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The US love affair with Python



Python's celebrity fans: Steve Martin, Robin Williams, Jim Carrey

By BBC News Online Entertainment Correspondent Tom Brook

Not so long ago I was covering a big Hollywood awards ceremony when I suddenly saw an animated Jim Carrey bounding towards me exclaiming, "The Python Network!"



He had seen the BBC logo on my microphone and was desperate to express his affection for the TV network that had brought him Monty Python's Flying Circus.

When it comes to comedy, Monty Python still remains the Holy Grail for a whole generation of American entertainers

Last week before I could even begin to ask Robin Williams about the series' 30th anniversary he started quoting verbatim from the famous Python sketch that dealt with the Spanish Inquisition. Williams says Monty Python is a "great combination of intellect and silly".



Robin Williams: Big Python fan

In the US Monty Python's Flying Circus was first broadcast on public television in the mid-1970s, but the series still enjoys a massive cult following among

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celebrities and legions of American fans.

The programme can currently be seen on American cable TV, where it remains popular with the baby boom generation.

The A&E Network, which released a set of Monty Python episodes on home video and DVD only last week, reports that retailers remain "super-enthusiastic" about the programme.

David Walmsley, Director of Home Video at A&E, says the Monty Python audience is made up of "people who actually watched the series in the 1970s when they were kids", but that it now includes a new generation of younger viewers who weren't even born when Monty Python was first broadcast.

Among them is 23-year-old die-hard fan Analda Anglin from Alabama who performed the legendary Lumberjack Song at her high school graduation ceremony instead of giving a speech.



Michael Palin performs the Lumberjack Song

She says she was first introduced to Python when her teacher rented a video of Monty Python and The Holy Grail.

Right away she was hooked and Anglin now operates a Python website, has all the Flying Circus episodes on tape, and has read virtually every Monty Python book she can lay her hands on.

She says the series is appealing to Americans like herself because there isn't much else like it and it is "very irreverent and it's also very intelligent".

Although American fans may not get all the British cultural references in the series, David Walmsley says it has endured because the "writing is so strong and the jokes are so well crafted".

Another reason for its American success according to Toby Miller, Professor of Cultural Studies at New York University, is that the series cleverly tapped into the prevailing zeitgeist "in the post-Watergate era of cynicism".

Although Monty Python is one of Britain's most successful TV exports to America, its appeal remains strongest in a zealous and hugely influential sub-culture rather than in the mainstream.



Terry Jones and Graham Chapman watch for flying sheep

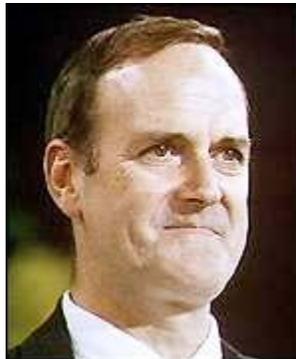
True American lumberjacks have probably never watched Monty Python but may well have heard of the Lumberjack Song - although they remain unaware of its ancestry.

However, Robin Williams says in his circles the humour is so well known. "You can start any (Monty Python) routine and people finish it for you. Everyone knows it like shorthand."

Monty Python has definitely left its mark on American comedy. David Walmsley believes that America's top TV comedy show, Saturday Night Live, and other similar programmes "owe a debt to Monty Python for setting the stage for silly sketch comedy".

Professor Toby Miller says Monty Python broke new ground in that it provided the entertainment industry with a clear demonstration that there could be "a wacky somewhat intellectual aspect to comedy".

Although John Cleese is the best known member of the Python gang in America, the cult is also being kept alive by other members.



John Cleese: America's favourite Python

Terry Gilliam has gained respect as a film director, while Eric Idle who has just landed a role in the popular TV sitcom Suddenly Susan starring opposite Brooke Shields.

On its 30th anniversary Monty Python is still thriving in the US.

It remains one of the most celebrated British TV comedies ever to have crossed the Atlantic, and for all

of us who work for the BBC in the US it has brought unexpected gains.

As a representative of "The Python Network" I certainly enjoy a level of professional respect - and ease of access to Hollywood's inner sanctums - that stems directly from America's deep ongoing love affair with all things Pythonesque.

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