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## **Ying Tong – A Walk With the Goons February 13 - March 16, 2008**

### **“Shouting Gibberish in the Face of Authority:” Spike Milligan and *The Goon Show***

On May 28, 1951, the BBC broadcast a program destined to change the shape of English-language comedy. It was called *Crazy People* (a title chosen by “the Beeb’s” honchos to echo a popular music hall group, “The Crazy Gang”). After a year, the title was changed to one the BBC had been afraid of but which the performers had been using for themselves for several years: *The Goon Show*. A year later, Wallace Greenslade became the program’s announcer and chief foil. Between then and 1960, the pretensions of the British class system (and human vanity in general) were skewed on a weekly basis by the Goons – straight man Harry Secombe, maestro of comic voices Peter Sellers, and Head Goon Spike Milligan, who wrote the scripts. *Ying Tong – A Walk With The Goons* is Roy Smiles’ homage to Milligan and *The Goon Show*.

Performed before a live audience and broadcast on Sundays, each *Goon Show* was (more or less) a single story, “usually a melodramatic and overblown version of a great drama or a contemporary documentary,” as their producer later said, featuring the bumbling “hero” Neddie Seagoon (Secombe) and a cast of characters voiced by Milligan and Sellers, supported by Milligan’s bizarre and innovative use of sound effects, such as “Fred the Oyster,” created “out of three or four donkey farts played slowly, then speedily and edited.” As Peter Sellers’ biographer Roger Lewis wrote, “the Rep Company of characters – Eccles, Crun,

Minnie Bannister, and Bloodnok among them – spend their time climbing Everest from the inside, searching for the piano Napoleon played at Waterloo, or racing across the desert sands on a fifty-ton Wurlitzer organ.”

Comedy groups, including Beyond the Fringe, Firesign Theatre, and, most famously, Monty Python, used the Goons as their model. John Cleese remembers listening to the program each week when it was repeated “with my ear up against the radio to try to catch the jokes you couldn’t hear the first time because of the laughter,” and said “Milligan is the Great God to us all.”

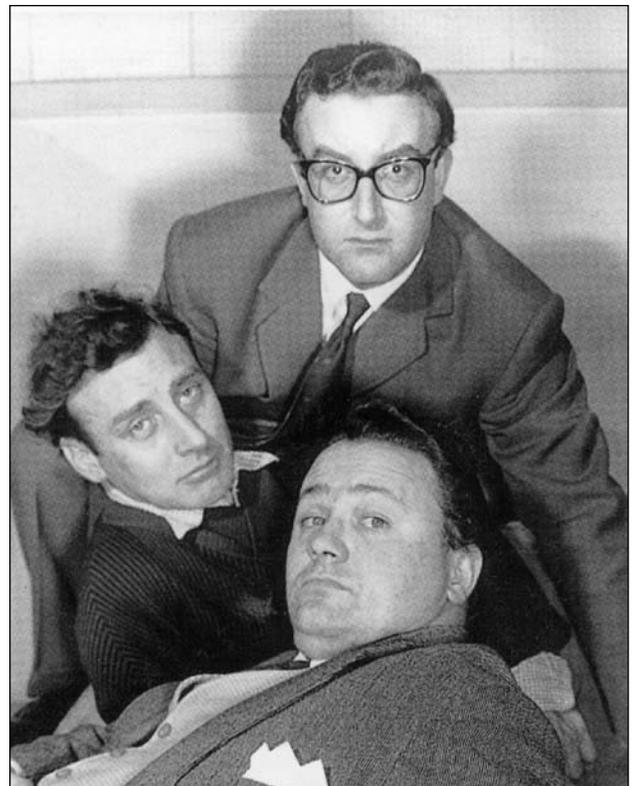
Beatle John Lennon wrote that *The Goon Show* “taught me that the WORLD was insane” and made movies with director Richard Lester (who had gotten his start directing a Milligan/Sellers TV vehicle in the 1950s). In the film *Shrek*, the title ogre points out the constellation “Bloodnok the Flatulent,” a tribute to one of Sellers’ characters, a cowardly martinet with an over-fondness for curry.

