

Absolutely Fabulous - Joanna Lumley and Jennifer Saunders

By Trevor Leighton

Cibachrome print, 1996

Absolutely Fabulous began as a short sketch in a *French and Saunders* television show. Saunders then developed the idea, and the first series ran in 1992. It starred Jennifer Saunders (born 1958) as Edina (left), head of a PR agency, and Joanna Lumley (born 1946) as her friend Patsy (right), editor of a fashion magazine. Joanna Lumley moved from playing classic English roses to drunken, louche Patsy, reinventing her self as an exceptional comedic actress to the surprise and delight of viewers. The series was immediately a great success, winning two BAFTA awards. A further four series and two specials followed.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Arthur Askey

By Anthony Buckley

Modern bromide print from original negative, 1939

Comic actor and radio personality, Askey (1900-82) was one of the first entertainers to use radio as a medium for comedy. Together with Richard Murdoch he created the innovative, highly successful variety show *Band Waggon* (1938-39) that had a great influence on radio comedy in the 1940s. This was the first comedy radio show designed specifically for radio and the first regular weekly comedy and music show. It was also the first to emphasise catchphrases, which included 'Hello playmates' and 'You silly little man'.

The success of *Band Waggon* led Askey on to a career in musicals, film and eventually television where he is best remembered for a show based on his catchphrase *Before Your Very Eyes* (1953).

National Portrait Gallery, London

Richard Murdoch

By Bob Collins

Bromide fibre print, 1957

Richard Murdoch (1907-90), nicknamed 'Stinker' Murdoch, became a household name through the popular radio series *Band Waggon* with Arthur Askey. Their humour was a forerunner of much radio comedy to come in the 1940s and later, including ITMA and Hancock's Half Hour, and was a strong influence on many developing comedy scriptwriters.

Together with Kenneth Horne, Richard Murdoch created and starred in the long-running, much-loved radio comedy series *Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh* (1944-54). Murdoch's other well known radio programmes included *The Men from the Ministry* (1961-77).

National Portrait Gallery, London

Rowan Atkinson

By Alistair Morrison

Toned lith print, 1988

Newcastle-born Rowan Atkinson (born 1955) wrote and performed in comedy revues as a student. His career quickly took off, and the award-winning, influential television comedy series *Not the Nine O'Clock News* (1980) made him famous. This was the first major programme to showcase the talents of 'alternative' comedians.

Starring roles as Blackadder and Mr Bean on television soon followed. These iconic characters from opposite ends of the comedy spectrum - the fast-thinking, fast-talking Blackadder and the almost silent, bumbling Mr Bean - reveal the range of Atkinson's talent. Films include *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Bean - The Ultimate Disaster Movie* (1997), *Johnny English* (2003), *Love Actually* (2003) and *Mr Bean's Holiday* (2007). He is currently starring as Fagan in the stage musical *Oliver!* in London's West End.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Beyond the Fringe – Jonathan Miller, Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and Alan Bennett

By Lewis Morley

Bromide fibre print, 1961

Beyond the Fringe was a ground-breaking comedy sketch show that brought new life to British comedy, and led the satire boom of the 1960s. It brought together and show-cased the extraordinarily creative talents of Jonathan Miller (born 1934), Peter Cook (1937-95), Dudley Moore (1935-2002) and Alan Bennett (born 1934). *Beyond the Fringe* began as a live show that was a huge success at the Edinburgh Festival, in London and in New York. It was broadcast on BBC television in 1964.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Jo Brand

By Trevor Leighton

Bromide print, 1993

Jo Brand (born 1957) was a pioneer of the alternative comedy scene. Female comedians were unusual in what was, and still is, a heavily male-dominated field. Having worked as a psychiatric nurse, and with strongly feminist views, she started performing in 1987. By 1993 she had her own series on Channel 4, *Jo Brand through the Cakehole*, that she co-wrote. She has had several solo television series, appeared in others, and has presented shows including *Jo Brand's Commercial Breakdown*. She is the only regular female panellist on QI. Jo Brand continues to give live stand-up performances as well as appearing on television and radio.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Rob Brydon

By Trevor Leighton

Bromide fibre print, 22 December 2008

Rob Brydon (born 1965) is well known as an actor and comedian on television and radio, famous for his roles in *Marion and Geoff*, *Rob Brydon's Annually Retentive* and *Gavin and Stacey*. Brydon won the Best Television Newcomer at the British Comedy Awards in 2000, and Best Television Comedy Actor in 2001. He has recently embarked on his first tour as a stand-up comedian on stage.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Marti Caine

