(ADVERTISMENT)

Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Music: "Huddle Formation" from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. This week we're doing something a little bit different. We are celebrating the work of Monty Python, the greatest sketch comedy group of all time. Monty Python as we know it began in 1969. The story that they tell is that John Cleese had wanted for a while to make something with Michael Palin. And after a series of meetings with BBC executives and a series of rendezvous at various London clubs, the roster grew to six. Cleese and Palin, Eric Idle, Graham Chapman, Terry Gilliam, and Terry Jones. Together, they made some of the most unforgettable comedy of all time. *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *The Holy Grail*, *The Life of Brian*, *The Meaning of Life*, and more.

When they pretty much broke up in the '70s, the members went on to produce countless more unforgettable projects. Palin and Cleese starred in *Time Bandits* and *A Fish Called Wanda*—the former of which was directed by Gilliam. Gilliam directed *12 Monkeys*, *Brazil*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and a bunch of others. What else did they do? Well, *Fawlty Towers*, *The Ruttles*, *Eric the Viking*. I could go on and on and on and on. I mean, seriously, I could go on and on and on and on. I would go on. If I were still 13 or 19, I would just be going on and on right now. I'm saving you me going on and on. They're the greatest geniuses of all time.

Anyway, this week we'll hear interviews from Eric Idle, John Cleese, and Terry Gilliam. But before all that, Terry Jones. Terry Jones joined Monty Python via his writing partner, Michael Palin. Jones would be on camera every now and then on *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, usually when they needed someone to put on a dress. But he did his best work behind the camera. Jones was the show's principal editor and largely responsible for its unique pacing. The sketches flowed between one another abruptly—usually before the sketch felt like it had actually ended—but also sort of effortlessly. Terry Jones died in 2020. I was lucky enough to talk to him in 2006. That

year, PBS had announced it would begin running the show again. He was also in the middle of remastering his 1989 film, *Eric the Viking*, which was being recut by his son, Bill. He actually spoke to me on the phone from the post-production studio. Let's listen.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Jesse Thorn: What place did you imagine Python having in the—you know, the comedy firmament when it was first created? What was your goal with it then?

Terry Jones: Well, I think the goal was to do something funny, really. We just thought we could do the funniest stuff and also try and do something that was different to what had gone before and had a different shape. And I think I was very concerned to break up the kind of formats of television comedy. In those days, you'd either have a half-hour comedy, a situation comedy, or else you'd have sketches, and they'd sort of have beginnings, middles, and ends. Or you'd have crickets, which would be sort of 30 seconds of the one joke. So, we were trying to break that up a bit.

Jesse Thorn: It seems like one of the interesting things about the *Python* television series was the way that all of the sketches were linked together, which is not typical in television sketch comedy. And you mentioned the not having beginnings, middles, and ends—I think those lengths kind of get you out of the requirement of always having to have beginnings, middles, and ends. And particularly ends, which can be quite difficult in sketch comedy.

Terry Jones: Exactly, yes. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: *(Chuckles.)* But at the same time— I mean, it imposes a whole other requirement. I know when I interviewed Bob Odenkirk, who created the sketch comedy series *Mr. Show*, and they decided to do that very same thing with links between sketches. And he told me that about halfway through the first season, they realized what a horrible mistake that was, because they spent about as much time trying to think of links between sketches as they did actually writing comedy.

Terry Jones: Yeah. Well, 'cause we're lucky. I mean, the idea of having that show that flowed like that really came out of an animation that Terry Gilliam had done for a TV show that Mike Palin, Eric Idle, and I were doing with Terry Gilliam called *Do Not Adjust Your Set*. It was a children's show. And Terry'd done this—he said, "I've done

this animation. It's sort of train of consciousness, and it doesn't really mean anything. It just goes from one thing to another."

And I was thinking—when we were trying to think about what shape the show would be, I suddenly remembered Terry's elephant cartoon. It was called *Elephants*. And I thought, "Well, you could do that throughout the whole show." So, of course, we were lucky in having Terry there to actually do links for us. And it—when—I mean, links were pretty easy for us, actually. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: I mean, how did you sell this whole idea? I mean, how did you convince the powers that be that this— I mean, it's a very odd television show, let's face it.

Terry Jones: *(Laughs.)* Well, I think it would be very difficult to do that now, I have to say. But in those days, the BBC was a kind of totally different sort of organization. It wasn't interested in how much money it could make and how big the audience was going to be. I mean, it was concerned at audience size. But it trusted—it was a much more anarchic organization. It trusted—it's the producers, you know. The producers were the top dogs. They'd been selected; they'd been trained. And the BBC—the people running the programming—trusted the producers.

And I have to say, we— They wanted to do something with John Cleese. And John wanted to work with Mike and me, and we went along to a meeting of the program planners kind of thing, and there's all these guys in suits sitting round the table. And they say, "Well, you know, what's this program going to be about?"

And we sort of said, "Well, we don't really know."

They said, "Oh. Um. Well, is it gonna have music in?"

And we said, "Weeell, we don't know!"

They said, "Well, who's it gonna be aimed at?"

And we said, "Well, we don't know!"

They said, "Well, what's it gonna be called?"

And we said, "Well, we don't know!"

So, they all looked at each other, and all went, "Mm, dear, dear, dear. Well, look, we can only give you 13 shows." *(Laughing.)* You know? I don't think— I can't see that happening, nowadays.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. We're listening back to my 2006 conversation with Terry Jones. He was a founding member of the sketch comedy group Monty Python.

I read something very interesting in an interview that you did shortly after the premier of *Spamalot*, which was the Broadway musical that Eric Idle adapted from *Holy Grail*—which was that, as wonderful as it was, one of the things that you seem to think that it lost from the film was the kind of darkness and grotesquery. Which, of course, isn't—you know, it's pretty hard to put grotesquery on the Broadway stage.

(Terry agrees.)

Tell me a little bit about how this middle ages setting for *Holy Grail* and this kind of dark, death-filled world was conducive for making jokes.

Terry Jones: *(Laughs.)* Well, you know, our original script for *Holy Grail*—half of it was set in the middle ages and half of it was set in the modern day. And it sort of banged backwards and forwards. But it just happened that I was, sort of, working on the book on Chaucer at the time and I kind of was pretty keen on setting it in the middle ages. And so, to my surprise everybody agreed to go along with that.

So, you know, any setting is going to be conducive to making jokes. You know, it's just— But the main thing is trying to create a real environment that you can then do silly things in.

Jesse Thorn: I think maybe you're British and maybe because you ran on PBS, but I think *Monty Python*, in the United States at least—maybe because of glancing references to literature and philosophy—*Monty Python* in the United States has a reputation as being very intellectual humor. Which I don't know; personally, I don't know if I've ever really bought into that. How do you feel about that? About having that reputation?

Terry Jones: Well, I think it was a bit of a blind that we were putting up, really. 'Cause, you know—'cause it mentions Kierkegaard or something like that. But basically, the jokes are really pretty stupid, and it's pretty silly stuff. But again, it's like

using intellectual furniture, just like using the Arthurian legends or men in bowler hats. You know, you take something that looks very straight and then it's easier to do silly things within that context.

