

Tim Brooke-Taylor

Born 1940. Comedian.

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1. Introduction

The following chapters (1 to 3) were archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Independent at www.independent.co.uk.



Brooke-Taylor appearing on ITV's 'Those Wonderful TV Times' in the late Seventies (ITV/Rex).

Tim Brooke-Taylor helped to change the face of British comedy as part of zany comic trio The Goodies, while his clever puns and wordplay had audiences rolling in the aisles on Radio 4's I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue.

Brooke-Taylor, who has died from coronavirus aged 79, was among a group of Oxbridge graduates who introduced a new strain of surrealism and silliness to television comedy.

He learned his craft in the Cambridge Footlights, where he performed alongside John Cleese, Graham Chapman, Graeme Garden and Bill Oddie. His friendship with Garden and Oddie would later see the three write and perform in The Goodies, a cult comedy show that ran on the BBC from 1970 to 1982.

A mixture of sketches and situation comedy, the show involved the three protagonists cycling around on a "tridem" carrying out good deeds. Brooke-Taylor played an establishment figure replete with Union Jack waistcoat who would often interrupt the action with a patriotic speech.



With fellow Goodies Graeme Garden, right, and Bill Oddie in 1981.



The Goodies re-united with their trandem.

Among the cartoon-style slapstick and buffoonery there were clever parodies, as well as satire. One classic episode, in which a kitten knocked over the Post Office Tower, won the Silver Rose at the 1972 Montreux television festival, a feat repeated three years later with an episode celebrating silent film, in which Brooke-Taylor wrestled a lion.

The show was a huge success and spawned hit singles, including “The Funky Gibbon”, which the trio performed on Top of the Pops. In the Eighties they returned to provide voices for BBC cartoon series Bananaman (1983-86).

The Goodies never received the acclaim of Monty Python’s Flying Circus – it was apparently deemed too “silly” by BBC executives – and the show’s legacy has suffered from being rarely repeated. “I’m very proud of The Goodies,” Brooke-Taylor said in 2017. “And, in a way, I am frustrated that we don’t still see it because it was fairly anti-establishment yet cleverly silly.”

Brooke-Taylor made an equally important contribution to British comedy as a panellist on BBC Radio 4’s I’m Sorry I Haven’t a Clue. He joined the “antidote to panel games” from its launch in 1972 and was a regular fixture until his death, with his wit, clever puns and japery helping to make the show another cult success.

Those taking part were given “silly things to do” such as redefine words (Brooke-Taylor’s contributions included “Parsnip – Dad’s vasectomy”) and play Mornington Crescent, an absurd board game based around Tube stations seemingly without rules.

Despite appearing on the show for nearly 50 years he was never complacent. “Every time we do a recording, I find myself thinking: ‘Please God, just let me be funny just one more time,’” he said in 2012.



I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue: Tim Brooke-Taylor, Humphrey Lyttelton, Barry Cryer, Willie Rushton, Graeme Garden.

2. Childhood and Education

Born in Buxton, Derbyshire, in 1940, Timothy Julian Brooke-Taylor was the youngest of three children of Edward Brooke-Taylor, a solicitor and decorated First World War veteran, and Rachel (nee Pawson), a former games teacher and international lacrosse player.

Following the death of his father when he was 12, Brooke-Taylor was packed off to Winchester College. He went on to read law at Pembroke College, Cambridge, with the intention of joining the family firm.

But in a twist of fate he found himself sharing digs with John Cleese. Within a few weeks he had met Bill Oddie, and the three of them joined Graeme Garden and future Python Graham Chapman in the university's Footlights drama club.



The cast of 'At Last the 1948 Show', clockwise from top left: John Cleese, Aimi MacDonald, Graham Chapman, Marty Feldman and Brooke-Taylor (ANL/Rex).

Brooke-Taylor was Footlights president in 1963 when their student revue, *A Clump of Plinths*, triumphed at the Edinburgh Fringe. It transferred to the West End under the new title *Cambridge Circus*, and in 1964 went on to Broadway.