By Trevor Leighton

Bromide fibre print, 22 August 1989

Sheffield-born Marti Caine (1944-1995) became famous as a dancer, comedian and actor. She had worked for many years as a stand-up comedian and cabaret singer before winning the *New Faces* television competition in 1975. This brought her to national attention, and before long she was starring in her own series, *The Marti Caine Show*, on BBC2. Caine returned to *New Faces*, this time as host, in the 1986, 1987 and 1988 series. She also recorded five albums, and continued performing in cabaret, pantomime, end-of-pier shows and a national tour of the musical *Funny Girl*. She was diagnosed with cancer in 1988 and became an active campaigner for cancer charities.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Russell Brand

By Karl J Kaul

Digital C-type colour print, 2006

Brand (born 1975) is a controversial comedian, well known for pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable, and beyond. People either love his humour, or hate it, and it tends to be younger people who 'get' it. Brand's television work includes *Big Brother's Big Mouth*, *Russell Brand's Got Issues* and *Russell Brand's Ponderland*. He has also developed his career in radio, and as a film actor.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Charlie Chaplin

By Homer Peyton

Bromide print, about 1929

Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977) began his career in London's music halls. He moved to the US in 1912, and become one of the most creative and influential figures in silent film. Celebrity came with his portrayal of the little tramp, with toothbrush moustache, bowler hat and cane.

Chaplin returned to Europe in 1952, forced to leave America because of his left-wing political views. In 1972 he was awarded an Oscar for 'the incalculable effect he has had in making motion pictures the art form of this century'.

An outstanding clown and mime, Chaplin has been a lasting source of inspiration for performers in these fields. He was also a talented actor, musician and film director.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Julian Clary

By Trevor Leighton
Bromide print, 1998

Well known for his deliberately high-camp style, Julian Clary (born 1959) began his career as a comedian in the alternative comedy scene of the early 1980s. He has starred or taken part in many television shows, including *Sticky Moments with Julian Clary* (1989), *All Rise for Julian Clary* (1996), *The All Star Talent Show* (2006), *Have I Got News for You* and *QI*. Live performances include touring his own show and playing the MC in an award-winning stage production of *Cabaret*. He is a regular panellist in Radio 4's *Just a Minute* and has written several books.

National Portrait Gallery, London

John Cleese

By Annie Leibovitz
C-type colour print 1990

John Cleese (born 1939) is internationally admired as an outstanding writer and performer of comedy. He rose to fame as a member of the *Monty Python's Flying Circus* team (1969-74) and consolidated his status as a leader of British television comedy with *Fawlty Towers* (1975, 1978). His film appearances have included *Clockwise* (1986) and *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988).

Annie Leibovitz is internationally known for her portraits of celebrities. This extraordinary, surreal photograph of Cleese hanging upside down from a branch like a giant fruit-bat was taken in London. The idea started with a suggestion by Cleese, which was then developed by Leibovitz. A 60-foot crane was used to haul him into position, and the harness he wore nearly suffocated him.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Billy Connolly

By John Swannell

Iris print, 1984

Billy Connolly (born 1942), the Scottish comedian, worked in the Clyde shipyards before making his name as a performer. He is also a successful musician, television presenter, actor and writer.

It was his appearance on *The Parkinson Show* in 1975 that made Connolly a star and led to his first UK tour. He later said that the programme changed his entire life. Best known as a stand-up comedian, some people find Connolly's language and subject-matter offensive – something he shares with other alternative comedians. In addition to his film and television work, Connolly still tours, and his shows are quickly sold out.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Tommy Cooper

By Patrick Lichfield

Giclee colour print, July 1980

Tommy Cooper (1921-84) was a hugely popular and much-loved comedian, famous for his trademark hat (a red Egyptian 'fez'), for his act as the magician whose tricks always went wrong and for his catchphrase 'just like that'. His minimalist humour was visual as well as verbal, and universal in its appeal.

After performing in the army and on the club circuit, Cooper rose to fame in the 1950s. By 1957, he was starring at major venues in the US as well as the UK, and he soon had his own television series. His highly successful career continued until his death, mid-performance in 1982 – his collapse during the live London Weekend Television show *Live From Her Majesty's* was witnessed by millions of viewers.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Peter Cook and Dudley Moore

By Lewis Morley

Bromide fibre print, 1968

Peter Cook (1937-95) and Dudley Moore (1935-2002) formed an extraordinarily creative partnership. Soon after working together on *Beyond the Fringe*, they became well known on television through the groundbreaking comedy sketch show *Not Only...But Also* (1965-70).

This photograph shows them in character as Pete and Dud, the Dagenham Philosophers, whose absurd conversations showed amazing comic inventiveness. It refers to one of their best-known sketches, in which they talk about a visit to an art gallery.

