

# Los Angeles Times

MUSIC

Neil Innes, Monty Python collaborator and Beatles parodist, dies at 75



Neil Innes in “The Seventh Python” documentary. The performer and humorist died on Dec. 29 at age 75. (Frozen Pictures)

By RANDY LEWIS | STAFF WRITER DEC. 30, 2019 | 4 PM

English musician and humorist [Neil Innes](#) worked closely with two of the biggest cultural juggernauts his nation ever produced — the Beatles and Monty Python’s Flying Circus comedy troupe — yet never became a household name himself, a goal he often espoused in interviews.



“I’ve been very close to people who have had all this terrible fame and renown — it’s really not for me,” Innes, who died on Dec. 29 at age 75, told *The Times* in 2003. “I’d rather be able to talk to people, my neighbors, or be able to be in a shop and nobody thinks I’m a freak. If that means I only do tiny things here and there, then that’s fine. At least it’s working the way I like it to work.”

Innes died of natural causes at his home in recent years near Toulouse, France, according to a statement released by his family. “We have lost a beautiful, kind, gentle soul whose music and songs touched the heart of everyone and whose intellect and search for truth inspired us all,” the statement said. “He died of natural causes quickly without warning and ... without pain.”

His approach worked for more than a half-century, when he first gained some measure of celebrity in England as a member of the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band, whose humor-laden music often skewered the loftier aspirations of the rapidly expanding ‘60s rock music scene.

“The Beatles used to come to gigs,” Innes told *The Times* in 2003. “A lot of bands that were in the god strata used to be dead jealous of the Bonzos ‘cause we could muck about, and they couldn’t. Eric Clapton said, ‘I wish I could do what you were doing.’ ... ‘Cause it’s too much for anybody to take all this idolatry.”

A decade later Innes took more jabs at such idolatry, helping create one of the savviest musical parodies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Beatles send-up project called the Rutles, which affectionately lampooned the Fab Four with its faux retelling of the history of a band whose legacy “would last a lunchtime.”



<https://youtu.be/iVFRgoQe86U>

Innes also was dubbed “the seventh Python” for his close association with the comedy troupe, for which he wrote songs and appeared in films including “Monty Python & the Holy Grail” (he wrote the song “Brave Sir Robin” and appeared as the minstrel who sang it) and “Monty Python’s Life of Brian.”

“Utterly dismayed to hear about Neil Innes. Right out of the blue,” Python founding member John Cleese tweeted on Monday. “A very sweet man, much too nice for his own good. Lovely writer and performer. When he worked with Python on our stage show, I listened every night to ‘How sweet to be an Idiot’ on the Tannoy [loudspeakers]. Very sad.”



**John Cleese** 

@JohnCleese

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A very sweet man, much too nice for his  
own good

Lovely writer and performer. When he  
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an Idiot" on the tannoy

Very sad.....

 7,543 7:09 AM - Dec 30, 2019 

 1,293 people are talking about this >

Others who combined comparable passions for pop music and humor reacted quickly as well.

“I wanted Neil Innes to live forever,” actor-musician-comedian Michael McKean, aka David St. Hubbins of the mock rock group Spinal Tap, posted to his Twitter account. “A wise, funny and beautiful man.”

His Spinal Tap bandmate, humorist-writer-filmmaker Harry Shearer, tweeted “RIP the quite brilliant Neil Innes.”

**Michael McKean** 

@MJMcKean

I wanted Neil Innes to live forever. A wise,  
funny and beautiful man. RIP.

 1,906 9:17 AM - Dec 30, 2019 

 177 people are talking about this >



Little-known among music fans in general, Innes was revered by musicians, especially those in England regularly exposed to his songs with the Bonzos and in the late '60s on a children's TV series "Do Not Adjust Your Set" that was the launchpad for future Python members Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin and which counted their soon-to-be troupe members John Cleese and Graham Chapman among its fans.

Innes may be most widely recognized for the songs he crafted for the Rutles, ingenious original songs that evoked the style and sound of the Beatles without directly imitating them.

The idea was born after Monty Python's Flying Circus TV series ended its run in England, and Idle launched a new show called Rutland Weekend Television, a parody of a low-budget British TV series that regularly included musical numbers provided by Innes.

"Quite frankly, the only reason BBC2 went for it was because it was going to be cheap," Innes told the Chicago Sun-Times in 2017. "My job was to come up with songs and cheap ways of filming them. I said, 'Why don't we do something like 'A Hard Day's Night'? Black-and-white film, speed it up, very simple. Four guys in wigs and tight trousers running around in a field.' He [Idle] said, 'Great. I've got this idea about a documentary filmmaker who's so dull the camera runs away from him.' That's how it started."



