the war. All born at the end of World War II, and into this horrible world. It was rationing and bomb sites everywhere, and that generation sort of invented--

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It was actually a Renaissance. They invented everything. They invented rock and roll, photography, couture fashion. It was because there was nobody there. Everybody was in the forces, so we were the ones who did comedy, and we were on television, but there wasn't anybody before us, 'cause there wasn't television. So we were very fortunate to go into a blank field, and if you can find a blank field, in any part of the world, that's a really good place to be, 'cause nobody's done anything, so you can hit all the spots first.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah, so again, we move into the 70s, and--very fast. We don't have a lot of time, so I have to move very fast. You were distinguished members of the Rutles, but before the singles, and records, and movies, and Rutlemania, and everything, there was this "Rutland Weekend Television". Can you tell us a little bit about it, and why'd you decide, for example, that there should be no live audience for this specific--

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ERIC IDLE: Well, it was after Python finished, and I sort of haven't--I still like writing sketches, so I have my--I got my own little television series from the BBC called "Rutland Weekend Television", and Rutland is the smallest county in England, and actually, they made it extinct, so I liked the idea of being their television station, and it was Cleese's title. I paid him a pound for it, and we did it from a tiny, little studio which was really the weather forecast studio, and we had to lift all the sets upstage. It was made--I think the whole series cost £30,000, so--but from that came a joke I wrote called--about the Rutles, because they were the Rutland version of the Beatles, and so I took that to "Saturday Night Live", and I was hosting, and they put it on TV, and people wrote to the Rutles. It was amazing, so then we made the full documentary for NBC.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah, and this was a huge success, and why did you choose to play Dirk McQuickly? Originally it was George, but then you switched to Paul.

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ERIC IDLE: In the original one, on the TV show, I played the George character, but I couldn't find anybody--'cause Neil Innes played Lennon, and he did him really great, and I couldn't find anybody to balance Neil. So I had to sort of do that role, 'cause I was really playing the interviewer all the time, which was fun, but then I sort of--I thought, "Well, I've got to play Dirk McQuickly," which is quite nice, 'cause then I came face to face with Paul McCartney, just after I'd played him, and he was with his wife Linda, and she really loved it. And he wasn't quite sure, 'cause I was mocking his little eyes that he would do, you know. [laughter] He's very--he's good friends now. They all like the Rutles now. George Harrison would only refer to the Beatles as the Rutles, and yeah. He would always talk about the Rutles. What we're doing now. The Rutles.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah, and there was also a story about George and Ringo actually playing...

ERIC IDLE: Yeah.

YIGAL PETREANU: The song.

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ERIC IDLE: We were visiting--my daughter and I--she was a wee one. We were visiting Friar Park, which is an extraordinary house in Henley where George lives. It was a gothic place, and Ringo was there, and they both picked up guitars and started to sing "Ouch", which is the parody of

"Help", in the Rutles. And it was like the world had just turned upside down. You know, this is really bizarre.

YIGAL PETREANU: Moving on--[laughter]. This is my job here. I need--

ERIC IDLE: It's all right. No. You're doing good. You're doing good.

YIGAL PETREANU: Okay, okay. Thank you. You have achieved some unprecedented act by singing the opening track on a Harry Nilsson album. Moreover, you are the co-owner of--co-creator of a song together. There's a song by Harrison/Idle named "Pirate Song", so I wonder how does it feel to really collaborate with culture heroes that tend to be your friends, at some point?

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ERIC IDLE: Well, that's two parts, but I don't know whether people--do people know Harry Nilsson these days?

YIGAL PETREANU: Everybody knows him. Yes.

ERIC IDLE: Really? Not everybody. He was great and a wonderful man, but the George one was because he came on my show "Rutland Weekend Television", and I'd persuaded him to be my special guest. And it was a Christmas show of "Rutland Weekend Television", and he came lurching on, and he said--and he dressed as a pirate, so he said, "All right. I'm ready for the sketch." I was, "Well, what sketch?" He said, "The pirate sketch." And I said, "Well, actually, there isn't a pirate sketch." He said, "No. There's gotta be a pirate sketch." I said, "No, no. We want you to sing 'My Sweet Lord'." "Oh, I'm not doing that, so a pirate sketch." I said, "Well, I'm sorry. There is no pirate"--"Well, up you then." And off he went. And then, at the end of the show, we cut to this big set, and it says George Harrison Sings, and George came down, and he had the white suit on and the 12-string playing. [humming]

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And he played all that introduction, and then he went, "I want to be a pirate. A pirate's life for me. All my friends are pirates, and they sailed to BBC." So we wrote that, so that--you know. You know, it's almost as good as Lennon and McCartney I think.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah, yeah. That's very good. Yeah, yeah. So we'll have to move on. Your "Hey Jude" will forever be "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life". And of course, again, can you tell us a little bit how it came to be, where the optimism comes from, and how come--and did you really imagine that, by 2018, people will still sing this song with so much spirit and vengeance?