### **The Goons’ England**

The Goons were very much a product of their times, straddling a period when the British Empire was revealed as obsolescent and England was transitioning from postwar austerity to the eve of the Mod Sixties. Although the catchphrase in the frontlines and on the home front had been, “Things are going to be different

after the war,” the reality in 1951 was very different. As Humphrey Carpenter writes in his history of the British satire movement, *A Great Silly Grin*:

The country had been virtually bankrupted by the cost of the war, and the late 1940s proved to be an era of austerity, with stricter rationing of food and other commodities than had proved necessary during the war itself. By 1950 the country’s economic position had improved enormously, and better times could be prophesied with confidence; but the electorate



**The Goons**

had been given no proof of this, and... the outbreak of the Korean War a few months later necessitated further cuts and economies. In the autumn of 1951 there was another General Election, and the Conservatives came back to power.

As Carpenter sums up, "British society had reverted to its pre-war hierarchical norm."

The comedy of the Goons was a head-on attack on this sort of society. Spike Milligan said that they took their name from characters in Popeye cartoons and described his humor as starting "with one man shouting gibberish in the face of authority and proving by fabricated insanity, that nothing could be as mad as what passes for ordinary living." All three Goons were outsiders to middle-class society. Milligan's father was an Irishman who served in the Army for a quarter century in India, where Milligan was born and lived until his teens. Secombe was a Welshman from a small mining town, and Sellers was half-Jewish and brought up in a family of second-tier music hall performers.

### Goons at War

Every major participant in *The Goon Show* (with the exception of announcer

Greenslade) had also served in World War II, and with the additional exception of Sellers, they had all seen heavy combat. The war's impact was felt throughout the shows. Roger Lewis describes *The Goon Show* as "a surreal response to the violence and behavior of war. Explosions, machine gun fire, mortar blasts, bombs and shells: the noises of combat punctuate each episode." Secombe and Milligan met during the war: after a brief, very "goonish" first encounter described in the play, they got to know each other when they were assigned to the Central Pool of Artists in Italy after both had been declared unfit for further combat duty as a result of what would now be called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

### The Goons Go On

All the Goons went on to other triumphs following the end of the program. Both Milligan and Secombe were knighted. Milligan created the *Q* series, a TV show that influenced the visual look of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, wrote several popular books of children's verse and a five-volume set of memoirs, and appeared in numerous films. Secombe had two hit songs, and played the role of Beadle Bumble in *Oliver!* (in both the original stage cast and the movie). Peter

Sellers achieved the greatest international success, with a handful of roles – most notably his characters in *Dr. Strangelove*, Inspector Clouseau, and his final role, Chance the gardener in *Being There*, ranking with the greatest comic performances in film history. The Goons reunited in 1972 for "The Last Goon Show of All" (highlights of which can be seen on YouTube, along with excerpts of the original programs). Although the BBC hierarchy had tried to kill the program numerous times during its run, it has broadcast the recorded programs in repeats for nearly half a century now.

How does one explain the enduring popularity of such a program? Spike Milligan may have expressed it best in one of his attempts to define a "Goon." "How would I describe a Goon? Mankind is a Goon – anyone who can get a perfectly quiet planet into such a bloody state in 2,000 years must indeed be a Goon."



Bluebottle

## "The Price Those Who Make the World Laugh Pay:" Introducing Roy Smiles

Walter Bilderback: *This is your first U.S. production. Tell us a little about yourself and your career: Where do you come from? How long have you been writing plays?*

Roy Smiles: I'm from West London. From what the English call 'a working class background.' Which means we had french fries a lot and peed in the North Sea on holidays. My father was a postman. But, unlike many of his contemporaries, he wasn't psychotic and lacked the urge to shoot people from atop water towers using a high power rifle. I was lucky enough to get a grant to go to college where I studied history, gaining a degree of such stunning pointlessness I was immediately unemployed/unemployable the moment I left. Panicking, I lost all self-respect and became a stand-up comic for six years – where I ripped off the late, great Lenny Bruce merrily and without shame. Realizing

I was never going to make a career of it I turned to acting and found myself in a rather dull West End musical for two long years. To stave off boredom/throwing myself under a bus, I killed the days by writing plays: the first of which, *Schmucks*, about Lenny Bruce meeting Groucho Marx, was staged in 1992. I have had 14 plays staged since and over thirty productions in countries as far and wide as Sweden, Israel, New Zealand, South Africa and Australia.

