

# “I told you I was ill,” Spike Milligan (1918-2002)

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Spike Milligan, who died February 27 aged 83, was the single most important figure of post-war British comedy. His radio scripts for *The Goon Show*, his television series *Q*, his novels and war memoirs have been cited as an influence by practically every significant innovator in comedy over the last four decades. Though virtually unknown across the Atlantic, contemporary performers as varied as Eddie Izzard and Robin Williams have acknowledged that his legacy not only influenced them, but also inspired their own development.

Terence Alan (‘Spike’) Milligan was born of an Irish father and English mother in India in 1918. His first 16 years were spent under the waning days of British colonial rule in India. As an Irishman Spike’s father, a captain in the Royal Artillery, was himself a colonial subject (all of Ireland being then under British rule).

The legacy of British colonialism on Milligan should not be underestimated. Although the family returned to England in 1933 (after a brief spell in Burma), Spike retained the sensibility of an outsider, an iconoclast and a rebel. (He remained one literally. With the establishment of the Irish Republic the British government rescinded the British passports given to children of Irish-born British citizens. Milligan found himself classed as stateless, and took Irish citizenship, although he continued to live in England).

Though by no means politically articulate, his experiences of colonialism instilled in him a loathing for the hypocrisy of authority and the routine absurdity of officialdom. Speaking of *The Goon Show* he said, “I wasn’t consciously aware of it, but I had had enough of the British empire. The Goons gave me a chance to knock people my father and I had to call ‘Sir’. Colonels. Chaps ... with educated voices who were really bloody scoundrels.”

Living in south London and working in a factory, Spike was already looking to a career in entertainment. A talented musician, he played the guitar, ukulele and trumpet. He was listening to jazz from the United States (a passion that stayed with him for life, as anyone who ever heard him discuss Miles Davis will testify). He was also looking to the latest in Hollywood comedy. He spoke later of the frustration he felt when people asked him to explain why he liked the Marx Brothers more than much of the contemporary British comedy.

Out of the rugged music hall of the early years of the century, British comedy was already well on its way towards becoming a staid and safe variety theatre. The wildly anarchic chaos created by the Marx Brothers at their best was a breath of fresh air, and their contempt for authority figures struck a chord with Milligan. This was also true for many of Milligan’s near contemporaries. Morecambe and Wise, for example, incorporated more than merely Groucho’s stoop into their routines, as they became the most popular comedians on television. But Spike always took his inspiration in a more anarchic

direction. Not for him the celebrity-studded Christmas specials. His preferred vehicle was a full-frontal assault on the “commonsense” view of the world that places him in a tradition of “nonsense” and surreal humour with a pedigree stretching back to Edward Lear.

Beyond this, however, what changed Spike and gave a particularly acerbic quality to his comic vision was his experience during the Second World War. Milligan did his basic training as a gunner at the south coast resort of Bexhill, where he encountered more of the useless bureaucracy that was to be his favourite target for the rest of his life. In the first volume of his war memoirs, *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall* (1972), he described his journey in a way that encapsulates his vision of the world:

“The RTO gave me a travel warrant, a white feather and a picture of Hitler marked ‘This is your enemy’. I checked every compartment, but he wasn’t on the train.”

On a tour of duty that took him to north Africa and Italy, Milligan began organising concerts and performances through the forces’ entertainment service, ENSA. His sense of the ridiculous was already struggling for expression. It was an absurdity teetering on the tragic—he was severely shell-shocked by a bombardment that almost killed him—and it cemented the uneasy combination of pessimism and compassion which was to define his work.

Returning to London after the war, he ran into his old army pal, Harry Secombe, then working as a stand-up comic. He had met Secombe in Africa. A field gun had bounced past his tent, followed some minutes later by Secombe asking, “Anybody seen my gun?” They started socialising with Peter Sellers, taking it in turns to entertain each other. This was the origin of *The Goon Show*.

At a time when radio comedy in Britain was often extremely mannered and driven by catchphrases, *The Goon Show* was a huge leap. There had been other imaginative radio comedy before, but nothing as complete and sustained as the Goons. Plundering the BBC effects resources and music libraries, as well as having two brilliant comedy voices in Sellers and Milligan, *The Goon Show* created a world that was recognisably opposed to the petty bureaucracy of government, the BBC, and indeed much of the existing state of the planet.

Milligan said in 1995: “Peter Sellers and I saw ourselves as comic Bolsheviks ... We wanted to destroy all that had come before and to create something new.” There is some hyperbole in this, but the leap of imagination was certainly enormous. Here were villains selling fire insurance on the English Channel, prison exchanges that involved sailing Dartmoor prison out into the Atlantic, plans to blow up guerrillas with exploding pianos, and a wave of terror created by a batter-pudding hurler.

Eccles (Milligan) was bumblingly stupid in the face of adversity, while Grytpype-Thynne (Sellers) was exactly the sort of penniless aristocratic con-man who epitomised the last days of the Raj. At the time *The Goon Show* had a staggeringly new logic. Looked at in the light of Milligan's war memoirs, it seems almost documentary-like in its examination of the decline of the old social mores and pretensions in the postwar era: ("That's a nice tie Eccles." "Yer, it's a Cambridge tie." "I didn't know you'd been to Cambridge. What did you do there?" "I bought a tie").