ERIC IDLE: Well, yes of course. I knew all about that. [laughter] I'd also imagined Google, you know.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah no. I know.

ERIC IDLE: Nobody believed me, at the time. No.

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I mean the fact was we were writing "The Life of Brian", and what we got to, as far as the end, and all of our characters were--had crucifixion. Now, we have to figure out how we're going to end the damn movie, you know, so I said, "Well, let's end with a song." And they said, "Oh, yeah. That's kind of a nice idea, so we can be being crucified and sing from the crosses," and everybody said, "Oh, that's really bad. Yeah. We'll do that." Yeah, and then Gilliam said, "We can dance, as well," you know, so I said, "Well, it has to be a ridiculously optimistic song, like looking on the bright side,

and it should be like a Disney song. It should have a little whistle." And so they said, "Oh, it's really good," and they put in the script and said, "We can stop for the day now." And I went home and wrote it very quickly, and brought it back the next day, and they hated it. No. They liked it, and I mean, you know, when you think about it, I mean it is a parody of an optimistic song, 'cause they're being crucified. There's not a lot to look forward to. You've got about 25 minutes, if you're lucky, but then--so that was kind of--it made a real nice ending for the film, and people really liked it.

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Harry Nilsson recorded it, actually, on one of his albums, but yeah. So then, about 15 years later, I had a friend who was an English football player called Gary Lineker, who is my neighbor, and he said, "They're singing your song on the terraces." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well," he said, "Whenever a team's losing very badly [laughter] all the fans sing, 'Always look on the bright side of life. Da-dum. Da-duh da-duh da-duh,'" and it was all going round all of the stadiums in England. Caught on like wildfire. They rereleased the song, and it went to number one, on one of the charts. Amazing, so yeah. That was kind of weird, and it developed its own life, after that. I mean during the Falklands War, when HMS Sheffield was hit by an Exocet and all of the sailors sat on the deck waiting for rescue for three hours singing "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life".

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And now, so it became something that--the English are very good at irony. I mean that--probably all they're good at really, but now it's the number one song requested at British funerals. Seriously. I mean for the last ten years it has been that. Replacing "My Way" I'm happy to say. And I like that. I think it's very--it sort of shows--'cause it is ridiculously optimistic, but it also says "always look on the bright side of death" which is one of the lines in it, you know. "Just before you draw your terminal breath, life's a piece of shit when you look at it." And so I love the fact that people go to funerals, and they sing it, and of course, what you need at a funeral is always a good laugh. That's the most important thing, 'cause it's the only thing that shakes you back into reality, so I'm kind of proud of that. I think that's nice.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah, and by the way, in front of the queen, you changed the "shit" to "spit."

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ERIC IDLE: Apparently I did. Yes. I think life's a piece of spit. But not in front of Prince Charles, and not at the Olympic games. They let me say "shit" on the Olympic games.

YIGAL PETREANU: So only the queen was quite...

ERIC IDLE: Well...

YIGAL PETREANU: Quite strict.

ERIC IDLE: You have to respect her majesty, and [laughter].

YIGAL PETREANU: Okay, so I think that we wrapped up very quickly the topic of music. Let's move to--come on. Give me a chance. We'll move to comedy.

ERIC IDLE: If you want to.

YIGAL PETREANU: Okay. Perfect.

ERIC IDLE: You know, I'm here.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah okay good. Okay, so again, in your book, you write that you spent 12 years in the Ophney, and which is a combination of an army and a prison. This is how you mentioned--and my question is, again, and you said that this was a perfect training for Python, so is becoming a comedian mostly the result of circumstance, as in your case, or is there a comic gene, as you refer, in one of your books?