<https://youtu.be/jYFefppqEtE>

Although the fictional group was introduced to English audiences first, the project hopped the Atlantic in 1976 when Idle was booked as a guest on a new late-night American television show: “Saturday Night Live.” Innes appeared in character as Ron Nasty, the quartet’s acerbic doppelganger for John Lennon, and sang the song “Cheese and Onions” (“I have always thought in the back of my mind / Cheese and onions”), all of which motivated “SNL” producer Lorne Michaels to start the ball rolling on a U.S. special spotlighting the Rutles.

That show, “All You Need is Cash,” finished dead last in the ratings when it aired in 1978 but became a cult classic and created a template for mock music documentary that actor-director Rob Reiner would pick up and run with six years later for his “mockumentary” “This Is Spinal Tap.”

The companion album, featuring 14 Innes-composed songs featured in the show such as “I Must Be in Love,” “Hold My Hand” and “Ouch!,” reached No. 63 on Billboard’s 200 Albums chart in 1978.





[https://youtu.be/JPn\\_QAaL4VM](https://youtu.be/JPn_QAaL4VM)

The Rutles resurfaced with a second album, “Archaeology,” released in the mid-‘90s in tandem with the Beatles “Anthology” documentary TV series. Idle took another stab at the concept a decade later in a sequel film — minus any involvement of Innes or the other Rutle actor-musicians — “Rutles 2: Can’t Buy Me Lunch,” which went straight to DVD when it was released in 2005.



<https://youtu.be/KB58fXxmK2s>

A rift between Innes and Idle over the latter-year iterations of the Rutles sometimes surfaced in public but seemed to have been resolved in recent years, as Idle wrote glowingly of his admiration for Innes in his recent memoir “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.”

The book’s title references the climactic song from “Life of Brian,” a production number sung — and whistled — by characters who were being crucified. “I have to say I am the man who wrote the whistling for ‘Always Look on the Bright Side,’” Innes told *The Times* in 2008.

Neil James Innes was born Dec. 9, 1944, in Danbury, Essex, England, and spent part of his youth in West Germany, where his father was stationed with the British Army of the Rhine. Upon returning to England, he took piano lessons from age 7 to 14 and taught himself how to play guitar. He attended Thorpe Grammar School and the Norwich School of Art, then Goldsmiths College in London, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in fine arts in 1966.

That was a big year for Innes: the same year he graduated he joined the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band (originally called the Bonzo Dog Dada Band after the Dadaist art movement) and married Yvonne Catherine Hilton.

The Bonzos had little commercial success, their biggest hit coming in 1968 with the single “I’m an Urban Spaceman,” produced by Bonzos fan Paul McCartney under the pseudonym Apollo C. Vermouth. The band also appeared in the Beatles experimental 1967 film “Magical Mystery Tour.”





<https://youtu.be/xVr2hbE6aW0>

After shortening the name to the Bonzo Dog Band, the group released an album in 1972, “Let’s Make Up and Be Friendly” that spent two weeks on Billboard’s U.S. album sales chart, peaking at No. 199. In the early ‘70s he joined another band, Grimms, which released several albums that had little impact commercially.

Innes, however, soon became an adjunct member of the Pythons, one of only two people with writing credits for the troupe’s TV show— the other being “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy” author Douglas Adams.

In recent years he had toured regularly, sometimes as a solo act and sometimes with Beatles tribute bands supporting his performances of the Rutles song catalog.

“He’s a great showman,” Python member Michael Palin told the Times in 2003. “As soon as he starts, people just love him. It’s a magic ingredient.”



**BEDLAM:** I don't think anyone has ever tried this insanity before, says Idle, right, with Rutles songwriter Neil Innes, during a Montalban Theatre rehearsal. (Anne Cusack / Los Angeles Times)

Innes said he preferred intimate spaces to some of the massive venues he played when he appeared with the Pythons in their heyday, among them the Hollywood Bowl.

“Who needs all the angst of big promotions and record companies and all that crap?” he asked in 2003. “I just don’t want it anymore. I don’t want to play to more than 500 people - - 500 people’s too many.”

One facet of his music many people missed, Innes’ longtime friend and “Archaeology” album producer Martin Lewis noted, was the straightforward side.





**Neil Innes with longtime friend, producer Martin Lewis in 2008 (Elise Thompson)**

“One of the ironies of Neil’s genius for comedic writing was that his equal talent as a writer of poignant and really emotional songs was often overlooked,” Lewis said Monday. “After George [Harrison] died he wrote a song called ‘Friends at the End,’ about getting a phone call about a friend passing. I’ve often used it when a friend died as a comfort. It’s just exquisite — a wonderful example of his gift.”



<https://youtu.be/hyAzgZN1oGI>

In addition to his wife, Innes is survived by their three sons, Miles, Luke and Barney, and three grandchildren, Max, Issy and Zac.