But certainly, we never thought about, "Oh, well people will never have heard of Thomas Hobbs or René Descartes." And so, we just sort of assumed that everybody would know about what we're talking about. And if they didn't—well, too bad.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Terry Jones from 2006. You probably are familiar with his work in Monty Python. If you're not, obviously, you should become familiar. I would just say—whether you're an adult or a child—his book, *Terry Jones Fairy Tales*, is just an extraordinary, extraordinary work of wonder. So, I really recommend that you check that out.

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Of the six founding members of Monty Python, John Cleese is the one who's probably the most readily recognizable. You can credit that in part to his long acting career. *Fawlty Towers*, *A Fish Called Wanda*, a few of the Bond movies. You can also credit that to his presence, which has always been very distinctive. Even when he was a young man, John Cleese read… as a sort of fuddy-duddy. *(Chuckles.)* Do you need a strict headmaster or a haughty businessman or a bored, wig-wearing barrister? You call John Cleese.

I got to talk with Cleese when his autobiography was published in 2014. I'm just going to mention that, in the years since then, Cleese has a few times made glib and callous posts online about transgender people and also expressed support for the profoundly anti-trans crusader J.K. Rowling. This conversation predates those posts. Anyway, let's take a listen.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Clip:

Headmaster *(The Meaning of Life)*: Now, before I begin the lesson, will those of you who are playing in the match this afternoon move your clothes down onto the lower peg immediately after lunch, before you write your letter home if you're not getting your haircut—unless you've got a younger brother who's going out this weekend as the guest of another boy. In which case, collect his note before lunch, put it in your letter after you've had your haircut, and make sure he moves your clothes down onto the lower peg for you.

Wymer: Now, sir?

Headmaster: Yes, Wymer?

Wymer: My younger brother's going out with Dibble this weekend, sir. But I'm not having my hair cut today, sir, so do I move my clothes down?

Headmaster: You should listen, Wymer! It's perfectly simple. If you're not getting your hair cut, you don't have to move your brother's clothes down to the lower peg. You simply collect his note before lunch, after you've done your scripture prep. When you've written your letter home before rest, move your own clothes onto the lower peg, greet the visitors, and report to Mr. Viney that you've had your chit signed. *(Sighs heavily.)*

Now! Sex.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Jesse Thorn: John Cleese, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's great to have you on the show.

John Cleese: Thank you for having me on!

Jesse Thorn: So, I think the reason that we pulled that clip from *Meaning of Life* is that… like 90% of the characters that you've played over the many years have been authority figures sort of dealing with these, um… eeh, issues of emotional disclosure. *(Laughs.)*

John Cleese: Yes, that's right. I mean, if somebody's funny, it means that they're not functioning quite right.

(Jesse chuckles.)

If anyone was completely appropriate in their behavior all the time, there would never be anything funny about them. So, comedy is basically about people not coping very well with the circumstances they find themselves in—you know, making mistakes. And that's the basis of farce, which is my favorite form of humor. It makes me laugh the most. Just that usually—at the start, it's usually a man, makes some mistake or does something which he then has to hush up, and he spends the rest of the play or film hushing it up. You know.

Jesse Thorn: Well, you made a dozen *Fawlty Towers* in that exact form.

John Cleese: Exactly! That's how the shape of comedy's got to be. And I realized early on that if somebody's going to behave inappropriately, it's more fun when they're important than if they're not important. So, if you have someone who's a bit crazy who's running the secret service, that's funnier than someone who's a bit crazy who's out of work and sitting at home watching a lot of television. You see what I mean? Because the consequences are so much more important.

Jesse Thorn: You actually were a schoolteacher during the time between when you—I guess—graduated from something like what we would call high school and went to something like what we would call college. Things are a little differently staggered. But—

John Cleese: That's right. Yeah, I couldn't get into Cambridge for two years, because they'd just abolished conscription. So, there was a bottleneck. There were people trying to get straight in from school and people who'd been in the armed forces who were trying to get in. So, they told me I had to wait two years. And my old headmaster from the school I was at from 8 to 13 rang me and said, "Would you like to come and teach?" And I went there and taught for two years, and I was extraordinarily happy. It was a very quiet, unambitious life.

I was paid five pounds a week. I did so well that after my first year, he put me up to seven pounds a week. And I had a nice little bedroom with a gas fire, and all my meals were provided, and I liked the kids. And I taught them soccer and cricket, which I adored. It was extraordinary, really! I mean, utter lack of any kind of ambition, but I was very, very happy then.

Jesse Thorn: Did you always feel like you belonged in the public school that you went to as an adolescent and teenager?

John Cleese: I don't know I can answer that question, because I don't know how I would have behaved in any other kind of school. I think I would have fitted in eventually, though it would have taken me time. But I was in a school with nice, well-mannered, lower-middle-class kids, and they were pretty kind. There wasn't much bullying. And they were fairly ordinary and predictable. And I was very comfortable there once I'd settled in. I took a little time to settle in, because I was an only child. And we'd moved house—I think it was 12 times in my first 10 years or something ridiculous. We moved five or six times during the war.

And so, I hadn't really formed any strong friendships with other boys. So, I didn't mix in so well at the beginning when I got there. But I think that the fact I could make the class laugh— I think I started doing that deliberately. Because when you get a laugh, there's this feeling of warmth and acceptance. And I think that slightly steered me in the direction of being funny. I liked the response when I could get a laugh.

Jesse Thorn: When you got to Cambridge, were you as comfortable there as you had been in school when you were younger?

John Cleese: I wasn't very comfortable at the beginning, because I was aware that the people I was around were probably brighter than I was—and certainly better informed. And I think I found that a little bit daunting. And I think I spent a lot of time there at the beginning pretending that I knew things that I didn't know. You know, when they mentioned a name I didn't really recognize, I would nod as though I knew who it was. And I was sort of keeping up a front for some time.

And then I discovered that if you simply said to people, "I don't know about that," they liked you much better than when you pretended that you did, because it gave them a chance to explain it to you, which they enjoyed. And I enjoyed hearing the explanation. So, I stopped—I think I stopped that act more. And I was pretty happy at Cambridge, but I think I took the whole business of studying a little too seriously. I think I should have had more fun and done more exploring and not just sort of going to lectures because I've been told to go to lectures, you know.

Jesse Thorn: It's funny. You know, you describe that in your book—the extent to which you were kind of a conscientious student and also kind of the kind of person who you felt very obliged to do what others had asked you to do or had told you to do.

John Cleese: I think I found it very, very hard to say no. It was just as simple as that. Because if you said no, it sounded rude. And I have a lot to thank Americans for. Americans are more direct than the British, or at least they're more direct than they used to be. We're talking 30/40/50 years ago. And I learned a kind of directness from Americans, which was difficult for me at the beginning. But I realized it was a much better way of dealing with things.

To give you an example, I remember sitting at a lunch table in Los Angeles—my first visit to Los Angeles, really. About 1980. And somebody—an Englishman at the table wanted the salt. And I just noticed he was looking around in this rather agitated way. And finally, he caught someone's eye, pointed at the salt and said, "Sorry."

(Jesse chuckles softly.)

I mean, that was his way of asking for the salt. As an American would say, "Please pass the salt," which is rather simpler.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: Well, you know, so many of these authority figures— Like, one of the things that they do is there is this kind of long period where <u>they</u> want something. You know, whether it's they want cheese from a cheese shop, right? And they try every sort of polite and indirect means to get there and then just flip the heck out.