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ERIC IDLE: I'm not sure about the comic gene, but I do like the fact that you read it. Yeah. I mean I was--a great irony of my life is I was--my dad was in the RAF from 1941, and he was actually killed in an accident hitchhiking home for Christmas in 1945, so having been in a Lancaster bomber all those years as a rear gunner, and that's really kind of ironic and sort of--kind of funny, if you're not--you know, I was only two-and-a-half, so--but the result of that was the RAF paid for my education, and they put me--we were in a boarding school, and it had been an orphanage, but the war gave it a shot in the arm, which is kind of good for business, because I went to this boarding school in Wolverhampton, which is not the end of the world, but you can see it from there. And I was there 12 years, from 7 to 19, and all the boys in my class and all that school all had lost our fathers in the war, so psychologically it's very interesting I think.

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You know, we'll get to it later, but so it was like you had to manufacture all your good time, so you learn how to be funny at expense of authority. Not that they knew, and then go over the wall to get beer, and meet girls, and do the normal things in life, and also, some various privations, you know. I mean they put you in the army once a week, so we'd have to march up and down the square, from the age of 12. And I think by 14 I could strip a Bren gun blindfolded. Reassemble it. And you know, they'd do adventure training courses in Wales where they send you, you know, with a compass, and a piece of cheese, and a map reference over Snowdonia. And so, you know, that's kind of tough really, but compared to our boarding school, it was a dawdle. In all the rather more better schools they're all--kids are crying, and weeping, and lying around, but we said, "Oh, come on. Come on."

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And so I think, you know, filming is kind of tough and boring. It's a cross between the two of them, and I think that did prepare me, you know, to put up with that sort of stuff.

YIGAL PETREANU: Okay, so "Beyond the Fringe". You mention it in your book that it was an epiphany for you. Can you describe to the young audience what was it all about, and how did it really affect you?

ERIC IDLE: Well, growing up in the 50s, it was very restrictive, and the English had the tough attitude. We'd been through it all now. We can tough out the peace, and all this. But then there was this show came on, in the West End. It was Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller, and Alan Bennett, and it was a revue. It was like 1961, and I went to see this thing, and I laughed my ass off. I rolled round the wall, because I didn't know you were allowed to laugh at the Queen, and the army, and the police, and all the things that kind of annoyed you they laughed at and mocked.

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And, like, the scales dropped from my eyes, and I got the album, and I learned everything. And that's all I ever wanted to be, after that point, was to be a comedian and be funny. And they came to Broadway actually. They were on in Broadway.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah. By the way, you can still see them on YouTube.

ERIC IDLE: Yeah?

YIGAL PETREANU: There is a complete show of them.

ERIC IDLE: Yeah.

YIGAL PETREANU: It's very entertaining. So now, because we are in Cambridge, and you moved to Cambridge and joined Cambridge University Footlights club, and it became something--it has a very big role in British comedy, so can you tell us more a little bit about this Footlights club and how come it became so important?

ERIC IDLE: Well, this is the other Cambridge, by the way. Yeah, you know, so--and I was fortunate enough, because I was stuck in a boarding school, I had nothing to do but learn. So I'd got more qualifications than almost everybody else who had a decent life and went out at the weekends.

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So I got into Cambridge, and almost--and in my second term I met John Cleese, and I was doing this college revue, and I did a piece of his that he'd written, which was quite extraordinary, and it was great to meet him. And then he said, "Come and join the Footlights." And the Footlights was founded in 1883, and it was a revue society, and I'm very proud of the thing, 'cause I eventually became president of Footlights, and women were not allowed. So the first thing I, as a little oik, did was to change the rules and admit women to the Footlights, which was--I'm proud of that, and that was about ten years before the colleges did. So you know, it was still just ahead of its time. Just.

YIGAL PETREANU: But the next question I'm not sure if you can answer, but let's try it. The best of 60s music was probably written under the influence. However, in your book you write, and I quote, "The idea you could try to write comedy under the influence was anathema to us." Why was it so different?

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ERIC IDLE: Well, this has happened when--you know, Python we wrote business hours. Even when we went to Barbados to write a movie we'd still write 10:00 to 1:00. Have lunch. 2:00 till 5:00 you know. We just wrote, because then we found, you know, it's better if you just have regular hours. Then whatever you do you can have fun afterwards, but when I went to do "Saturday Night Live" for the first time, in 1976, I think it was the second season--I mean I couldn't believe it, because at NBC towers you'd go into their offices, and it just smelled of reefer all over the place, and they had them--all doors locked. Nobody came in. You couldn't do that in the BBC. I mean they'd go nuts, but then they'd try and write, on a Tuesday night, and they're all smoking things and being--and it would take forever. And they'd expect the host to stay up with them, which is really boring, but so I found that it wasn't very productive.