3. Career

A career in comedy beckoned, and upon graduating Brooke-Taylor got a job in BBC radio with *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again*, a sketch show full of silly voices and smutty humour that was the precursor to *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*. His big break on television came as a writer and performer for *At Last the 1948 Show*, which saw him reunited with Cleese and Chapman in a cast that also included Marty Feldman and Aimi MacDonald.

It was there that he co-wrote the celebrated *Four Yorkshiremen* sketch, considered a high watermark for British comedy, in which four well-dressed northern men smoke cigars and drink wine while reminiscing over their humble origins, each account getting more ridiculous as they trump each other with cries of "Luxury!" and "You were lucky!"

The sketch was revived by Monty Python and is often miscredited. "I could have been a member of Monty Python, but I'm not a very good solo writer," Brooke-Taylor once said.

He branched out with a small role in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971), and once spent 15 days directing Orson Welles in the film *12 + 1* (1969) after the great star fell out with the film's director.



He greeted the award of an OBE in 2011 with typical modesty (PA).

Apart from *The Goodies*, his main TV work in the 1970s and 1980s was in sitcoms. He and John Junkin wrote and starred in *The Rough with the Smooth* (1975), about the misadventures of two flat-sharing bachelors. He also had roles in *Me and My Girl* (1984-88) and *You Must Be the Husband* (1987-88).

He was awarded an OBE in 2011, which he said with typical modesty made him “grateful that somebody thinks the things I’ve done haven’t been too bad”.

He is survived by his wife Christine, whom he married in 1968, and their sons Ben and Edward.

4. Interview in 2020



The following was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Sci Fi Bulletin website at www.scifibulletin.com. The interview was conducted by Nick Joy in February 2020. He sadly died, from coronavirus, later that year.

Comedy legend Tim Brooke-Taylor's death has shocked the countless viewers and listeners who grew up with his genius in award-winning shows like *The Goodies* and 40 years of radio staple *I'm Sorry I Haven't A Clue*. Nick Joy had the pleasure of meeting Tim in February 2020 at the Sci-Fi Ball and we present this previously unpublished interview, believed to be the last he gave, as our tribute to him, talking about *Evita* parodies, a funky gibbon and a giant kitten.

*Are you looking forward to the cabaret tonight, a version of *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again*?*

I am, but I'm not quite sure what I'm doing! OK, I do to a certain extent, but we're going to have a little read through later which will get me ready. I've worked with these guys before [The Offstage Theatre Group] – they do a version of the shows I was in during the 60s. Occasionally I've guested for them, and I'm not entirely sure what the script is going to be tonight, but they do a great job.

*I guess the million dollar question is what makes the perfect comedy sketch. And as an example I have to cite your 'Don't Cry For Me Marge and Tina' skit from *The Goodies* in 1980. It has never left me, basically spoiling *Evita* from then onwards. Did it feel special at the time?*

You don't think that at all. The wonderful thing about that sketch – and I often play it during my 'evening with' shows – is that you expect people to get the joke long before the end. And they don't! That's the wonderful thing. It's very satisfying – I think they're being distracted from seeing the girls' names. You don't expect anything to last that long, so that fact we're talking about it here today – yes, the word is satisfying.

Equally, does it surprise you that while some sketches are indelibly lodged in our memories, others that you might have believed to be cleverer are soon forgotten?

Yes, and a lot of that is down to the episode that the material appeared in. One of the best sequences we ever did was about the movies, and the visual jokes were terrific, but the rest of that episode wasn't very good, so it's not shown very often. It can be luck of the draw that a certain sketch is in a good one and that's what helps grow its popularity.



The Funky Gibbon.

Have you ever reached a point where you said 'If someone mentions 'Funky Gibbon' one more time, I'll scream'?