John Cleese: Well, that's right. Because again, comedy—as I said, it's about people not behaving flexibly and intelligently and—what's the word?—appropriately. It's about that. But it's also about things going wrong, because if you wrote a movie in which things all went right, there wouldn't be any laughs in it at all. So, you're right. I think on the one hand you've got characters who, if they are authority figures, there's more at stakes, which makes them funnier. And then things have got to go wrong, because if they got their way easily, there would be no humor in it.

Jesse Thorn: Was there some kind of turning point as your Cambridge Footlights show went from being, you know, a series of sketches and just kind of casual cabarets on campus to being a big show on campus to being a big show off-campus to being a big show on the West End to going to Broadway where you—?

John Cleese: Oh no. There was really just one event and that was the Footlights—Sorry, *(starting over)* there was really only one event. That was the *Footlights Review* in 1963. I'd been in the *Footlights Review* the previous year. I was wondering whether to do the show, because I was behind on studying my exams. And I thought, "Oh, what the hell. I'll do it anyway." Which is extraordinary when I look back on it, because the result of the show was that the show was so good because of two guys—one called Bill Oddie and the other called Tim Brooke-Taylor—that we got asked to transfer to the West End. Which was <u>huge</u>! I mean, it was a little student review. It was supposed to run for two weeks in Cambridge, and that was it. And we were all supposed to go off to our jobs.

So, first of all, an impresario came along and said, "I want to put your show on in the West End," which flabbergasted us. But the next thing was that people from the BBC—BBC Light Entertainment Radio—came along and offered two or three of us jobs. They offered me a job, not as a performer, but as a writer with a training to become a producer.

And of course, I thought, "Well, this is fun. You don't have to wear a tie. The hours are pretty lax. And you're trying to make people laugh." Which is a nice way of earning a living, even if it's a bit scary sometimes. So, like a shot, I wrote a letter to a firm of lawyers that I was engaged to start work within two or three weeks and said, "I'm going to go into showbusiness." I always wondered what the hell they thought I was doing. They must have thought I was mad!

(Jesse laughs.)

Because they were very good lawyers. They were soliciting to the Bank of England. You know? But anyway, I went off, and I've never had any regrets about it. But I was never utterly committed to showbusiness. It wasn't as though— Like, some people, they know from the very beginning that they want to be in showbusiness, or they want to be doctors or something like that. I never knew that. And I just continued drifting into it. I had moments when I thought of doing other things. But then when David

Frost came back into my life and asked me to do a show with him in 1966 and I started to do that, that was really when I sort of threw my weight into showbusiness. And then I think I became a rather different person, because I think I'd been pretty relaxed up to then. And once I got into showbusiness I was so scared of being bad that I used to work rather harder than any of my contemporaries on trying to avoid being bad.

Jesse Thorn: I was struck by that in your book. You know, you describe how much you enjoyed the writing and creating process, especially working with Graham Chapman, your cowriter for *(unclear)*.

John Cleese: Yeah, the moment of realization that you've hit on a really funny idea is a wonderful moment.

Jesse Thorn: But what you don't describe is something that a lot of other comics love more than anything else, which is being on stage and getting a laugh. Was that—

John Cleese: Well, it's lovely to get the laugh but the trouble is all the anxiety about whether you're going to get the laugh. So, when you're out there and the audience is laughing, it's marvelous. But the rest of the time, you're always remembering what a complete idiot and how humiliating it is when you try to be funny and people don't laugh. You see, actors never talk about dying, because if you're in a play as an actor and it's not quite believable or it isn't really working, it's just boring. But it's not humiliating for the actors. But for a comic who's knocking himself out to make people laugh and failing, that is real humiliation. That's death.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that you got something different out of the performance aspect than the people that you were working with as fellow performers? Do you feel like you were more trepidatious about it?

John Cleese: I think I was more trepidatious and more driven, therefore, to make it as good as I possibly could. I was always— It struck me that a lot of performers were just a bit lax; they were just taking it too easy. They weren't working hard enough. And I worked hard but it was always out of this fear of being bad. The result of this is that I rehearsed much more than most of my contemporaries, and I rewrote much more. I was much less easily satisfied. Because I was always trying to make it absolutely as good as possible. And I did find a lot of my contemporaries just seemed to be much

more happy-go-lucky about it. I think they had more fun. I think I had less fun, but I think my work was better.

Jesse Thorn: We've got more to get into with John Cleese after the break. Plus, Terry Gilliam and Eric Idle. Keep it locked. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're mixing things up a bit this week, replaying some of my conversations with the founding members of the legendary sketch group, Monty Python. We've already heard from the late Terry Jones. We're currently listening to my 2014 conversation with John Cleese. Let's get back into it.

So, I want to play another sketch. And this is a sketch that took several forms over the course of your career. It's called "The Four Yorkshiremen".

(John affirms.)

So, this was for a show called *At Last the 1948 Show*, this version.

John Cleese: That's right. Tim Brooke-Taylor and Marty drafted a first version, which I thought was funny. But I didn't think it was constructed right. And Graham and I sort of constructed it so that the exaggerations grew one speech at a time.

Jesse Thorn: And when you say Marty, you're talking about Marty Feldman. So, in this scene, it's you, Graham Chapman, Tim Brooke-Taylor, and Marty Feldman. You're sitting around, and you're drinking wine and smoking cigars, and you're sort of waxing nostalgic about your childhoods.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Clip:

> **Speaker 1:** Who'd have thought 40 years ago that we'd be sitting here drinking Chateau de Chastellux?
>
> **Speaker 2:** I would have been glad of the price of a cup of tea then!
>
> **Speaker 3:** Aye! A cup of cold tea!
>
> **Speaker 1:** Aye! Without no coarse sugar.
>
> **Speaker 4:** Or tea!
>
> *(Audience laughs.)*

Speaker 2: And out of a cracked cup at that!

Speaker 1: We never had a cup! We used to drink out of a rolled-up newspaper.

Speaker 3: The best we could manage was to suck on a piece of damp cloth!

Speaker 4: But you know, I often think we were happier then, although we were poor.

Speaker 2: Because we were poor! My old dad said to me, he said, "Money won't bring you happiness, son."

Speaker 1: He was right! I was happier then, and I had nothing! We used to live in a tiny, tumble-down old house with great holes in the roof.

Speaker 3: House!? You're lucky to have a house! We used to live in one room, 26 of us. All there. No furniture. Half the floor was missing, and we were all huddled in one corner for fear of falling.

(Laughter.)

Speaker 4: Room?! You were lucky to have a room! We used to have to live in the corridor.

Speaker 2: Corridor!? Ohhh, I used to dream of living in a corridor. That would have been a palace to us.

(Laughter.)

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Jesse Thorn: It seems like one thing that you and Graham Chapman were very committed to in your comedy writing was consistency. Consistency of structure and internal logic.

John Cleese: I think that's right. You see, I wonder if it was because we both had basic scientific training. Graham was qualified as a doctor, and I got into Cambridge

on physics. So, the idea of a more scientific approach was first nature to us. And we were sometimes almost puzzled that our Oxford friends—particularly Jones and Palin, who were producing very funny material—never seemed to worry about the structure or the building of it. For example, I think Terry once wrote that funny sketch about the very fat man in the restaurant in *Meaning of Life*—Mr. Creosote, wasn't it?—who comes in. But I never felt it built correctly.

So, Graham and I took it and restructured it, and we thought it was very much better as a result. But I don't think Terry ever felt we were making it better. We were sure we were, and he was pretty sure we weren't. So, it was really a difference of philosophy.

