

Eric Idle interview

As one-sixth of Monty Python, Eric Idle has been in the comedy game for well over half a century and now, at the age of 82, he's embarking on a tour of the UK, promising "an evening of rude songs, some singalongs, inappropriate remarks, reminiscences of fame, fortune and rare footage." After a successful run in Australia and New Zealand, this latest eight-date tour kicks off at Birmingham's Symphony Hall on 10 September.

So what can fans expect from Always Look on the Bright Side of Life Live?

When I write a show, I always ask, how am I going to surprise and entertain people? So I choose things that they won't expect. It's a one-man musical and I have a virtual band who I take on the road with me who are on a screen, and when I want to sing a song, I play live with them. There are also some stories about people who I've known in my life who were important to me, like Robin Williams and George Harrison, so it's a bit of everything really.

What songs will you be performing during the evening?

I do some that I really like, like The Meaning of Life, and The Philosophers' Song with the Australian Bruces, and we put the words up and everyone sings along. I found the basis for the show in Australia and New Zealand last year and it was surprising how moved people were by a song I wrote for George and one I wrote about Robin. [Comedy duo] Flight of the Conchords came to see me do it in Wellington, and they wrote me a letter and it said, "You can't just go straight on, you've got to let us recover, we're moved, we're crying, give us time, bring us back from that before you move on." I thought that was such an interesting note, because comedians always like to help each other... unlike rock 'n' roll people.

Of all the Pythons, you seem to be the one still the most in love with comedy – you haven't diversified out to start presenting travel shows or directing movies.

Even after 62 years, it fascinates me. I've always loved comedy. I think comedy is a very healthy way of dealing with how awful things can be. Obviously that's true, because it's one of the strongest things that's happened during wartime; people made jokes all the time. It's the way we can actually get to a truth without necessarily being killed immediately. Although, to be honest, the first people Hitler got rid of were comedians, and it looks like they're the first people Donald Trump's trying to get rid of!

Have any of the other Pythons reached out to you since you arrived in the UK?

They're not nice to me. It's a shame, but never mind. I seem to have angered some of them very, very deeply, and I've done nothing at all. It's actually been 10 years since I saw most of them in the flesh. Look, we were together, we haven't done anything for 40 years, so it's not a big loss. It is a shame, but I don't like to go on about it because the fans don't like it; it's like mum and dad fighting, you know? I'm sure it's only temporary... maybe.

Of all the things you've done in your life – the songs, the sketches, the films etc – what's the thing you're most proud of?

The thing I'm most proud of is the fact that people choose to sing Always Look on the Bright Side of Life at their funerals. I think that's so surprising and so unpredictable and so healthy. It touches me all the time and makes me feel very proud.

Obviously you'll be performing that song at your show then?

At the end, I have a big collage of all the many different places I've sung it, dressed in so many different stupid costumes. I mean, I performed it for the Queen dressed as a Japanese maid from Madame Butterfly, and for Prince Charles, I was in a tutu with Swan Lake!

Does performing live, in your 80s, keep you feeling young?

I like to scare myself every year. I think it's important, if you're a comedian, not to lose the knack of going out and trying to be funny. Luckily, you don't have to be young to be funny and you can actually become funnier as you get older, because you can say things you never would have dared say before!

After your successful stage version of Monty Python and the Holy Grail, Spamalot, you tried to get a Life of Brian musical off the ground, didn't you?

After Holy Grail was a hit, everybody said, well, let's do Life of Brian. So we wrote some songs, and went to the Pythons, and John Cleese said, no, he vetoed it. But they said, well, you can do The Meaning of Life, which is a real poison chalice, because it has no characters and no plot. So I did about eight drafts of that before I finally abandoned it, and when I abandoned it, it was called Wittgenstein's Panto! I thought this has nothing to do with The Meaning of Life. I mean, the film actually IS a musical, but it doesn't have a through-line of characters, so it's really hard to make into a play, and Mike Nichols always says the three most important things about a musical are story, story, story. So we wrote some very nice songs, John DuPrez and I, but we could never get the plot together.

Do you watch a lot of modern-day comedy?

I don't watch a lot of comedy, and I think it's because I write every day. People will send me things that make me laugh, but I don't watch a lot of TV, and I don't see many funny films. I've seen about 30 years of stand-up and I'm a little bit tired of it. So I'm not a person to ask that, because I read books, I'm a reader and a guitar player and, you know, somebody who likes a ding dong.

At the age of 82, do you have any ambitions left?

My ambition is to last another day, having survived cancer! I try to help them raise money, because we've improved the survival statistics of pancreatic cancer. I'm an example of somebody who can survive, so it encourages people to give money. In 2019, I should have gone, so I've had quite a reprieve. So I like to write every day, and I play guitar every day. It's fun to go and entertain people. I like getting people to laugh – it is an addictive thing. You say something, then they laugh and their response, it just lifts you up!