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Not that they weren't funny occasionally, but they wouldn't do what we always did. We were obsessive writers. We would rewrite. If that's not good enough, give it to somebody else. Tighter, tighter, tighter. Python is just a group of writers who then acted everything, because we'd do it better, and we wouldn't have to bring other people in, but it's really about the control of writers. And that never really happens, in any--you know, it doesn't happen in--certainly in Hollywood. It doesn't happen on television really that the writers are in control, and I think it's one of the reasons that it's so wacky and so kind of--still resonates a little bit. But with SNL they never heard of rewrites, and when you did the show, if you notice, they're always looking off. So if somebody's doing a scene over here they're reading the cue, so "Good evening. How are you? How are you? Are you all right?" And so I find it very disconcerting and kind of fake, whereas Python we would rehearse for five days, learn it all, and be on top of the material.

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And when we faced our audience we knew what we were doing, but so I didn't find it very--I found it, you know--it wasn't my kind of thing. I mean we are much more, you know, control freaks about the writing.

YIGAL PETREANU: So now we'll switch from comedy to TV. Your first experience, by the book at least, is that you were as a writer only on "The Frost Report", and later on at "I'm sorry, I'll Read That Again". So was it a big change for you to switch to become behind the scene, just as a writer? Pure writer?

ERIC IDLE: Well, the Footlights club--it was in Cambridge, and it had its own bar, which is one of the great appeals, because the pubs closed at 10:00, and our bar would open at 10:30. So you could go along to the club. It had its own lunches. It had a little stage where you could try out material where there were little concerts that you could try, and that's the--actually the only way to do comedy. You've got to stand on the stage and try it, and those who die must be got rid of, because it's a very painful experience for them.

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So you either can do it, or you have to leave, so that was very good training, but it also taught you how to write. And we were very, very fortunate, our generation, 'cause the minute we left Cambridge we all went straight into jobs, 'cause David Frost brought us into television immediately. And we were writing on the radio immediately, so all of Python were writers on "The Frost Report". And John Cleese was actually on the show, but the rest of us were writers, so you know, just one of those--and again, it's because there was nobody in front of us. It was a new area, so we were groundbreaking new areas, and the jobs were there. So I think we're greatly lucky people.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah. We are lucky as well though I must admit. The next experience was a children's TV show, which was this. I don't know how many people watched it real life. This is...

ERIC IDLE: Oh, yeah.

YIGAL PETREANU: It yeah.

ERIC IDLE: Wow.

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YIGAL PETREANU: And again, how was it writing and starring in a TV show, and how did it affect your later writing and starring on the--

ERIC IDLE: Well, it was always about writing and performing, so you'd write your own material, and you'd perform it. And so you'd do revues, and you'd write and perform that, so that's what it was. So it was a natural step for us. We were just lucky enough to be offered a TV show, but it was a kids' show, and this guy said, "Will you do the show?" And I said, "Sure, but I want Michael Palin and Terry Jones," so they came in, and we wrote it. And we said, "Well, let's not talk down to children. Let's not make it a children's show. We'll just be funny. We'll just make them laugh. We'll be absurd, and they'll like it." And they did, and you know, the only discipline about that is you can't be rude, which is also very good discipline, 'cause it's easy to be fucking rude, innit? [laughter] I mean, so the shock gets you a laugh, but it's sort of cheating, in a way. A useful cheating, but we were prepared, and Cleese and Chapman were writing for Peter Sellers, at the time, movies.

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And their relaxation every week was to turn on our TV show at 5:25, and they just loved it. And that's why they came to us and said, "Let's all do this show," that John had been offered. And we'd

been offered a very big show on an independent channel, but they didn't have a studio for another year. So we said, "Oh, we might as well do the one with Cleese for a bit," you know, just to see how that goes. But we never got to the other show.

YIGAL PETREANU: And now, finally, after half an hour, we can talk maybe a tiny bit about the "Monty Python Flying Circus", if you don't mind. I brought a couple of books. Again, the bible, for me, at least. The entire script. And the question is, again, most viewers think about Monty Python as a revolution. However, in your book, you stress the fact that it's more like an evolution, so how can you--

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ERIC IDLE: Well, at this stage in the 60s, there were lots of little shows all bumping into each other, and starting, you know, and then Python just--Python wasn't a big deal. I mean when it started it was late on a Sunday night. The BBC were opening up that time slot, 'cause nobody--they closed down. The Queen was on a horse, they'd play the national anthem, and then they said, "Goodnight, everybody. Goodnight," and they'd go--and everybody went to bed. But the BBC recognized that some people might be staying up a bit, and so they wanted to put something on, to see who was gonna be there. And they didn't much care what it was, so--[laughter]. Which is as well, 'cause we didn't know what the hell we were doing. And they said, "Well, what are you gonna do?" And we said, "Hmm. Don't really know." And they said, "Will there be a band?" "Uh, no. I don't think so." "Will there be guests?" "Will there be--no. No, I don't think so." "Film?" "Oh, yeah film. We'll have film. Yeah we'll do film." And so they said, "Oh, just go away and make 13." Fantastic. A really great decision, because they didn't interfere.