They both had separate careers as well, with Moore moving to the US and starring in several films. Cook founded The Establishment Club, the first satirical nightclub in London, and was a founding member of the *Private Eye* team. Films they made together included *The Wrong Box* (1966) and *Bedazzled* (1967).

National Portrait Gallery, London

Ken Dodd

By Michael Ward

Bromide print, 1977

The long-running BBC television series *The Ken Dodd Show*, broadcast from a theatre stage, established Dodd (born 1927) as one of the leading comedians of his day. He made his professional debut in 1954 and, at the age of 81, continues to perform his theatre show *Happiness*. Famous for the length of his live shows, he entered the *Guinness Book of Records* for the world's longest ever joke-telling session (1,500 jokes in three and a half hours). With Diddy Men, tickle-stick (feather duster) and the catchphrase 'How tickled I am', Dodd has entertained family audiences for over 50 years. He has also had great success as a singer, with 19 singles in the UK charts.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Joe Cornish and Adam Buxton

By Honey Salvadori
Lambda print, 1996

Cornish (born 1968) and Buxton (born 1969) began their creative partnership at school, aged 13, and first appeared together on television in *Takeover TV* (1995). This led to four series of *The Adam and Joe Show* on Channel Four. Writing, directing and presenting the show from their bedroom in Brixton, Adam and Joe's regular features *Toymovies*, *BaaadDad* and *Vinyl Justice* brought them a devoted cult student audience. Now working on solo projects, they still collaborate on their popular weekly BBC6 radio show.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Les Dawson

By Eric Watson
R.type colour print, 1980s

A popular Lancashire comedian, Dawson (1931-93) began his career in working men's clubs. His big break, bringing national fame, came with his appearance on the talent show *Opportunity Knocks* in 1967. He soon became a regular on television, hosting his own shows and presenting the quiz show *Blankety Blank* (1984-89). Dawson was famous for his deadpan style, his mother-in-law jokes, his creation of the characters Cissie and Ada (with Roy Barraclough) and his deliberately bad piano-playing.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Jack Dee

By Trevor Leighton

Bromide fibre print, 13 September 1995

Three years after his first public performance at London's Comedy Store in 1986, Dee (born 1962) won the British Comedy Award for best stage newcomer. He was nominated for the Perrier Award in 1991. By 1995 he had his own series on ITV. He often appears on television, starring in his own shows or as a guest or presenter on others. In 2001, he was the winner of the first *Celebrity Big Brother* programme. He is also a successful writer and actor.

National Portrait Gallery, London

The Crazy Gang - Bud Flanagan, Jimmy Nervo, Teddy Knox, Charlie Naughton and Jimmy Gold

By Cecil Beaton

Bromide print, 17 October 1952

Members of the Crazy Gang were already well established performers before they came together for the first time at the London Palladium in 1931. They were a combination of three double acts – Flanagan & Allen, Nervo & Knox and Naughton & Gold. They combined verbal gymnastics, farce, physical comedy and slapstick. Flanagan & Allen's songs were particularly loved, with *Underneath the Arches* being one of their biggest hits.

The Crazy Gang made several films, the best known being the wartime *Gasbags* (1940). They took part in a number of Royal Command Performances, and also performed privately for the royal family. Television appearances included their own series in 1956.

Chesney Allen retired from the stage in 1945, so he does not appear in this photograph.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Jenny Éclair

By Barry Marsden

C-type colour print, early-mid 1990s

Born Jenny Hargreaves this comedian, novelist and actress (born 1960) began performing as a punk poet in the 1980s. She came to prominence with hit shows at the Edinburgh Festival including *Mummy's Little Boy* (1992) and *Prozac and Tantrums* (1995) for which she became the first female winner of the Perrier award. She is widely known for her performances on television in *Packet of Three* (1991), *The Comedy Network* (1997) and *Jenny Éclair's Private Function* (1999). She regularly appears on television and radio, including *Grumpy Old Women*, and is now touring with a new stand-up show.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Ben Elton

By Barry Marsden

C-type colour print, early-mid 1990s

Ben Elton (born 1959) rose to fame in the early 1980s. A leading figure in the alternative comedy movement, he became one of the UK's best-selling live acts. *The Ben Elton Show* (1993) was a hugely popular TV showcase for his stand-up routines. His early television appearances were famed for his sparkling suits and anti-establishment jokes, 'A little bit of politics ...' became a catchphrase.

In addition to his success as a performer on television and radio, Elton is also an award-winning comedy writer, co-writing *The Young Ones* and three series of *Blackadder*. He has also written plays, novels and musicals with Andrew Lloyd Webber. He created the musical shows *We Will Rock You* (with music by Queen) and *Tonight's the Night* (based on Rod Stewart songs).