WB: *What drew you to the topic of Spike Milligan and The Goon Show for a play?*

RS: I grew up with an older brother who introduced me to Woody Allen, Sergeant Bilko, Monty Python and The Goons. They were repeated on the radio all through my childhood on BBC Radio, the BBC never being bashful at repeating old shows ad infinitum. Milligan was one of my heroes from an early age. My relatives used to do all the voices at weddings (and funerals) so it was just a thing I grew up with. Having written about Lenny Bruce/Groucho Marx it seemed a natural progression to write

about an English comic and Milligan seemed the obvious choice. I never met him: the producer of the English stage show knew Milligan well and we were arranging a meeting when unfortunately he passed away.

WB: *You mentioned in an email to Jiri Zizka that the research for the play started driving you nuts. Can you explain a little?*

RS: Yes, my journey to the center of Milligan's brain came a little too close to the journey to the center of my own brain. The inability to sustain relationships due to an obsessive need to write/create comedy from darkness hit rather too close to home. Milligan being a national institution here in England I was also assailed with people telling me how and what to write: "Milligan would never have said 'hello' on a Thursday," and so on. Writing 24 drafts of the play for 3 different directors and taking three and a half years to get the play staged from its first option also sent me slightly barmy...Nurse? The screens!

WB: *Harry Secombe seems to be the fairy godfather of Ying Tong. Like Spike Milligan, he's*

*almost unknown in the States, although he was knighted in England. Can you talk a little about him?*

RS: Harry certainly is the hero of the play. He was the ego-less saint who managed to calm the rampant and competitive egos of the other two so that they could work together. And he could always joke them out of their angry moods by blowing a raspberry or telling a service joke. He was certainly a calming influence on Milligan whose jealousy of Sellers knew no bounds. He was known as the nicest/kindest/sanest guy in showbiz; terribly proud of his Welshness. No one who worked with him seemed to have a bad word against him. Sellers and Milligan always sang his praises on chat-shows. Though, like Sellers, he always believed *The Goons* to be the best thing he ever did. He met Milligan in the army and they were both invalidated out and ended up in the same army show touring

bases. For all his limitations as a vocalist – he couldn't do any voices but his own – his faultless and speedy (and articulate) delivery as straight man/narrator made him a vital cog in the *Goons'* success.

WB: *In addition to Schmucks and Ying Tong you've written other plays about comedians: Good Evening, about the comedian Peter Cook, and the revue Beyond the Fringe, and one about the comedian Tony Hancock... What keeps drawing you back to these subjects?*

RS: I've always seen life comedically I suppose, and having been a stand-up comic it seems my destiny to keep coming back to this subject. I am obsessed, I expect, with the getting of laughter and the price those who make the world laugh pay. Not all comedians are tragic figures of course and would make dull subjects for plays. Michael

Palin, a comic genius, might just be the happiest man alive for example. And for my *Sermon On The Mount*: I know there is a considerable feeling in British theatre that comedy is somehow a lower art form. It'll never be that for me. If you can lift people out of their lives, make them laugh until they cry or even laugh some more, in the violent and hate-filled world we live in that's a pretty good art form as far as I'm concerned. So Viva Lenny Bruce, Bill Hicks, Richard Pryor, the Marx Brothers, Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers – all the poor, fucked-up madmen and geniuses who in spite of all the personal cost inspired our laughter and made our lives richer by their being.

**Read the complete interview with Roy Smiles, learn more about the Goons, and listen to audio clips at [www.wilmatheater.org](http://www.wilmatheater.org).**

## Michael Palin on The Goons

*[Monty Python co-founder Michael Palin spoke at The Free Library this fall, promoting the publication of his Diaries. He took a few minutes from his schedule to speak with Wilma Dramaturg Walter Bilderback about the impact of The Goon Show on his life and career.]*

For me, the *Goons* were to comedy what Elvis was to music. It was something I discovered in the 1950s in my little suburban home in Sheffield, and it was my own thing – when my father came into the room, it was kind of embarrassing. It was usually in the middle of Henry Crun talking like this [he raises his voice in a quavering falsetto]. There would be moments when the *Goons* would have someone simply walking upstairs with their keys to open the door for about two minutes. And I could see it exasperated my parents completely and mystified them. "What's wrong with him now? Is he ill?" So I was a big fan. I don't think I caught it in the first series, but pretty soon after, in 1954, 55. I remember racing home from school, about two miles, and arriving breathless and panting in order to get the first moments of *The Goon Show*. It actually took my breath away – I'd never heard anything like it, so inventively silly and so daring with the form of radio. John Cleese was also a fan, and Terry Jones as well. I loved the free form of it, I loved the characters, I loved the way they balanced off of one another. Wallace