Jesse Thorn: Well, it's interesting, because it—you know, you could imagine it as being in contrast to the things that made Python so remarkable and special, which are the kind of outrageous silliness of it. The fact that it was willing to go anywhere. But you argue in the book that basically having that—that you can't go those places without having the structure and the logic undergirding it.

John Cleese: Well, it doesn't matter how silly your premise is. The buying a bed sketch, which I always like—the moment that the young couple mentioned the word mattress, then the sales guy puts a large brown paper bag over his head and won't take it off until they have sung a verse of the hymn "Jerusalem". Now, that's about as silly as it gets, but we stick rigidly to that. Because you have to!

(Jesse laughs.)

If you suddenly change the logic, if the salesman takes the bag off his head before anybody has sung a verse of "Jerusalem", the whole thing collapses. Those are the rules. You lay them down at the beginning. It doesn't matter how silly they are, you've got to stick to them.

Jesse Thorn: I was really excited to read how important having a thesaurus around was to you and Chapman, like how central a thesaurus was to your writing process.

John Cleese: And while I was writing the book— I mean, I always have a thesaurus there, and it's a constant source of delight. Although I have to say, if I can't get the word—and I try before I go in the thesaurus—then <u>most</u> of the time, I can't find the word in the thesaurus anyway. It's rather odd. But occasionally, you just come across one that you've missed and it's absolutely perfect.

One of the delights of writing is trying to draw a picture of something, either in your imagination or something that happened historically, and trying to describe it absolutely as precisely as possible; and trying to get the feeling and the emotions and describe them as accurately as you can. And there's a marvelous moment when you think that you've got all the right words.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that one of the appeals to you of farce is, as *Fawlty Towers* was—you know, it is like a comedy system is it's like the board game *Mousetrap*, but for comedy? That you have to fit all these different pieces together perfectly.

John Cleese: Well, the greatest farces of all time are like intricate pieces of clockwork. And in the first 20 minutes, certain things are established, and it's as though the playwright has wound up the plot. Which then can kind of un... What would be the word? Like a spring un—un… I can't think of the word, but you know how it just sort of unwinds. And really, it should go right through to the end of the play without introducing any new elements. The greatest farces have got everything established in the first 20 minutes.

Now, this is an intellectual task. And when you read great masters like the French guy, Georges Faydeau, wrote about 1890. I mean, when you look at it now, some of the translated dialogue is pretty flat. But the plots are just so clever and so ingeniously constructed that they're almost intellectually satisfying—as well as providing a framework for real humor. But I think I was drawn to farce, because what I love more than anything in the world is laughing out of control. And it happens now and again. You know, when you laugh so much that it hurts. And that's a wonderful sensation. And you only really get it when the emotions involved in the comedy are rather heightened. And in farce, you get more heightened emotions than you do in comedy theatre or just people swapping jokes.

Jesse Thorn: I want to play a clip from *Fawlty Towers*. So, if anyone hasn't seen *Fawlty Towers*, you played Basil Fawlty, who was a hotel proprietor. And you know, every episode was a pretty complicated farce in which his sort of combination of best intentions—and sometimes a little bit of ill intentions—

John Cleese: Well, he was always covering something up that he's fearful that somebody will discover—

(Jesse agrees with a chuckle.)

—that Sybil will discover he's put money on a horse, or that the health inspector will discover that there's a rat running around the kitchen. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: So, the thing that you are trying to keep people from discovering is that there has been a guest who's asked for breakfast in bed. Your wife gave him some kippers, which is fish that's sometimes eaten for breakfast. So anyway, la-di-da-di-da-di-da, you end up thinking that you've poisoned this man by giving him bad kippers.

John Cleese: Because I don't even realize he's dead when I first serve him with the food, because I'm just ranting on about something.

(Jesse confirms with a laugh.)

I don't even notice he's lying there motionless with his eyes staring.

Jesse Thorn: And so, now there's a doctor coming to inspect the body, and you have decided that you are going to hide the kippers. *(Laughs.)*

John Cleese: That's right.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Clip:

> **Doctor:** You brought him his breakfast?
>
> **Basil:** Yes.
>
> **Doctor:** So, you told her he was dead?
>
> **Basil:** Yes.
>
> **Doctor:** Well, then why did you bring him...
>
> *(Audience laughter.)*
>
> Why did you bring him the milk, then?

Sybil: Why?!

Doctor: Yes, why?

Sybil: Well, when he said Mr. Lehman was dead, I thought he said, "He's still in bed." Well, he didn't exactly say he was dead, but—

Basil: Well, I said he was pretty quiet!

Doctor: Quiet?

Basil: Exactly.

Sybil: What were you talking to him about, Basil? Car strikes, was it?

Basil: *(Flatly.)* Thank you, Sybil.

Doctor: I don't understand. He's been dead for about 10 hours!

Basil: Yes, it's so final, isn't it?

Sybil: *(Sharply.)* Basil!

Basil: Well, wouldn't you say it was final, dear? *(Through grit teeth.)* I'd say it was pretty bloody final. *(Audience laughter.)*

Doctor: Do you mean to tell me you didn't realize this man was dead?!

Basil: *(In full panic, speeding through his sentences.)* Well, people don't talk that much in a morning! And look! I'm just delivering a tray, right?! If the guest isn't singing "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning", I don't immediately think, "Oh, there's another one snuffed it in the night! Another name in the Fawlty Tower's book of remembrance! I mean, this is a hotel, not a Burma Railway! Yes, but I mean, it does actually say hotel outside! I mean, perhaps I should be more specific. Hotel for people who have a better than 50% chance of making it through the night?!

(Audience laughter.)

Basil: What are you looking at me like that for!?

Sybil: Basil, there's a kipper sticking out of your jacket.

(Audience laughter.)

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Jesse Thorn: You know, you write almost as an aside in the book that you think that maybe what you find most funny are the things that you are most afraid of.

John Cleese: Yes, it's very much an aside, because I'm not really sure if it's true. And I've only thought of it in the last few years. But I think I've always been most amused by lack of communication. Like, Basil and Manuel were two people who were just not connecting. And I think I was scared as a kid for the fact I didn't connect emotionally with my mother. And then, because her tantrums used to alarm my dad so much, I'm sure they alarmed me. I think I've often tried to laugh at anger, at other people getting angry about things.

And I'm not sure. For example, one of my girlfriends once was really quite demure, quite shy sexually. But she enjoyed dirty jokes enormously. And I had a feeling sometimes she was laughing as a way of trying to diminish her slight discomfort about sexual matters. But it's no more than a thought that I'm throwing out there for other people to examine. It would be very hard to have any sort of semi-scientific experiment to prove it.

Jesse Thorn: I want to ask you about another little aside in the book that I thought was amazing. You and Graham Chapman are writing in London and working together in this apartment, and you decide to take a meeting with an American movie producer who comes in to pitch you a movie. And you look up his credits. You find that you're not that impressed by them. But you've already agreed to this meeting. So, you decide you're going to have some fun. And you fill the room with stuffed animals.

John Cleese: Well, I always had a large collection of stuffed animals.