Well, it might come as a surprise, but not many people play that for me now. It wasn't one of our best songs [though peaked at 4 in the UK Chart in 1975], but it was fun to do at the time. Bill [Oddie – fellow Goodie] wrote some wonderful songs, and some of the tracks on the LPs – as they were back then – were some of his best work. I used to live in Cricklewood, and Bill had this fantastic Beatles-style lyric 'Cricklewood. No-one's going

anywhere in Cricklewood!’ That’s something that nobody else will have heard, but it was one of his best. There were lots like that.

How was it appearing on Top of the Pops with Funky Gibbon?

That was wonderful. Terrific. One of those unbelievable things. And then going and having a meal with [dance troupe] Pan’s People afterwards was pretty good too! Life was about as good as it could get. I remember Paul McCartney being on the same show as us, but we did quite a few, so they all roll into one. Funky Gibbon didn’t sell as many as The Inbetweenies because it wasn’t released near Christmas, but it did get a higher chart position. A lot of success for these songs is dependent on when they are released.

There’s a lot of renewed interest in The Goodies at present generated by last October’s 14-disc release of The Complete Collection by Network. It looks better now than it ever has.

It does look much better, especially the filming. It was shot on something like 16mm, so not the highest quality, but they’ve transformed it and made it look really good. It’s extraordinary what they can do now, like adding colour to footage from the First World War [Peter Jackson’s They Shall Not Grow Old] and running it at the correct speed. It’s amazing – we could have done with a bit of that technique at the time!

Was The Goodies an expensive show relative to other comedies at the time?

It was expensive in many respects, but we used the in-house visual effects department, and wardrobe and makeup. When we did filming, we had to do it in a certain time. Some of my favourite shows were created when we ran out of money and couldn’t afford any new sets or filming – you all have to be more inventive. That’s what shaped The End of the World Show and it ended up being one of my favourite episodes. If the money ran out, we had to cancel things. If it rained during outdoor filming, you had to rewrite the thing just to fit in the fact that you’re undercover. That was very frustrating. When you watch the show at the time, you’re thinking ‘Why couldn’t we have done this or that?’ You watch it now and you forget that and just watch what’s there.

Do you have fond memories of the big ticket scenes like Dougal from The Magic Roundabout and Kitten Kong swinging on the Post Office Tower?

With the kitten, we knew it was going to be remembered. There were some great shots in that. When we went to Montreux we did a slight rewrite of it, and the original kitten was no longer a kitten any more, so we had to get another one. We don’t like to tell people that... but it was treated very well!

And what of the giant Dougal chasing you, Graeme and Bill?

Ha ha. Yes, all we could hear was the effing and blinding of the people running inside it, bumping into each other. ‘Who wrote this? This is ridiculous. No further, please!’ I’ve cleaned that up for your ears!

Another favourite of mine was the Four Yorkshiremen, which started on At Last the 1948 Show before becoming a Monty Python favourite.

Oh yes. In the last year, the BFI have produced a collection of what’s available of At Last the 1948 Show and again they’ve made it better quality-wise, and it was nice to be able to show the Four Yorkshiremen as part of the celebration. It was good fun to see it. I hadn’t seen it since the day it was shown. So many episodes were wiped, but were then found on tele-cine around the world in Sweden and Australia. They put the pieces back together and it was like seeing your past coming back. It would be quite fun to colourise that!

It also feels contemporary. It’s not showing its age.

Thank you. Well, I like to think so. They were good days. Marty Feldman was a genius. I wrote quite a bit with him and he was also writing Round the Horne at the time.

And finally, could I mention a former comedy contemporary of yours, Terry Jones, who we lost recently. What are your memories of him?

He was a very loyal person. Funnily enough, I remember a party being given by David Frost, and Terry and Michael Palin coming over to me and saying ‘We’re really sorry, we hadn’t realised the Four Yorkshiremen had been done before.’ It was very thoughtful of them to come and say that, and when they did the O2 concerts [Monty Python Live (Mostly) – 2014] they arranged a little bit of payment to come to me. But he himself was incredibly knowledgeable. Very clever, sadly missed, but not been well for some time. It’s not a relief when anybody dies, but it wasn’t a sudden thing.