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They didn't watch. [laughter] It was just a--the BBC, at that time, was mainly filled with people who'd just left the RAF, and smoked pipes, and had beer, you know. "Jolly interesting show, you guys are doing. Keep it up. Jolly good," and it was absolutely perfect. I mean, you know, I call it executive-free comedy, and if you see executive-filled comedy, which Hollywood puts out, you'll know that it's terrible, because you've got to let these idiots do what they do best, even if they can't explain it, because comedy's the thing that you can't really explain or predict, but it's very necessary, 'cause we all need to laugh. You know, it just shakes us a little bit into reality again. I think that's what it's doing, but I don't know why it should be in primates, although in "The Road to Mars", the book he was referring to earlier, I do have--I tried to make this film with Robin Williams, and Dan Akroyd, and David Bowie.

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They were comedians on the road, in space. I figured that, in space, what they wouldn't have would be live entertainers, and that would be the most--I mean the first thing you wanted to see was live people being funny. And they had a robot which was gonna be played by David Bowie, and he didn't understand what they were doing, 'cause he's a robot. And he couldn't understand why they went onstage and people barked at them. And so he started to write a thesis called De Rarum Commedia for the University of Saturn about what, on Earth, this thing called comedy was. And it's quite interesting when you try and look at comedy coldly and objectively, because if there are other civilizations, or even, you know, even other places where human--where life exists, would you expect there to be comedy? And I think you would. If there's intelligent life, it has to perceive of itself as being somewhat ridiculous, because it's gonna die. I mean that's the basis of it.

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You're not here forever, and so I find those sort of ideas kind of fun to play with and to examine, you know. And by being--having two comedians I can take the slightly pretentious nature of that discussion and make fun of it, as well as exploring it. That make sense a bit?

PERSON: Yeah.

ERIC IDLE: Yeah.

YIGAL PETREANU: So preparing for this talk I, again, watched again and again old sketches on YouTube. Everything is available, of course, in relatively good quality.

ERIC IDLE: Thank you, Google. We've spent all those years trying to connect these sketches together, and what do you get on YouTube? Disparate little sketches here and there.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah, but the funny thing--okay. Maybe it's not funny, but the funny thing is still that--I started looking at the videos, and then, of course, like every YouTuber, I started looking at talkbacks, because it's much more interesting than the videos themselves, and there were-- [laughter].

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And it's true, but two things really struck me. One of them was that most of the comments were very positive, as opposed to most comments which you can find on YouTube. And secondly is that they are very recent. It's not from 20 years ago. The comments are from last week, so I wonder, how can you explain the fact that these sketches still appeal to young people in the 21st century?

ERIC IDLE: I don't understand. It shouldn't happen. Next year is the 50th anniversary of Python. It went on the air in--[applause]. Thank you very much indeed, and we're going to celebrate by doing fuck all. And we're all going to do it together probably, but no. it seems absurd. I mean it was 1969, so you know, it seems impossible that some--the comedy particularly, which tends to be about "in the moment" or what we're thinking about at the time could last that long.

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And I think it's partly because it isn't in the moment. It's not satire. We followed the satire boom in England, so there's nothing that connects it to the time in which it's at. It's about characters and generic comedy about human behavior, and it's sort of a bit silly. It's kind of--it's still endearing, but I think the most important thing about it is it's digital. We were right at the beginning of the digital world, you know, at the BBC. You know, so we've gone from film and everything to tape. We're on, you know, 2 inch Ampex being taped, and so it's still in pixels, and you can polish them up still, so it can still look fresh. And we were in color by three months, because if it was in black-and-white, you're in the "I Love Lucy" and "The Honeymooners" territory, and it looks like forever in the past. But I think there's something with that, both that it's not tied into time, like in early SNL, so you have to remember, "Oh, Gerald Ford fell over a lot. That's why Chevy's doing that."