Jesse Thorn: Yes! So, that's the part— *(Chuckling.)* Like, I'm not surprised at the two of you guys playing a joke on this American movie producer. It was just this offhand remark—

John Cleese: We hid the animals all around the room, but only with their heads sticking out from drawers. So that every time he looked around the room, he'd see another little animal peering out from a filing cabinet. And as I say, what was so funny is he never mentioned it during the entire two-hour meeting—during which he was talking about strapping Ernest Borgnine to a hog along with Sophia Loren. I mean, he was completely mad. And then as he was leaving, he just said, "Thanks very much for the meeting." He said, "Great animals."

(They laugh.)

As though—he'd obviously noticed them but never mentioned them.

Jesse Thorn: Wait! So, I have to say—like, really fun story. I really enjoyed it in the book. I had to take some time before I enjoyed it, just getting over just the offhand mention of the fact that you've always had a big collection of stuffed animals. As though that was like—

John Cleese: Oh, it's very unusual. And one of the reasons I'm so in love with my wife! This is my fourth—my first English wife. I discovered when I met her that she had a large collection of stuffed animals, almost as good as my own. So, we've decided to put these animals together and leave them to the Smithsonian when she dies.

Jesse Thorn: I thought you were putting them together to make more stuffed animals. *(Chuckles.)*

John Cleese: Oh, I see what you mean. No, no. Well, I just like them. I like animals. I have a soppy relationship with them. I've just been looking at pictures of our cats, which Jenny sent me. And I just look at them, and they make me feel happy. It's very simple. Nothing clever about it at all. They just amuse me and I love them to bits. And they're much, much easier than children.

Jesse Thorn: *(Chuckles.)* I can't disagree with that.

John Cleese: *(Laughs.)* Nobody would who's had children.

Jesse Thorn: You know, you hadn't done anything with Python as Python in decades until earlier this year when you reunited on stage.

John Cleese: That's the truth.

Jesse Thorn: And I wonder how it was different to perform—you know, perform almost retrospectively, 30 years or whatever it's been after the last time the group of you got together.

John Cleese: Yes, I suppose the point of it was that once we decided to do it—and we very nearly decided to do it in 1999. When we get together—which is very seldom, because we've been badly managed for 40 years, and we very seldom had proper systematic meetings. And we had all gone off in completely different directions. You know, Eric's gone in the direction of musicals, writes brilliant lyrics. Michael's done his travel programs. Terry Gilliam wants to make movies, which I would pay money not to do. I think it's a dreadful way of passing your life. Jonesy does all sorts of extraordinary things. He just made a documentary about the global financial crisis.

But we all do completely different things. And we're very different people. So, we've gone in completely different directions. But we were a great team in the late '60s and early '70s. Because of that, we didn't see much of each other. When we do, we laughed a lot. When we went to the Aspen Film Festival in 1999, we were all laughing so much together that a couple of us—I think it was mainly Eric and me—said, "Well, what about doing another show together?" Because it's fun when we're together. But that didn't ever happen for a number of reasons. And Michael finished up, saying he didn't really want to do it. So, that was all right.

And then when we got together just over a year ago to discuss the fact we had legal expenses of £800,000—it's quite a lot of money—because a case had been completely mishandled. We brought someone in. An old Cambridge friend who'd managed Queen for 40 years. Because he was an old friend. He was the number two in the Footlights in Eric's year, when Eric was president of the Footlights. And he'd passed—Jim Beach his name is—he'd passed his law exams on the notes that I'd given him. Because when I was doing law, I was a year ahead of him. So, when I finished mine, I just gave him all my notes. And then he became my lawyer. So, that amused me.

(Jesse chuckles.)

We've known Jim a long time. And we were all laughing at this ridiculous situation. And Jim said, "Well, why don't you just do a couple of shows and pay it off?"

And we thought, "Well, why not? That's the way to do it. It's painless, and we'll have some fun."

Jesse Thorn: When it was done, did you feel glad to be done with it? Or did you feel melancholic about being done with it?

John Cleese: No, it was very strange. Not a single one of us felt melancholy. Because we had lunch together the next day, and we just discussed the fact that we were—in a sense—surprised to feel there was no regret, no "What a shame. Well, it's all over." It was as though it was a perfect way to wind something up that had not quite had closure. And to be with those fans and to see the enormous amount of affection that they had for us, for making them laugh over 40 years, it wasn't a show in the ordinary sense. It was like a pop concert.

I mean, somebody said to me, "If you want to listen to the great rock songs, then you sit at home and listen to them on your headphones. If you go to the arena, it's for occasion. It's not to hear the songs again." And once I'd realized that, then I really began to enjoy the show enormously. But at the end of it, it just felt that was it. It was a very satisfactory way of concluding it. And now, we would all go off in our different directions again.

Jesse Thorn: Well, John Cleese, I really appreciate you taking the time to be on *Bullseye*.

John Cleese: I appreciate your, um, helping me to sell my book.

Jesse Thorn: *(Cackles.)* John Cleese's book, by the way, is called *So, Anyway*.

John Cleese from 2014.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Of the six founding members of Monty Python, only one was born outside the UK. And only one of them wasn't a comedy performer. Terry Gilliam was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He went to high school and college here in Los Angeles. And as a kid, he dreamed of being a cartoonist—not a comedy icon. But then he got a gig with John Cleese. And after that, he moved to London. There, he got a gig working on a kid's show called *Do Not*

Adjust Your Set, where he collaborated with Terry Jones, Eric Idle, and Michael Palin. And so, when *Monty Python's Flying Circus*—the TV show—first launched, Gilliam was the show's animator. The gigantic feet squishing old portraits of fancy Victorian people, those were Gilliam's gigantic feet squishing old portraits of fancy Victorian people.

Eventually, the group made Gilliam an official member, even putting him on screen. And even though he was—and is—funny, he always dreamed of being behind the camera. After Python disbanded, he went on to direct the movies *Time Bandits*, *Brazil*, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen, Twelve Monkeys,* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, among others. I got to talk with Terry Gilliam in 2005. He'd just put out a very dark, surreal, intense film called *Tideland*. I asked him what attracted him to directing features.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Jesse Thorn: Why did you choose that in your post-Python career? I mean, obviously you co-directed *Holy Grail*, and you directed part of *The Meaning of Life*, and *Jabberwocky* may have been in between those two. I can't remember the timeline. But why did you choose features as your medium, after previously having had this career as an animator?

Terry Gilliam: I never wanted to be an animator!

(Jesse laughs.)

It's like I was going to be a lumberjack or a film director. I mean, animation was just sort of this detour on the way to eventually getting to do what I've always wanted to do. My problem was I grew up in the San Fernando Valley outside of Hollywood, and I just couldn't see how anybody could ever work their way up to that system. And so, I always chose to only do work that I had control over, which—well, as a cartoonist, I just needed a piece of paper and a pen. And that ultimately led to a love of animation. And Python and them, when we got to the point of making *Monty Python: The Holy Grail*, and we had this money from all these pop stars, Terry Jones and I said, "Well, everybody named Terry gets to direct. Is that agreed? Does everybody agree?"

(They laugh.)

And so, we were off doing what I really had always wanted to do.

Jesse Thorn: It's funny. I mean, before we went on the air, you mentioned that radio always had an appeal to you, because it was another thing that someone can do solo and let their creativity run wild. Because it requires both so little in the way of other people and so little in the way of, for example, money. I wonder what it was like for you when you made the transition from making—you know, even from making a film with your buddies in Python to making a movie that, you know, involved millions and millions of dollars and like Robert De Niro—as did *Brazil*. Or you know, $40,000,000 and the disembodied head of Robin Williams—as did *Baron Munchausen*.