National Portrait Gallery, London

Harry Enfield

By Trevor Leighton
Bromide print, 1999

Harry Enfield (born 1961) began his comedy career by providing voices for the satirical puppet show *Spitting Image*. He then shot to fame with characters created with Paul Whitehouse for Channel 4's *Saturday Live*. These included Loadsamoney, whose constant boasting about his wealth captured the spirit of excess in late 1980s Thatcherite Britain. Enfield was influenced by comedians from the 1970s, including Morecambe and Wise, rather than alternative comedy. Well-known characters from his sketch shows included Kevin the Teenager, who helped millions of long suffering parents realise they were not alone in their struggles. In 2008, Enfield reunited with Whitehouse in a new television sketch series, *Harry and Paul*. Enfield has also appeared in the comedy-drama *Skins*.

National Portrait Gallery, London

The Establishment cast - John Fortune, Eleanor Bron, John Bird and Jeremy Geidt

By Lewis Morley
Toned bromide print, 1960s

The Establishment Club was the first satirical nightclub in London, co-founded and run by Peter Cook. Open from 1961 to 1964, it had a big impact on British comedy, particularly political satire. The four performers shown here were the Club's original cast, key figures in comedy at the time. It was at the Establishment Club that Barry Humphries first performed as Edna Everage, and Frankie Howerd revived his career.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Lee Evans

By Trevor Leighton
Bromide print, 1999

Evans (born 1964) is well known for his slapstick, energetic physical humour delivered with his trademark sweatiness. He performed for a number of years as a comedian in working men's clubs and on the alternative circuit before his big break came with success at the Edinburgh Festival in 1988. He went on to win the Perrier Award in 1993, and his tours as a stand-up comedian are always sold out.

Lee Evans's work in television includes the BBC1 sitcom *So What Now?* He has also acted in several films including *There's Something About Mary* and on stage in *The Producers*, for which he was nominated for an Olivier Award in 2005.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Sid Field

By Anthony Buckley
Modern bromide print from original negative, 1949

Even as a child, Sid Field (1904-50) loved entertaining people, sometimes with Charlie Chaplin impersonations. The revival of variety theatre in the late 1910s and early 1920s allowed the young Field to become a master of sketch comedy and dialect. He worked as a comedian in regional music halls for nearly 30 years before becoming an overnight star following a role in London's West End. He appeared at the Royal Variety Performances in 1945 and 1946 – 'the only comedian who literally had his audience falling off their seats with laughter.'

Field inspired a generation of comedians; including Tony Hancock, Eric Sykes, Eric Morecambe, Frankie Howerd and Tommy Cooper.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders

By Trevor Leighton

Bromide print, 1989

French (born 1957) and Saunders (born 1958) worked together in comedy clubs before breaking into television as part of the *Comic Strip* team, part of the new alternative comedy scene. Their own BBC television series, *French and Saunders*, was launched in 1987. With six series, it lasted for over 20 years, and French and Saunders became Britain's best-loved female comedy duo. Their individual careers include *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Murder Most Horrid* (Dawn French) and *Absolutely Fabulous* (Jennifer Saunders). In November 2008 they completed *French and Saunders: Still Alive! – The Farewell Tour*.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Gregor Fisher

By Chris Clunn

Bromide fibre print, 17 March 1992

An appearance in a Hamlet cigar advertisement set Fisher (born 1953) on the road to becoming a television comedian, but it was his portrayal of string-vest wearing, hard drinking, Rab C Nesbit that really established him as a star of comedy. The series lasted for ten years, and came back for a Christmas Special in 2008.

The Scottish comedian is also an actor, and has performed in many television sitcoms and dramas, including *Oliver Twist*, and films including *Love Actually* (2003). He also starred in *Empty*, a new comedy series launched in February 2008.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Stephen Fry

By Camille Silvy

Albumen carte-de-visite sized print

Stephen Fry (born 1957) is an actor, comedian, television presenter, director and writer. His career in comedy began at Cambridge University, where he wrote and performed with Hugh Laurie. This began a long-lasting, very creative partnership. Fry's television appearances include the *Blackadder* series (1987-9), *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* (1989-90, 1995) and *Jeeves and Wooster* (1990-2), also with Hugh Laurie.

Fry played the title roles in the films *Peter's Friends* (1992) and *Wilde* (1997) and is the author of several novels, including *The Hippopotamus* (1994), and an autobiography, *Moab is my Washpot* (1999). Currently, amongst many television and radio appearances, he is host of the popular panel quiz show *QI*. He has also made serious television programmes, including his two part exploration of what it means to be bi-polar, for the BBC.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Rik Mayall

By Alistair Morrison

Toned bromide print, February 1991

Rick Mayall (born 1958) was one of the first stars of the new wave of alternative comedy in the 1980s. Early appearances with Adrian Edmondson at The Comedy Store included extreme slapstick comedy stunts, such as setting fire to each other. Mayall broke into television in *A Kick up the Eighties*, soon followed by *The Young Ones* (1982-85), which he co-wrote with Ben Elton and Lise Mayer, with additional material by Alexei Sayle. Other television appearances included *Blackadder*, *The New Statesman*, *Filthy*, *Rich and Catflap* and *Bottom*. Film roles have included *Drop Dead Fred* (1991).