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You don't have to have those references. You can still come in and find it silly I think.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah. Silliness definitely strikes out yeah. Comes out. I heard somewhere that you describe yourself as the sixth nicest Python. Is that so?

ERIC IDLE: I think I was exaggerating a little, but--

YIGAL PETREANU: Oh, okay.

ERIC IDLE: Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, poor old Michael always got lumbered with being called the nice one, and occasionally, I'm mistaken for Michael Palin when I'm, you know, on the road and going around. And when I'm mistaken for Michael Palin I always say, "Yes I am Michael Palin. Now fuck off, you ugly, old git." And that sort of helps to destroy his character, you know, a little bit more.

YIGAL PETREANU: "Holy Grail". You did this movie--

00:34:00

ERIC IDLE: Yeah we did. Yes we did it.

YIGAL PETREANU: Okay. I wasn't sure about it, for a second. Okay. Anyway, you write in the book that some of the scenes you have--that you had to show the film on 13 test screenings, until you were happy with the results.

ERIC IDLE: Yeah.

YIGAL PETREANU: And I ask myself how come it was so different from TV? Because on TV, you were quite confident on your material.

ERIC IDLE: Well, on TV, we would do one a week, and we would rehearse for five days. The writing was all done, and then we'd play it to an audience. And the thing about an audience is they tell you where it's funny, and you cut the bits where they don't laugh. You take it away, and that's the editing process. But in a film, you don't have that. You have this, like, 95 minutes, and then--and so they laugh here. Then they don't, and they stop, and they get bored. And we had a completely disastrous first screening, and then we all got together, 'cause we're quite good at writing, and rewriting, and editing.

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And so we started to tackle it, and we had 13 different cuts, until we finally made it really funny where the audience would laugh all the way through, and there wouldn't be a bit where they stopped. And if you put laughs together, then people get on a roll, and they're still laughing when the next gag comes along, and that's what you're trying to do live onstage normally. Automatically you're sort of feeling that, but in a film, it takes much more to drag it to where the audience responds. And so most films don't get that. I mean that's quite unusual, and I think it's one of the reasons the film sort of survives and is still pretty funny.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah.

ERIC IDLE: Apart from--10-year-olds love it, because it's adults pretending to ride horses, you know, which is what they do all the time so.

YIGAL PETREANU: I know many people, again, even my close family relatives, regretfully, who can act out scenes from "Holy Grail" and "The Life of Brian" in entirety, so I wonder how do you feel about such people who can really refer to it as the Old Testament, or New Testament, or whatever?

00:36:02

ERIC IDLE: Not that many laughs in the Old Testament are there? I did exactly the same. When I saw "Beyond the Fringe" I absolutely bought the album, and I absolutely learned all of the monologues that Peter Cook did. And Alan Bennett did a vicar, and I learned it. I think--why do we learn songs? I think it's the same thing. When you are young, you know, you like this song, and you learn it. And then you like this comedy, so you learn it. I think those are the two important pillars of becoming teenager and growing up, and that's why everything turns over so quickly, 'cause there's another bunch along who are rejecting what the people in front of them just liked.

YIGAL PETREANU: Yeah. Moving on to "Life of Brian", it was a lot of controversy when it came out, but definitely it cannot be compared to what happened when John said this quote about Beatles being more popular than Jesus. They didn't burn your records or didn't become violent.

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So what do you think changed between '66 and '79, and how do you think it would have been accepted, if it come out today, in today's--

ERIC IDLE: Well, that's a different question. I think that today is different. People say, "Well, why wouldn't you do it about Muslims?" And so actually, we grew up as Christians. We were forced to go to church twice on Sundays for 10, 15 years, and that was our heritage, so we are allowed to be funny about that. If you were just randomly funny about any other religion that you haven't experienced, I think that you have the right to--well, you may be right, but I mean it's not what we would have done. We were specifically looking at this particular--it's the Church of England really, which hardly exists anymore, but--and what was interesting to us is when we--it all came from the opening of "Holy Grail". We're in New York. I open my big mouth, and somebody said, "What's the next Python film going to be?" And I said, "Jesus Christ lusts for glory." [laughter]

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I don't know why. I've had therapy. It doesn't seem to help. And then when we got back to England Cleese said, "Actually, that's a very interesting subject. Nobody's ever done religion," and what I was saying about the blank field--it's really attractive, 'cause you're not going in where, "Oh, this is the 13th comedy about religion." Nobody's done this and why is a very interesting question. Why don't people do that? And so we studied it, because we're all Oxford and Cambridge, you know. We did about a month's research reading the Dead Sea scrolls and all sorts of books on the bible and, you know, what was going on. And then we all sort of talked about it, and we said, "Well, you can't actually make fun of Jesus Christ," because everything he's saying is, you know, love your neighbor. Blessed are the poor. Look after people.