What was it like for you to make that adjustment from an art that you controlled completely to art that sort of had, in a funny way, had to be vetted by people with a quajillion dollars?

Terry Gilliam: It was— *(Sighs.)* I mean, the most difficult adjustment was when we made *Holy Grail*, because I had been sitting there working on my own during the Python years. I mean, I'd appear on the show occasionally, and I'd get the others to do voices. And we would be in meetings when we were writing the stuff and putting it all together. But most of the time, it was me and my drawings and pieces of paper and cutouts. So, when we came to doing *Grail*, the difficulty was with Terry and myself co-directing it. Very quickly I discovered that I didn't have the sort of social skills that a director needs.

(They laugh.)

And because I didn't have the patience to sit there and explain so very, very carefully to the others of the group why they had to kneel in uncomfortable armor and keep their heads below the parapet of a castle so I could do a matte painting. I used to walk off. I'd get *(censor beep)* off at the others and just leave! *(Laughs.)* And I realized, "Oh, I've got to change a bit." So, when we made *Jabberwocky*, which was the first one of my own, I discovered something very interesting. Because all these actors that were hired, they thought I was a director, and so a director must know what he's doing. And they took orders without questioning.

And I thought, "Well, this is interesting now." *(Giggles.)* And so, I'm slowly— I actually was just learning on the job. And what I did learn, I just found I was actually quite good with actors. I enjoyed working with them.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Terry Gilliam from 2005.

Transition: Chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: We're going to take a quick break. *(Referencing Spamalot lyrics.)* Don't feel down; look on the bright side of life. Our Monty Python special continues. We'll talk with Eric Idle when we return. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. This week, we are celebrating the work of Monty Python—the legendary, massively influential British comedy group founded in 1969. My final guest on the show is Eric Idle. Along with being a founding member of Monty Python, Idle co-founded The Ruttles—the Beatles parody band. He also wrote the smash hit Monty Python-adjacent Broadway musical, *Spamalot*.

Music: "All for One" from the musical *Spamalot*.

All around this blighty land

We are his mighty band (ooh)

King Arthur's strongest knights

We are prepared to fight

Whoooo-ever!

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: These days, almost 60 years since Monty Python was founded, Eric Idle has entered a reflective moment in his career. When I talked with him in 2018, he had just written a book about his life: *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life: A Sort of*

Biography. He named it after the iconic song that he wrote, recorded, and sang for Monty Python's The *Life of Brian*.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Clip:

Mr. Cheeky: When you're chewing on life's gristle, don't grumble! Give a whistle! *(Transitioning into song.)*

And this'll help things turn out for the best. And...

Always look on the bright side of life (whistling)

Always look on the light side of life (whistling)

If life seems jolly rotten, there's something you've forgotten!

And that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Jesse Thorn: Eric Idle, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

Eric Idle: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Jesse Thorn: You recorded the vocals of that song under a blanket in a hotel room. *(Chuckles.)*

Eric Idle: I was just thinking of that! Live in a hotel bedroom in Tunisia.

(Jesse laughs.)

In a very sort of second-rate hotel too. And in the sound recordist's room. Yeah, because I wanted to change the way I sang the lyric. Because we were on location filming The *Life of Brian*. 40 years ago, actually. And I just thought it should be the character I'm playing, Mr. Cheeky. *(In a thick cockney accent.)* He talked like this!

(Returning to normal.) And the demo I'd done was really rather boring. *(Singing with a mild English accent.)* "Always look on the bright—"

You know, it was kind of a boring, boring, boring vocal. So, I thought, "Oh, that's what I should do!" So, I took a bottle of boukha, which is this rocket fuel, and drowned a bit of it. And then we just hit it live! And that's live from a hotel bedroom in Tunisia.

Jesse Thorn: That song, in a lot of ways, is sort of a framing device for the book. And I had never thought of it in terms of it being like a solution to the problem. The problem being, if you're going to make a comedy about Jesus, he's going to be crucified at the end. *(Laughs.)*

Eric Idle: Well, yes. But so were thousands of other people. You know, it was the Roman method of execution.

Jesse Thorn: But if you know you're going to end your film— You can't end it with a wedding like most comedies, right? Like, it can't be *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or whatever.

Eric Idle: *(Chuckling.)* No, no. No. Well, I mean, all of the characters were heading for—a lot of them were heading for execution. And that was a sort of problem we had to deal with. What the hell are we going to do? How are we going to end this damn thing? And we weren't very good at endings. *Holy Grail* stopped with the police coming in and arresting everybody, which my daughter says is the worst ending of a film anywhere.

Jesse Thorn: It is a very bad ending.

Eric Idle: It's a very bad ending. *(Chortles.)*

Jesse Thorn: It's maybe my favorite movie of all time. It's a terrible ending.

Eric Idle: So, we were trying to think of what to do, and I just said, "Well, we should end with a song." You know, it should be like a cheery-uppy song, you know, looking on the bright side. Because it's terribly ironic! You can't actually look on the bright side when you are being crucified. There's not a lot to look forward to! *(Laughs.)* So, it

is a sort of dumb optimism in the context of the movie, but it seems people have adopted it for reality. Which is quite nice.

Jesse Thorn: Let's talk about beginnings for a second. I didn't know much about the circumstances of your early life. Can you tell me about how you came to ship off to boarding school full-time?

Eric Idle: Well, I was born in World War II. And at the end of World War II, in 1945, my father was still in the RAF. He'd been since 1941. And they told everybody to hitchhike home for the holidays. And he got a ride, and he was in a truck which swerved off the road, and the load crushed him. And he actually died in hospital on Christmas Eve, which is a kind of—*(snorts)* it's a poignant scene for anybody. I was only two and a half, so that's something that I only experienced afterwards and through the absence of my mother, in extraordinary grief in reaction to that. I think she disappeared into a depression for a while. *(Mimicking a line from Holy Grail.)* She got better! *(Chuckles.)*

And then I think I went to school on the other side of the Mersey, opposite Liverpool in Wallasey. And then it was too much. I mean, I was about seven. And an unruly seven-year-old boy, if you're trying to keep a full-time job as a nurse—which she was— So, the RAF very kindly stuck me into a sort of semi-orphanage. Which, we had been an orphanage. And now I went to school, rather bizarrely, with a lot of boys who none of whom had fathers. So—

Jesse Thorn: So, like literally, this was a school that had been an orphanage weeks before you got there. Like, the big changeover, they're like, "Well, we're going to send a bunch of kids who lost a parent in the war to this school, courtesy of the RAF"—the Royal Air Force.

Eric Idle: Sure, sure. So, they paid for my education, which is very nice of them. But it was kind of— It's not a thing you notice. You don't go, "By the way, do you have a dad?"

"No. Do you have a dad?"

"No. Do you have a dad?"

"Don't stand up now."

It's only afterwards, in hindsight, you realize, "Well, that's a kind of peculiar self-selecting group of people. How odd must that have made us behave?" We didn't have any idea what a father was, or even discipline. So, we were kind of a bit unruly and kind of sneaky and anti-authoritarian. And I think that was very useful for Python.

Jesse Thorn: What kind of relationship did you have with your mom when you were a kid and teenager?