National Portrait Gallery, London

Ricky Gervais

By Spiros Politis

C-type colour print, December 2001

The Reading-born writer and performer Ricky Gervais (born 1961) studied philosophy at London University and then became Entertainments Manager for the Students' Union. He launched his radio career in 1997 on London's Xfm. His first television appearance was on the *11 O'Clock Show* (1998). In 2000 he went on to host his own comedy chat show, *Meet Ricky Gervais*. He rose to fame in 2001 with his character David Brent in the award-winning comedy *The Office*, which he co-wrote. He also wrote and starred in the television comedy *Extras* (2005). Gervais has toured in solo stand-up shows, and has recently finished directing a film in Hollywood.

National Portrait Gallery, London

The Goons - Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan and Sir Harry Secombe

By Bryan Wharton

Bromide print, 6 May 1968

Like many post-war entertainers, The Goons began performing whilst serving in the armed forces during the Second World War. They went on to create the ground-breaking radio series, *The Goon Show* (1951-60). Spike Milligan (1918-2002) was the main creator and writer, and other writers included Eric Sykes (born 1923). The shows mixed ludicrous plots, surreal humour, puns, catchphrases and bizarre sound effects. Characters included Moriarty and Eccles, and the show invented the word 'lurgi', in a sketch about an imaginary illness.

The Goons marked the beginning of a new comedy style, and were a major influence on Monty Python. Hugely popular, *The Goon Show* is still broadcast around the world.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Sid James and Tony Hancock

By Bob Collins

bromide print, 1959

Tony Hancock (1924-68) was the creator and star of *Hancock's Half Hour*, which began on radio in 1954, transferred to television two years later and ran until 1961. It featured the lugubrious Anthony Hancock, whose elaborate schemes to improve his lot in life were doomed to failure and to cynical commentary by his room-mate Sid. This photograph was taken on the set of *Hancock's Half Hour* in 1959. Hancock took his own life while working on a series for Australian television.

Sid James (1913-76) had a long and successful career, notably in the *Carry On* films, contrasting with Hancock's gradual eclipse. Sid James died mid-performance at the Sunderland Empire in 1976.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Lenny Henry

By Koo Stark

Bromide print, 1985

Lenny Henry (born 1958) was part of the early 1980s alternative comedy scene. Talent-spotted on the *New Faces* television show when he was 16, his career took off with the television series *Three of a Kind*. From 1984 he had his own series on BBC and in the same year he married comedian Dawn French. *The Lenny Henry Show* returned to the screen in 2004. Other television shows include *Chef* (1993-96).

In addition to frequent appearances on television, radio and in film, Lenny Henry has toured as a stand-up, and was one of the co-founders of Comic Relief in 1985. He has recently taken on a new challenge - the title role in a stage production of Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Benny Hill

By Bob Collins

Modern bromide print from original negative, 1958

Inspired by the stars of music hall, Benny Hill (1924-92) became a household name through *The Benny Hill Show*, which first appeared on television in 1955 and came to end in 1989. Famed for his 'seaside postcard' sauciness, Hill achieved international stardom. Film roles included *The Italian Job* and *Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang*.

In the 1980s, however, Benny Hill was much criticised by feminists and the new wave of alternative comedians for what they considered to be the sexist attitude to women in his humour. Although recordings of his TV shows are still enjoyed around the world, Hill never recovered popularity in the UK.

Benny Hill is shown here as one of his famous characters, Ernie, The Fastest Milkman in the West, subject of his number one hit single.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Kenneth Horne

By Lewis Morley

Bromide fibre print, 1960s

Kenneth Horne (1907-69) was a well-known and much-loved comedian and broadcaster. He served in the RAF during the Second World War, first broadcasting on radio in 1940 in the series *Ack, Ack, Beer, Beer*. In 1943, he created with Richard Murdoch the immensely popular series *Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh*, which ran until 1950. He was the Ken of *Beyond our Ken* and the anchorman for one of the most consistently funny radio programmes of the time, *Round the Horne* (from 1965) which had characters and catchphrases from contributors including Kenneth Williams. He also chaired the television quiz show *Celebrity Challenge* and the radio programme *Twenty Questions*. He has been described as 'a master of the scandalous double-meaning delivered with shining innocence'.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Frankie Howerd