Milligan was to be diagnosed as suffering from manic depression. The stress of producing the high standard of 26 shows a year for nine years took its toll on him. His method of working was very intensive. A few other writers assisted him, but he wrote most of the script and took responsibility for the end product. He suffered repeated breakdowns, and was hospitalised several times. Milligan himself saw the intensity of his commitment as having contributed to the success of the show: "I'd had a terrible nervous breakdown—two, three, four, five nervous breakdowns, one after the other. *The Goon Show* did it. That's why they were so good." Monty Python's Michael Palin has commented, "It was more important to him to work that way, and thus preserve his individuality and independence, than to compromise and become a paler version of Spike Milligan."

He was to spend the rest of his life coping with bouts of profound depression. He had also acquired a reputation for being "difficult", which was to dog him for the rest of his life. He had to solicit work. Bernard Miles, an actor-manager who had appeared on *The Goon Show*, took him into the theatre. Perhaps the most Milliganesque of his theatrical performances was in an adaptation of Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov*. Departing quickly from the text, and indeed the plot, Milligan effectively reworked the show so drastically that it was retitled *Son of Oblomov* for its highly successful tour. At the same time, and exemplifying his combination of humour and despair, he co-wrote a comedy set after the third world war, *The Bed-Sitting Room*, which later became a film of the same name.

Spike initially resisted a move to television, arguing that it did not give him the same freedom as radio. When he did make the move, with the various *Q* series, he was to prove just as inventive, just as determined to stretch the boundaries of the form, as he had been on radio. The quality may have been more variable, as was inevitable with a show of sketches rather than one hanging from even the most tenuous of narrative threads, but he was still producing work that was funnier and more extreme than anybody else. John Cleese has spoken of seeing *Q4* and realising that Spike had already gone further than Monty Python had been planning.

With *Q* Spike continued to challenge the accepted comedic. His sketches often had no finish or punch-line, ending with the cast heading towards the camera intoning, "What are we going to do now?" or simply merging into another completely unrelated skit. He never lost the sense of anarchic spontaneity that characterised his work. The refusal to compromise continued throughout his career (no mean feat in itself) and led him into repeated conflicts with the media authorities. He harboured a justifiable grudge against the BBC for never repeating the *Q* series, although they continue to make money out of the highly lucrative *Goon Show* reissues.

Spike started producing his highly successful war memoirs in 1972. The best of them (*Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall*, and *Rommel? Gunner Who?*) capture brilliantly his bitter laughter at the meaninglessness of the war, and also the absolute cruelty and horror of the suffering he saw. He produced books—memoirs, children's

books, poetry, and novels—with the same manic intensity he brought to his performance.

It is this, I think, which is the key to his popularity. He never let up in his pursuit of the absurd. When he was no longer being commissioned to make his own programmes, he became a staple of the talk show circuit. Whereas other comics sometimes ended up there through the frittering away of their talent (Peter Cook), Spike remained true to his own vision. He remained unpredictable.

Some comics have spoken of Milligan's enjoyment of his own comedy, but this is not quite the case. What made him laugh in the anecdotes he told, in the verbal barrages he constructed, was not a smug pleasure at his own cleverness. It was, rather, his continuing bafflement at the absurdity of the world. Later in life Groucho Marx stopped doing puns, which he came to think of as an unsophisticated form of wit. Spike, on the other hand, delighted in what he called the "minefield" of the English language.

It was this which drove him into the wonderful silliness of his children's verse (*On the Ning Nang Nong* was recently voted Britain's favourite comic poem), but also kept him tilting headlong at more serious targets almost in the manner of Flann O'Brien. *Puckoon*, his best novel, begins with the madness of drawing the border for the partition of Ireland. It was his sensitivity that drove him to compassion, and also to his splendidly irrational rage. It was not in any way politically articulated, hence the wild range of causes both progressive and reactionary—his support for green issues, for example, included advocacy of compulsory birth control in the undeveloped countries—he championed with great passion. His campaigns were almost always conducted in a way that would only occur to him. Protesting against cruelty to geese in the production of *paté de foie gras*, he attempted to chain the delicatessen buyer of Harrods down and force-feed him spaghetti.

When Spike described himself as a clown, he was technically accurate but there is a deeper significance to his work. He was a clown because he saw no other way of representing the foolishness of the world as he saw it. His clowning was humane and compassionate precisely because of the inhumanity and unreasonableness he was railing against. It did not change in intensity because he did not believe that the world had fundamentally changed. When Harry Secombe, for example, had become a presenter of religious programmes, Spike was making a guest appearance in *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. Even though Prince Charles, an enthusiastic fan of the Goons, adopted Spike, Spike nevertheless proclaimed his republican sympathies openly and described Charles, with some affection, as a "groveling little bastard".

Spike Milligan was only feted on his own terms. It is this single-minded pursuit of his own path that marks him out as a major artist who will be so sorely missed.



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