Eric Idle: Well, very intermittent. Because the terms were 14 weeks. So, you were gone. You know, the school was the overall life. And then there were moments of kind of, "Ooh! We can go home now for the holidays." You've got three weeks here, two weeks there, eight weeks in the summer. And that was kind of wonderful and luxurious. But then you're back to this thing, you know. *(Chuckles.)* It's all discipline and very—you know, good things came of it. For example, I'd read everything. *(Chuckling.)* By the time I got into applying for university, I was way ahead of people who were having a decent life and going out with teenage girls and enjoying the early '60s.

We'd had nothing. We were just doing homework and prep, you know, all evening. So, it helped me get onto the next stage, which was very useful.

Jesse Thorn: You were a good student, though. I mean, despite all this unusual stuff.

Eric Idle: I think because, at a certain stage of education, it's all down to what you do. So like, we call it A-level—which is from 16 to 18 and 19. You do these advanced exams. And that's all self-learning. So, I did history and literature and geography, all of which I loved doing. And so, you escape by reading. And I think quite early on, I escaped by reading. That's how you make your privacy *(pry-vuh-see)* or privacy *(prihv-uh-see)* around yourself is by getting into books. And there wasn't much television.

So, it wasn't like we could get into TV or—you know, we had little transistor radios. So, we got into rock and roll, listening to the radio stations from Luxembourg. And those were our means of escape, really.

Jesse Thorn: When you got to college—or university—did you look around and think, "Oh, I don't think any of these people grew up in a semi-orphanage"? *(Chuckles.)*

Eric Idle: It's just such a strange, different world from Wolverhampton is a very bleak and gray and dark—or it was in those days, in the '50s and '60s—early '60s. But Cambridge is built in 1347. My college is built. It's like, "Well, look at this then!" And it's so beautiful. You know, you look at King's College, and it's sort of—everywhere is beautiful. And then they treated you like intelligent adults. It wasn't any more of that, "Oh, shut up" or "Go to bed" or "Be quiet." They wanted to know what you thought and what you think and how you are. And that was really— That was nice and different. And my life changed completely because of it.

Jesse Thorn: When you got into Footlights, the legendary theatre comedy troupe at Cambridge, it must have been great to like play in a space where what mattered was whether you were funny. *(Chuckles.)*

Eric Idle: My entire life, from my second term onwards, became all about comedy. The very first, I auditioned and did The Pembroke Smoker, which is a comedy club thing. And the first performance, I did a John Cleese sketch and met John Cleese. That's in my second term at Cambridge. So, this is like 1963, February. So, I've known him that long. And then all these— I watched and I joined this club by auditioning. And you just learn by watching people be funny. That's the only way you can learn, by watching and doing.

Jesse Thorn: Do you remember a particular lesson that you learned when you were in school—as a performer or as a writer?

Eric Idle: I think the most I learned was once I was in the Footlights Club, and it was lunchtime, and I picked up a sketch which John Cleese had written. And I'm reading through this headmaster sketch and I'm not laughing. I'm not laughing. I'm not laughing. I put it down and said, "Well, good luck with that."

That night he killed with it. Because *(mimicking Cleese's high-energy, rapid-fire shouting)* "Listen up everybody! Hello! Sit down! Shut up!" I mean, his level of performance made it hilarious! Whereas the sketch itself wasn't particularly funny. You know. I mean, it was all about the performance.

Jesse Thorn: Did you figure out what you could do as a performer that was funny? Because obviously, your gifts as a performer are so different from Cleese's.

Eric Idle: Yes, I think I learned to perform during Python, because we had to play all these different roles, and we have different wigs and makeup. So, you can hide behind a character and then explore being a bit more ambitious in your performing. And watching Cleese time a line, you go, "Oh, my god! You can wait forever." I mean, I think in *The Holy Grail*, I'm waiting for him. *(Chuckling.)* He says, "She turned me into a newt!" And I'm at the front of the screen, and I'm breaking up. I have to bite onto whatever I'm holding. "I got better!" finally, he says, after two minutes! *(Laughing.)* You know?

So, that's a learning. That's a lesson in timing. Right there. How long can you wait for a laugh? And so, I'm very fortunate to be working with Palin and with Cleese and Chapman and Joan. They're all very, very good performers. And you're learning and teaching at the same time. We're all picking up from each other.

Jesse Thorn: Can I play a song that you wrote with John Cleese?

Eric Idle: Sure.

Jesse Thorn: It's called "Eric the Half a Bee" from Monty Python. And my guest is Eric Idle.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Clip: "Eric the Half a Bee" from the album *Monty Python Sings*.

Half a bee, philosophically

Must, ipso facto, half not be

But half the bee has got to be

A vis-a-vis its entity, do you see?

But can a bee be said to be

Or not to be an entire bee?

When half the bee is not a bee

Due to some ancient injury?

Singing!

A-la-dee-dee, a-one two three

Eric, the half a bee

A, B, C, D, E, F, G

Eric, the half a bee

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Jesse Thorn: *(Chuckling.)* Always been a favorite of mine.

Eric Idle: Mine too! We wrote it when we were pissed.

(Jesse chuckles.)

We were halfway up a mountain in Bavaria. He was dressed as Little Red Riding Hood in a dirndl and full skirt. And I was playing his mother, dressed as his mother. And we had finished filming our scene, and we decided to have a little bottle of schnapps, because we were cold. And they went off to film the rest of the sketch. And John and I— I had my guitar there, and I just pulled it out, and we suddenly wrote a song— completely bizarrely. And I love it. I must say, I do love it. And John sings beautifully. People say he has no voice. He's perfectly in pitch! He sings with a fantastic voice.

Jesse Thorn: *(Affectionately.)* It's a very dumb song. *(Laughs.)*

Eric Idle: It's a very strange and odd and bizarre song! You go— And then, because you record these things, and some things are picked up and some things aren't. That got picked up. People go, "Oh, I love that song!"

You go, "Really?! Okay. Fine. Well, good!"

Jesse Thorn: *(Giggles.)* Well, it's such a lovely combination of two very distinct sensibilities of yours and Cleese's, right? Like, it is your tendency to kind of bring brightness and geniality to weird things—like, a kind of like presentational musical-ly quality, that is always put through a weird lens. You know what I mean?

(Eric confirms.)

Like, placed just slightly wrong. But Cleese is so masterful about the comedy of like just barely staying in control. And that whole song is just like these weird— Like, all those weird, complicated rhymes and like logical schemes.

Eric Idle: But I can't even imagine how we even got to writing a song about a bee, let alone half a bee, called Eric! You know, John always thought the word—the name Eric was very funny. I mean, in one show, I think he had Eric the fish, Eric the fruit. He just thought he thought the word Eric. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it's a hard K. It's a hard K sound at the end. That's like a comedy staple.

Eric Idle: *(Unclear)* chicken? Yeah. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Anything that ends in a kuh.

Eric Idle: He wanted us to go on a tour called The Two Erics.

(Jesse giggles helplessly.)

And I said, "John, just stick with our names. They'll come to that. The Two Erics, they will not come."

Jesse Thorn: It also seems like you were the one, having read several Python's memoirs and read a lot about Python, that—granted, Graham Chapman was in a league of his own when it came to carousing. As a, you know, a serious alcoholic and a gay man in swinging London, he was in his own—

Eric Idle: International class. Yeah. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. He was a top-drawer carouser. But like, it seems like you were the one who actually maybe most enjoyed the part of your life which was like, "Hey, I

guess we're like cool, subversive, famous people." And I'm not asking you to be, um, immodest, but like the benefits of that stuff, you're like, "Yeah! I'm going to go—whatever, like hang out with models or something!"