By Vincent Gillett
Bromide print, 1980s

Camp and often lugubrious, Howerd (1917-92) began his career entertaining troops in World War II. The radio show *Variety Bandbox* from 1946 made him a household name. In the early 1960s, performing at Peter Cook's The Establishment Club helped to revive his career from a temporary decline. During the 1950s and 1960s Howerd appeared in several films, including *The Runaway Bus*, *The Lady Killers*, *Carry on Doctor* and *The Great St Trinian's Train Robbery*. Television successes included *The Frankie Howerd Show* (1953-56), *That was the Week That Was* (1962) and the immensely popular, innuendo-filled *Up Pompeii*, made between 1969 and 1991.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Hugh Laurie

By Trevor Leighton
Bromide fibre print, 23 April 1990

Hugh Laurie (born 1959) began his career in comedy at Cambridge University, where he performed with Stephen Fry (born 1957) in the award-winning 1981 Footlights revue. This was the start of a highly successful acting and writing partnership, which included the sketch show, *Alfresco*, *The Young Ones*, *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*, *Jeeves and Wooster*, *Blackadder the Third* and *Blackadder Goes Forth*.

In the mid-1990s Laurie moved into films, music and writing, and away from the 'upper-class twit' roles for which he had become famous. Since 2004 he has starred as a serious actor in the American medical drama *House*, winning two Golden Globe Awards.

National Portrait Gallery, London

The League of Gentlemen - Mark Gatiss, Reece Shearsmith, Steve Pemberton and Jeremy Dyson

By Trevor Leighton
Bromide print, 1999

'Are you Local....?' Graduating from radio to television, *The League of Gentlemen*, set in the village of Royston Vasey, is a disturbingly dark and genuinely original comedy with a host of macabre characters, played by Gatiss (born 1966), Shearsmith (born 1969) and Pemberton (born 1967). The award-winning television series (1999-2002) was written by them and Dyson (born 1966). A combination of sketch show and sit-com, it has been described as one of the most powerful comic formats ever written. It paved the way for the creation of *Little Britain*.

The stars are shown here as themselves, rather than as the grotesque characters that they created for the show.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Bernard Manning

By Trevor Ray Hart
C-type colour print, September 1997

Manchester-born, Bernard Manning (1930-2007) was a controversial, old-style stand-up comedian, who became well known through his appearances on Granada TV's stand-up show *The Comedians*. However, his style of comedy lost popularity, and he came to be considered too offensive for television. He was particularly disliked for his use of racist jokes. Manning continued to perform on the northern club circuit, and had a strong fan-base in his own club in Manchester.

This informal photograph shows him on the Blackpool promenade.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Paul Merton

By Trevor Leighton
Bromide print, 1994

Paul Merton (born 1957) is a writer and performer who combines a razor wit with an outstanding talent for improvisation, recently showcased in the highly successful touring show *Paul Merton's Impro Chums*. He became widely known in through *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, *Have I Got News For You*, *Paul Merton - The Series* (1991-3) and *Room 101* (1999-2007). A superb sketch-writer, he created sketches for *Sticky Moments with Julian Clary*. On radio, he is a long-standing, hard-to-beat panellist on *Just a Minute*.

Paul Merton has a great love of the comedy stars of silent film and has written a book about them. His show featuring their work is currently touring the UK.

This portrait shows Merton with the dolphin that featured in his sketch show.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Max Miller

By Russell Westwood
Cream-toned bromide print, 1930s

Max Miller (1895-1963) was one of the UK's best-known comedians of the 1930s-1950s. He was a master of the art of stand-up, playing to large audiences in variety theatres. Called 'The Cheeky Chappie', he was mischievous, brash and known for his use of double-meanings. Like many comedians, Miller liked to push the boundaries of what was acceptable. This led to more than one ban from BBC radio, the longest being for five years following an inappropriate joke. In those days radio was usually broadcast live, and Miller was thought to be just too much of a risk.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Spike Milligan

By Angus McBean

Bromide print, 1960

Spike Milligan (1918-2002) has a unique place as a comedy genius who rose to fame as one of *The Goons* in the 1950s. He went on to reveal his bizarre, surreal sense of humour in television programmes including the *Q* series and *The World of Beachcomber*. He was Prince Charles's favourite comedian. Milligan's publications included comic writing, verse, children's stories and *Depression and How to Survive It* (1993), a guide drawing from his own experience. In 1994 he was presented with a British Comedy Lifetime Achievement Award.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Monty Python - John Cleese, Terry Gillian, Graham Chapman, Eric Idle, Michael Palin and Terry Jones