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Be kind and gentle. People don't do that today, but that's what the religion says really, and so we don't want to do cheap jokes about JC. That's not gonna be what we're gonna do, but what is funny about religion is how people take over people and force them to become cult members and, you know, make them behave, and force them to not think really, but obey. And so that's really what the subject of the film became, as we explored it, which is we're all individuals. "I'm not." Yeah, but-- [laughter] that's really the sort of--that's the sort of--I think that's very healthy and really quite good, nice people. You know, religious people really enjoyed the film, because they noticed that it was actually not mocking religion, but actually rather reinforcing some of the better things about it.

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So the only thing was that we were supposed to come to America to sort of sell it, you know. We were gonna fly in for junkets, and I think the first was the rabbis came out in New York and protested, and we went, "What?" and then they went back in again, and they said, "Oh, sorry." And then there were big pickets outside Warner Brothers, and it said, "Monty Python." No. It said to Warner Brothers "agents of the devil." And everybody knows that's CAA, but so that--but we didn't have to come. It was on the news all over the place, and once you're on the news--and also, the other thing is once you try and stop Americans doing something, they won't do that, because freedom of speech actually means something. It's the only country that has it, and it's absolutely vital. And so they would go and see it in another town that--if one had taken it off, they'd go to the next town, so it sort of--we didn't have to do anything. We just, you know, we missed the trip, which was sad really.

00:41:01

YIGAL PETREANU: People are going to kill me, because I have something like 20,000 more questions about science, and literature, and meaning of life, which you are very familiar with. But I

think that maybe we'll open the floor for a couple of questions from people here, and we can later proceed, so please go ahead. Let's do it quickly.

ERIC IDLE: Nicely lit, by the way. [laughter]

PERSON: Good afternoon, Eric.

ERIC IDLE: Hi.

PERSON: Answer me these questions three. I'm only gonna give you one. I've witnessed admiration from Americans since I moved here about 18 years ago, of UK's progressive politics and attitudes, but then we've got Brexit. And growing up in Stockport, just outside of Manchester, I've seen bigotry, and race, and gender be really big obstacles from, like, the football hooligan crowd to seeing it on TV, as well.

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How do you reconcile the gap, and how successfully do you think that satire skirts the line between parody and reinforcement?

ERIC IDLE: Well, you have to remember I have now been in America nearly 25 years, so I don't--when I go back to England I don't recognize it. It's not the England I left, and I think everywhere is changing all the time, but you don't notice it, 'cause you're there all the time. And I think you--don't forget, Python we were only addressing people from 1969 on television to 1973. That's all we were on, and then it was on in America. So I think that England is rather good on the satire. They seem to have very good comedians. They seem to be not racist. They seem to be--you know, they seem to be quite modern and quite progressive, except for the politicians who seem to think that Brexit is a good idea. But you know, it's like Dunkirk 2.

PERSON: Very good. Thank you.

ERIC IDLE: Sure. Thank you.

00:43:02

PERSON: Hey, Eric. What's funny to you today? Comedians, shows, movies? What makes you laugh?

ERIC IDLE: Well, I have a couple of girls who make me laugh a lot, and they're called Garfunkel and Oates. Do you know them? [applause] Yeah. They're really good, and they're very beautiful and very young, and they write lyrics much filthier than even I've ever written, so I just love them. I think there's a lot of good comedy here, but to me, the most interesting thing is that I think, since the George Bush time, people get their news now from comedy, and that's--I think "The Daily Show" started it. Jon Stewart. But now, my missus watches "The Daily Show with Trevor Noah" and Colbert and then Seth Myers. Every night she has to watch this, and that's--it's interesting to me now that in order to--I suppose it's a counter to Fox, you know, which is unintentionally funny.

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We can't trust the news anymore, so we get it from comedians, and I think that's quite interesting. I don't quite understand it, but I think it's quite healthy.

PERSON: So you were mentioning how people sort of memorize the work, and these things are just sort of embedded in our brains, after so long. And I'm sure that you regularly have people just come up and regurgitate your material back at you, out of the blue. "Nudge nudge. Wink wink. Say no more." All that stuff. I'm wondering if there are episodes that have happened that stand out in

your mind where you're really taken aback, or caught off guard, or were surprised at the way someone worked your own material back into an encounter with you.