Secombe, Milligan and friend at Jimmy Grafton's

Greenslade, the announcer, was so perfect, and Harry Secombe. Peter Sellers became one of my favorite comic actors because he was so great at characters, and – I was also slightly frightened of Spike [Milligan], because he was a genius, but he was mad. After *Python*, I did the series *Ripping Yarns* with Terry Jones, and one day I got a card from Spike saying, "Love *Ripping Yarns*! More of them!" and it just made my day.

*[Thanks to Andy Kahan of The Free Library for arranging the meeting with Michael Palin.]*

## Who's Who Among The Goons

### Bluebottle (played by Peter Sellers):

A young, lustful boy scout with a squeaky voice who normally gets blown up in each episode. He is often a companion of Eccles and is willing to help anyone for sweets, although he frequently fails. He often reads his stage directions out loud and is always greeted with a deliberate round of applause from the audience. The character is based on a real scout master with a squeaky voice.

Catchphrases include "Enter Bluebottle, waits for applause. Not a sausage.", "You rotten swine, you deaded me.", and "I don't like this game".



### Eccles (played by Spike Milligan):

The Famous Eccles, complete and utter idiot. An amiable, well-meaning man with no wits or understanding. When people tell him to shut up, he frequently joins in

and often goes on telling himself to shut up long after everyone else has given up. Eccles often finds himself helping Ned Seagoon alongside Bluebottle. His idiotic logic is considered to epitomize Goon humor.

Catchphrases include "Hello der", "Fine, fine, fine", "I'm the famous Eccles" and "Shut up Eccles".



### Henry Crun (played by Peter Sellers):

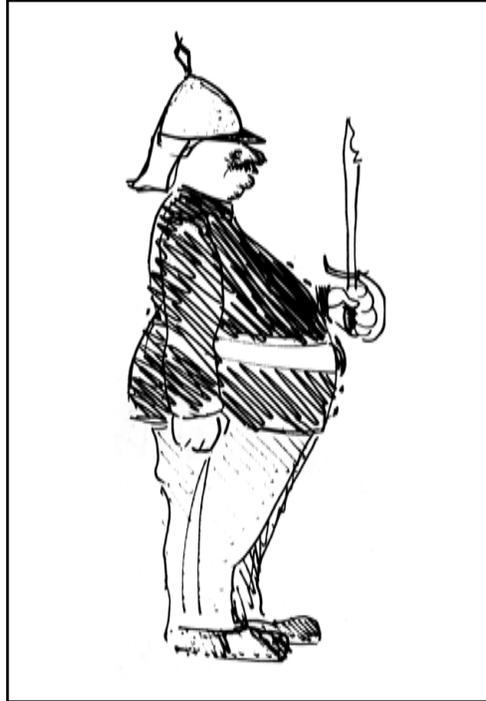
An elderly idiot inventor and partner of Minnie Bannister. Rather decrepit and forgetful, he often struggles to keep pace with the action around him.

Catchphrases include "You can't get the wood you know."

### Major Dennis Bloodnok (played by Peter Sellers):

A corrupt military cad, pervert and idiot. Seagoon's former commanding officer who suffers terrible flatulence. Bloodnok is a total coward who will betray anyone or anything for money.

Catchphrases include "Nurse! The screens!" and "It was hell in there."



### Minnie Bannister (played by Spike Milligan):

A feeble old spinster with an interesting past. Minnie enjoys modern-type music and is as flirtatious as a girl a third her age.

Catchphrases include "Henrrryyyy" and "We'll all be murdered in our beds!"

### Ned Seagoon (played by Harry Secombe):

An honest but gullible idiot, around whom the plot revolves. The patriotic Neddie is always willing to lay down his life for his country. He is often unemployed, some episodes beginning with him accepting a new job which leads him into trouble. Many jokes are made about his short yet rounded appearance.

Catchphrases include "Needle nardle noo" and "What,what,what,what,what."

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