By David Appleby

R-type colour print, 1982

Monty Python's Flying Circus hit television screens in 1969, and grew to have a world-wide following. From the 'dead parrot' sketch to films including the *Life of Brian*, this team of performer-writers redefined comedy for the second half of the twentieth century. They remain the key inspiration for many comedians, and an entire generation of fans can quote their most famous routines by heart. The Python team is shown here on set in Scotland, filming a scene for Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* (1983), the last of their films.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise

By Arnold Newman
Bromide print, 1978

Britain's best loved comedy double-act, Morecambe (1926-84) and Wise (1925-99) first appeared together at the Liverpool Empire in 1941. They became national celebrities through their ITV television series, first broadcast in 1961. In 1968 they moved to the BBC where *The Morecambe and Wise Show* (1968-77) attracted huge audiences. Their Christmas Special came to be regarded as essential viewing and in 1977 it attracted 28 million viewers, still a record for a comedy programme. Returning to ITV in 1978, their show continued until 1983 (the year before Morecambe's death), but never quite achieved the superb quality of their BBC shows.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Paul O'Grady as Lily Savage

By Trevor Leighton
Bromide print, 1999

Lily Savage became one of television's most popular stars, part of the long tradition of cross-dressing in comedy. The loud-mouthed, Birkenhead drag queen began presenting the long-running *Blankety-Blank* series in 1998, the year in which she was also awarded her own television series, *The Lily Savage Show*. Lily Savage is the creation of Paul O'Grady (born 1955), comedian and presenter on television and radio. He does, however, no longer perform as Savage.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Simon Pegg

By Jillian Edelstein

C-type colour print, 5 February 2007

Simon Pegg (born 1970) is an award-winning comedian, actor, writer, film producer and director. He began his career as a stand-up comedian, before moving into television and film.

Appearances in television comedy series were followed by *Spaced* (1999), the brilliant and original sitcom that made his name, co-written with Jessica Hynes. He went on to create and star in *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*. A third film in this series is in the pipeline. Of his many film projects, the latest to be released is *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People*.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Vic Reeves

By Trevor Leighton

Bromide print, 1999

Vic Reeves (born 1959) was brought up in Darlington. He started performing as a stand-up comedian in the early 1980s on the London alternative comedy scene. *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* hit television screens in 1990, and soon attracted cult status as a truly original show presenting a host of bizarre sketches and catch phrases. With his comedy partner Bob Mortimer, Vic Reeves went on to create other unique programmes such as *Shooting Stars*. They also starred in the remake of *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)*. Reeves has also developed his solo career, regularly appearing on radio and television and has released hit records including covers of *Dizzy* and *I'm A Believer*.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Bob Mortimer

By Trevor Leighton
Bromide print, 1999

Middlesbrough-born comedian and actor Bob Mortimer (born 1959) is best known for his comedy partnership with Vic Reeves. They met in 1986 when Reeves was performing in his own stage show in London. This was the start of an extraordinarily creative friendship that led to *Vic Reeves' Big Night Out* and the comedy panel game *Shooting Stars*. They have continued to work together, including the radio sketch show *Vic Reeves' House Arrest* and both have also followed solo careers.

National Portrait Gallery, London

George Robey

By Henry (H) Walter Barnett
Vintage bromide print, 1910-1920

George Robey (1869–1954) was an outstanding music hall comedian, known as the 'Prime Minister of Mirth'. His style of delivering double meanings and catchphrases such as 'Desist', or 'Kindly temper your enthusiasm with a modicum of reserve', influenced later comedians such as Max Miller and Frankie Howerd. With the decline of music hall, Robey moved into revue and performed in musicals. For more than 40 years he also excelled as a pantomime dame. He appeared in a number of films and was a talented serious actor. He was knighted in 1954.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Alexei Sayle

By Alistair Morrison

C-type colour print, 1984

Alexei Sayle (born 1952) was at the forefront of the alternative comedy scene of the early 1980s, with his tight-suited stand-up act. He was the first compere of London's Comedy Store when it opened in 1979, the venue where a new wave of comedians honed their talents. Sayle has appeared in many television series, with *The Young Ones* first bringing him widespread fame, and *Alexei Sayle's Stuff* being his first starring show. He has also appeared in films, had hit singles and is a successful writer.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Peter Sellers

By Bill Brandt

Bromide print on card mount, 1963

Peter Sellers (1925-1980) started out as a stand-up comedian, before moving to radio. This led to him quickly joining the ground-breaking comedy series *The Goon Show*, originally called *The Crazy Show*.

Sellers's versatility in film roles was shown by successes such as *The Ladykillers* (1955), Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962), *Dr Strangelove* (1963) and *Being There* (1979). Sellers is perhaps best remembered for his brilliant creation of the character Inspector Clouseau in the *Pink Panther* films. He is shown here during the filming of *A Shot in the Dark* (1964), the second of the Clouseau films.

