

SOUNDS

PYTHON PASSION

Like England's Lord Privy Seal, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* is a complete misnomer; it has nothing to do with the circus, flying, sinister snakes, or dead World War II field marshals. The fictitious Monty Python is actually a collective alias for five of Her Majesty's finest satirists and an American illustrator who always seems to add his surrealist two cents' worth to their common endeavors. They've been featured on their own BBC television show on and off for the last five years. But until recently the group was known only to U.S. audiences by way of two relatively obscure albums and one rarely seen feature film—perfect fodder for a cult following which went beyond snob appeal and camp considerations.

The Pythons finally made their American TV debut last winter over a few local public stations. Their British brand of absurdist humor made them the surprise hit of the season. In cities as different as New York and Dallas *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was the hottest noncommercial television program since the Watergate hearings. By now most of the member stations of the Public Broadcasting System are airing the show. Critics who described it as an English version of *Laugh-In* must have had their eyes closed. When did Rowan and Martin ever show tits on the tube? Or have a lumberjack sing about putting on high heels and a bra when he goes into town?

In retrospect it's hard to understand why TV executives took so long to introduce Monty Python to these shores. The standard answer—that the Pythons' sense of humor was too parochial—was not convincing, especially in view of the American popularity of *Beyond The Fringe* veterans Jonathan Miller, Peter Cook, and Dudley Moore. Even the favorable response to a few Monty Python skits shown

on summer replacement programs a few years back failed to convince American television executives. They pointed to the disappointing sales of the group's U.S. albums, *Another Monty Python Record* (packed in a scribbled-over classical record cover) and *The Previous Monty Python Record* (on which All-stair Cooke is attacked by a duck in Philadelphia). What they failed to notice was the number of Monty Python addicts who began to appear on college campuses from coast to coast. No one suspected just how many students had the Python on their backs until they turned the first Flying Circus movie, *And Now for Something Completely Different*, into a cult classic despite a less-than-enthusiastic release by its distributor. There were even hard-core fans who smuggled in Python paraphernalia then only available abroad: *Matching Tie and Handkerchief*, the world's first three-sided record album (one side has two concentric sets of grooves), *Monty Python's Big Red Book* (in a blue cover), and *The Brand New Monty Python Bok* (sic) complete with fresh-printed smudges on the dustcover and containing some of the group's funniest material.

Thanks to the TV show's impressive ratings, Python propaganda is now becoming as easy to buy as Kentucky Fried Chicken. And there's more coming: a live album of their hit London stage show of a year ago, and their long-awaited second feature film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* ("Makes *Ben Hur* look like an epic!"). The multimedia assault on America's sanity (or what's left of it) will continue with another batch of thirteen TV episodes due in the fall. The group itself is tentatively scheduled to do a five-week tour of the U.S. by this winter.

As for the Pythons themselves, they're baffled by their sudden if rather belated success in the States. Wary of personal publicity to the point of never identifying themselves individually on the air, they've been surprised by the American penchant for matching up their names and faces. John Cleese, the tall one with a jaw like Gibraltar, is probably the most distinctive of them. He's always impersonating bobbies, nannies, and total loonies. Graham Chapman, the tall lanky blond who's often a straight man for the others, is an M.D. All that's officially known about Eric Idle is that he claims to be nine and a half—and a legend in his

own lunchtime. Round-faced Terry Jones was born in Wales, and according to his press bio, "like all Welshmen he is shifty and a natural liar." Idle, Jones, and Michael Palin were responsible for a BBC kids' show, *Do Not Adjust Your Set*, which turned out to be Monty Python's forerunner. When Palin turns up on TV, it's usually as some bizarre con man, like Luigi Vercotti, London Mafioso, or Norman Vales of Gravesend, who claims he wrote all of Shakespeare's plays, "and my wife and I wrote all the sonnets." In a weak moment the Pythons will admit that inspiration for their zany skits comes from their everyday lives. As long as they continue to inhabit a whimsical and oddly exotic world of Tony Jacklin golf clubs, Watney's Red Barrel, and Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Eggs, Bacon and Spam, America's Python passion will flourish.—Steve Ditlea



The Monty Pythons: Going beyond camp considerations