Eric Idle: Sure. I mean, that's sort of true. I think when you've been to boarding school, all bets are off.

(Jesse chuckles.)

You know, you're certainly owed a good time. And I've been thinking about it recently. I thought Cleese acts like Jupiter. He attracts all of the incoming things, and you can quietly go on with your life not being bombarded by fame and things. Because he was really famous when we started, so everybody knew him. And one can just quietly get on with your life. And then a lot of rock and roll people just wanted to meet us. They just flat out pursued us. Because we were their generation, but we were doing comedy. They were doing rock, and they had been for many years, but we're the same age. And so, they would just— You know, they pursued us. I mean, the rock people paid for *The Holy Grail*. George Harrison paid entirely for the *Life of Brian*. I mean, it was a sort of—amazingly give and take. It was lovely.

Jesse Thorn: It seems like, in your book, you are trying to balance the story of how awesome it was to like go to George Harrison's castle—*(chuckling)* which sounds great! It sounds great. And it seems like you didn't figure out how badly you were failing your family as a young man until you kind of had a second chance at it later in life.

Eric Idle: Oh, sure. I mean, I think we were young. And we were—you know, it was the '60s. We were wearing tight trousers. We had all these crazy clothes to dress into. And the females were liberated by the pill. And we were sort of on the edge of all that. And it was kind of fun, because we were chic. And when we did our big show in London, the boxes were filled by Pink Floyd and the Stones. And you know, everybody came to see us! Because there weren't that many comedians. There were just us. You know, there weren't lots of other groups of comedy. So. And we were the same generation.

And I think that it was a very interesting generation. It made its own world in photography, couture, books, literature, poems. I mean, everything. It just did everything, because there was nothing there. And it was like— London was filled with

bomb sites. It was a real mess when I first got to London. It was horrible. It was bomb sites everywhere with grass growing and weeds and everything. So, it was all being made up. And then we had one—two television stations and then three. You know, so it was all coming into being.

Jesse Thorn: And you're kind of riding in this river of all of this, this kind of cultural river. And at some point, it seems like you looked back and were like, "Oh, I have a wife and kid back there."

Eric Idle: Sure. No, no. I mean, we were spoiled. I mean, we were on a rock and roll tour, you know, in Canada. And, you know, you think, "Oh, this is great. This is great! You know, ah!" But after a while, you go, "Wait a minute, that was very bad behavior." *(Chuckling.)* You know, you could— But hey, all you can say is, "Look, when you're 26 and you're on the road…" Um, yes, was I *(censor beep)*? Absolutely. And what I like now is I sent the book to my ex-wife, and I said, "Look, I'm sorry about all this."

She said, "I wouldn't have done it any differently." And I thought that was the sweetest thing to say.

Jesse Thorn: When you write a memoir, one of the things that you have to deal with is the important people in your life who you are remembering after their passing. Was that a difficult part of writing the book?

Eric Idle: It was. It was the hardest part. I realized— I mean, what I did is I set out to write the story, and I didn't want to go to a publisher. I wanted to just write a book that I wanted to write, how I wanted to write it, and just let's see what happens. Where does it go to? What subjects do I find? And then after a bit, I realized that I had been avoiding dealing with some people I knew who had recently passed. And in particular Robin. I hadn't faced the fact that I really didn't believe he was dead totally.

And I owed it to him to write about him, because I've known him since 1980, and we've been very close—to write something about him and to try and express what kind of an extraordinary person he was. And so, that was sort of hard to do, but that's the discipline of when you come back to a thing. You try and put some shape into it and what it needs, what's it missing, what can you put into the cake, you know, to make it better as a book.

Jesse Thorn: When you did that, when you engaged with— I mean, Robin Williams is one of the people; George Harrison is one of the folks that you write about. Graham Chapman—although Chapman has—you know, you've covered in many more Python-centric things than the book. How do you feel differently about their passing as a guy in his mid-70s? Like, as a person who has a lot to retrospect about?

Eric Idle: Well, you look around and suddenly all the people I found really funny and really great for going to dinner have gone, like Gary Shandling or Carrie Fisher, Mike Nichols. You know, and that's— You suddenly realize, "Oh! I get it. So, wait. So, the death thing? That does apply then, okay?" And you know, I think the fact is that you just— It behooves you to realize and put things into perspective. And then, you know, I like to encourage younger people and just—you know, to write about people I wanted to write about. I always liked—what's that Lytton Strachey book?—*Eminent Victorians*, and these are Eminent Elizabethans. But I like the idea of writing about characters or people who you knew or have some insight into. I think that's interesting for people. And it's also interesting for me to write about.

Jesse Thorn: It's the 50th anniversary of Python coming up. You've done what you say will be your last shows. And you know, you just wrote your memoir. Like, you're in looking-back mode.

(Eric confirms.)

Do you still look forward, too? Do you still make the kinds of plans that you made 10 years ago or 20 years ago or 50 years ago?

Eric Idle: No, I mainly want to sort of read books and play guitar, you know?

(Jesse laughs.)

But we can't do it again. Because, sadly, Terry Jones is not able to do it again. And then—so, there's very few of us left, you know, sort of able. And it wouldn't be the same. I think we sort of did a big show and a big farewell. We have a little— We may have some surprises up our sleeves, but it will be certainly not us particularly performing. It will be encouraging other things to take place. I think that's the best I can express it. You know, because 50—it's not <u>our</u> anniversary. *(Chuckling.)* It's like somebody else's wedding anniversary. You know? It's a very strange one. But I

thought I would write my book, because I knew I'd be asked questions. And so, I wanted to see what I could remember while I still hadn't forgotten.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think of it all differently now than you did 20 years ago? Or like, I'm talking about after the movies were made and so on and so forth, but still a long time ago.

Eric Idle: A very long time ago. And it's amazing to me, because it just seems to get bigger. I mean, it doesn't seem to pass away. It becomes more and bigger. And in the end, you've just—you know. Well, what can you do? You embrace it, enjoy it, and be grateful for all those wonderful people that you met along the way and all the many laughs. We were doing comedy, so we had a lot of bloody laughs. And that's really great.

Jesse Thorn: Eric, I'm so grateful that you came here to be on *Bullseye*. It's a real honor to have you on the show. And thank you for that. And thanks for your amazing work that's meant so much to me and so many people.

Eric Idle: Sure. My pleasure. Thank you for reading the book!

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: I did! It's true.

Transition: Bright, brassy synth.

Jesse Thorn: Eric Idle. His book, *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life: A Sort of Biography*, is in bookstores now. A few years ago, he also wrote *The Spamalot Diaries*, in which he recounts the making of his hit musical.

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is recorded at Maximum Fun World Headquarters in the historic Jewelry District of downtown Los Angeles—where I found out that there is a puppy cafe three blocks away. And so, when I finished my lunch and was about to do an interview today, I looked at my watch, realized there was 35 minutes until my interview started, and I just went to the puppy cafe and played with puppies for 10 minutes right before my interview started. And it

was a great decision. So, shout out to Bibim Paws Dog Cafe in downtown Los Angeles. Somebody go adopt my friends there so that I don't adopt more dogs.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Hannah Moroz. Our video producer, Daniel Speer. We get booking help on *Bullseye* from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It is called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram and TikTok and YouTube, where you can find video from almost all of our interviews. I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature sign-off.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)

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