ERIC IDLE: You mean like Obama or somebody like that?

PERSON: I don't know. Her majesty breaking into the lumberjack song or something.

ERIC IDLE: Oh. Well, I did sing "Bright Side" to her majesty, and I did make her laugh, and that was very good.

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And I did it for Prince Charles, too, but I wore a tutu, and a wig, and I danced around these little belly dancers, but I don't think--I mean people do do that. They seem to do it less. Maybe one's become more firm at stopping them, but there's nothing you can say, if somebody does that to you. You go, "Hey, nudge nudge. Know what I mean? Say no more," and you go, "Mm-hmm. Yeah. [laughter] Well, my flight's leaving." It isn't a conversation, and that's the true--all celebrity encounters. I always try and break that and say, "Hi. I'm Eric. What's your name?" And then you have a real human reaction, and you're meeting somebody. And they're not meeting something that is a sort of--well yeah. They call us legends now, which of course legends are people who are dead and not true, so I mean you have to learn how to deal with that. Otherwise, you become a jerk.

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My wife still thinks I am a jerk, but you know, but thank you.

PERSON: So you mentioned that you guys, like, really worked really hard at rewriting, and rewriting, and practicing for Python, but when I watch it, or when I watched it as a kid, it really gave me the impression of being very spontaneous. So could you say a little bit about how those seemingly conflicting--like how you resolve that or how you...

YIGAL PETREANU: Sure.

ERIC IDLE: Make spontaneity out of so much work. Well, the motto of the Footlights is "Ars est celare artem," which I'm sure I don't need to translate for you, but it means "The art is in concealing the art." And so, even last night, when I had a long conversation with David Hyde Pierce, he spent two weeks writing and thinking about how to do this. And then it was effortless for him, and that's--I think that's the thing. It has to look effortless, but it is a lot of work. And so of the comedy we did, nobody did improvisation, with the exception of Peter Cook, in our day.

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And improv came around in sort of the 80s, and now it's all standup, but we weren't that. We were sketch comedy, so you could perfect the sketch in the writing stage, then rehearse it, and then kill with it. But so I think all good work is hard work, and I think with writing all good writing is rewriting. I think you really have to work hard, and then make it look effortless, if you can. That's my tip.

PERSON: Hi, Eric.

ERIC IDLE: Hello.

PERSON: I hope you still like Chinese. [laughter]

ERIC IDLE: Are we allowed to say--don't sing that anymore. I had to change the lyrics slightly.

PERSON: All right, so, like, you mentioned earlier about the blank fields in comedy. So, like, in your opinion what are the blank fields today that still get to be explored?

ERIC IDLE: What are they?

PERSON: Yeah.

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ERIC IDLE: Well, it's very hard. I mean, you know--I mean I would say that when you look at Trump, if you didn't know, you could put a laugh track on it, because it is kind of insane. You know, it's wonderfully mad humor, and I love the fact that he did his usual material to the UN, and the world laughed at him. And then he had the balls to say they were laughing with him, and then they asked the UN, and the people said, "No, no, no. We were not. No, no, no. No, no, no." And so I mean I think--I always think that comedy's like "The Emperor's New Clothes". It's the kid who says he's no wearing any clothes. And then everybody laughs, and I think that's very much what's happening at the moment. And I think people need it. It sort of reassures you. It's a balance. It's a truth testing. It's a test against reality, and I think that's its uses, and its excuse, and why it's healthy.

PERSON: Thank you very much.

00:48:58

ERIC IDLE: Sure. I'd like to read a bit, in conclusion. Just a tiny, little bit, and I think this is rather relevant, so if you'll bear with me. And it's not very long, and it's, of course, about death. And I'm talking about my song "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life" which is the theme of the book. And I say, "My funeral song will go on and on, though obviously we don't. Dust to dust is about right. We dissipate into the carbon atoms we came from. Technically, reincarnation is sort of correct. We get reassembled into other things. I'd like to be reassembled into a Tesla, so my wife can still drive me. I was born in the same place as my mother, and I wonder if I'll die there, which would mean our home in L.A. To be precise, in our guest room, but that's now become my wife's shoe closet. I think I wouldn't mind dying in there, amongst the Jimmy Choos.

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I worship the ground she walks on anyway, so that would be appropriate. She who sadly knows me best thinks my last words will probably be, "Fuck off." But that doesn't look good on a tombstone, so instead I would like, on my grave, "Eric Idle. See Google." [applause] Thank you.

[music outro]

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