Monty Python’s Terry Jones joins the choir invisible

Enlarge / Terry Jones playing the organ *au naturel* in Monty Python’s “Blackmail” sketch.
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Monty Python’s Terry Jones died at age 77 on January 21 at his London home.

Born in Colwyn Bay, Wales, Jones got his comedy start at Oxford University, playing in revues with fellow future Monty Python member Michael Palin. After graduation, he worked as a writer on a handful of BBC shows, including *The Frost Report*, and he performed on *Do Not Adjust Your Set* along with *The Complete and Utter History of Britain*. But it was his work with Python that he is primarily remembered for.

During Python’s original four-year run, Jones generally wrote with Michael Palin, and the two would bring their work in progress to the entire group to read through and workshop the material. (John Cleese and Graham Chapman also wrote together, while Eric Idle and Terry Gilliam generally worked alone.) It was in that crucible that Jones, along with the other Pythons, honed their sketch-writing and comedic-timing skills to produce timeless comedy.

Actually getting to watch Monty Python was a chore. I was probably 11 or 12 years old when I became aware of the

groundbreaking British comedy troupe, and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was instant appointment viewing for me on KRMA, Denver's PBS affiliate. The problem was timing. I could stay up until Python started at 10pm on a Saturday night, but I had to slog through some uninspiring TV to get there. But once the opening strains of "The Liberty Bell March" began playing, the trauma of hearing Hervé Villechaize yelling "Da Plane! Da Plane!" in *Fantasy Island* dissipated in anticipation of watching Python.

Enlarge / Eric Idle, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Michael Palin, and Terry Jones from Monty Python in 2014 before a series of live performances in London.
Philip Toscano/PA Images

Jones was not my favorite Python. In contrast to John Cleese, who was often a simmering cauldron of barely repressed rage,

and Eric Idle’s iconic smarmy, sketchy blokes, Jones always felt like more of a comedy generalist to me. It’s easy for me to pick a favorite Idle, Cleese, Palin, or Chapman sketch. For Jones, though, it’s more the memory of his dressing up as a middle-aged woman and delivering his lines in a high falsetto, as he did to hilarious effect as the mother of the false messiah in *Life of Brian*. Or playing the unwitting straight man in sketches like “Candid Photography” while politely enduring Eric Idle’s “nudge nudge” patter, that sticks with me. But no matter what the part, Jones threw his whole self into it—even if that meant playing a naked organist in one of my favorite Python sketches, “Blackmail.”

In addition to writing and performing with Python, Jones co-directed *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* with Terry Gilliam and was behind (and in front of) the camera for *Life of Brian* and *Meaning of Life*. Post-Python, Jones directed *Erik the Viking* and *The Wind in the Willows* and wrote the screenplay for 1986’s *Labyrinth*. Jones also developed a keen interest in medieval history, eventually writing a couple of books on Chaucer-era England and hosting some history documentaries.

Jones was diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia in 2016, which, among other things, robbed him of his ability to speak. He is survived by his second wife, Anne Soderstrom, as well as his three children.

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