National Portrait Gallery, London

John Sessions

By Steve Speller

Cibachrome print, 27 October 1988

A brilliantly gifted mimic and improviser, John Sessions (born 1953) is also an accomplished actor. His career as an alternative comedian began in the early 1980s. Well known for his surreal monologues, he became famous through the television programme *Whose Line Is It Anyway*. He has had several of his own television shows and is a regular on quiz shows including *Have I Got News For You* and *QI*. Sessions co-wrote and starred in the television series *Stella Street* and, for cinema, *Stella Street: 'The Movie'*.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Frank Skinner and David Baddiel

By Trevor Leighton

Bromide print, 1998

This very successful comedy partnership created several popular television series including the live improvisation show *Baddiel and Skinner Unplanned* and *Fantasy Football League*. They have also toured their live stand-up show. Baddiel (born 1964) and Skinner (born 1957) are most famous, perhaps, for their chart-busting football song *Three Lions*, created for Euro 96, co-written and co-sung with The Lightning Seeds. Skinner and Baddiel have both also had successful solo careers.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Gina Yashere

By Sal Idriss

C-type colour print, 2002

Gina Yashere (born 1974) made her stage debut in Edinburgh in 1995, and soon afterwards joined the BBC2 panel show *Blouse and Skirt*. Her many television appearances include the BBC2 *I Love ...* series, *Jo Brand's Hot Potatoes*, *The Lenny Henry Show*, *Last Comic Standing*, and *Up Late with ... Gina Yashere*. Yashere regularly appears on radio and in films.

Yashere's awards include Best Female Comedian in the Black Entertainment Comedy Awards in 2005, 2006 and 2007. She is a popular live stand-up performer in the US as well as in the UK, becoming the first British comedian to appear in HBO's influential black stand-up show *Def Comedy Jam* in 2008.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Meera Syal

By Jason Bell

C-type colour print, 1 March 2002

Meera Syal (born 1961) became widely known through co-writing and appearing in the television series *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No 42*. She frequently appears on television, including taking part in entertainment shows including *Room 101*, *QI* and *Have I Got News For You*.

Syal has also appeared in the films *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), *Beautiful Thing* (1996) and the television series *Band of Gold* (1995). Screenplays include *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993). Her semi-autobiographical first novel *Anita and Me* (1996) was filmed in 2002, and she adapted her second novel, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999) for a three-part television series. She co-wrote *Bombay Dreams* (2002), the Andrew Lloyd Webber Bollywood-themed musical, that surely inspired this tongue-in-cheek portrayal of her as a Bollywood heroine.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Eric Sykes

By Godfrey Argent

Bromide print on card mount, 1970

One of this country's best-loved comedians, Eric Sykes (born 1923) is also an actor, writer, director and performer. Like many comedians of his generation he started performing in the RAF during the Second World War. In the 1940s and 1950s he became a very successful comedy writer, contributing to the radio shows *Variety Bandbox*, *Educating Archie* and *The Goon Show*.

Despite developing hearing problems in his early thirties, and becoming almost totally deaf, Sykes went on to become a household name in the 1960s and 1970s in his own long-running television series, *Sykes*, with Hattie Jacques. He directed himself in two wordless comedies, *The Plank* (1967) and *Rhubarb* (1970).

Stage performances include *Hatful of Sykes*, and film appearances include *Monte Carlo or Bust!*, *Theatre of Blood* and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Victoria Wood

By Trevor Leighton

Bromide print, 1994

Victoria Wood (born 1953) won the television talent show *New Faces* in 1974 and her great skill as a writer for stage and television was quickly recognised. Television appearances, and her comedy partnership with Julie Walters, led in 1982 to the *Wood and Walters* sketch show and *Victoria Wood – As Seen On TV*, which established her as a much-loved performer. Victoria Wood has also been highly successful as a stand-up comedian on stage.

In 2005 Wood and Walters were awarded a BAFTA for Outstanding Contribution to British Comedy, for 25 years of a great comedy partnership.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Max Wall

By Prudence Cuming

Bromide fibre print, 21 December 1982

Max Wall (1908-90), comedian and actor, began his career as a music hall entertainer in the 1920s, billed as *Max Wall With His Independent Legs*. In the 1940s and 1950s he also became a great success on radio and television, including his own television series *The Max Wall Show* (1956). He had by then perfected his character Professor Wallofski, a scruffy, spidery, clown-like figure in black tights, short jacket, large boots and straggling wig. Professor Wallofski was the inspiration for John Cleese's *Monty Python* sketch 'The Ministry of Silly Walks'.

Wall is shown here with the artist Maggi Hambling (born 1945), who had seen him performing in his highly successful stage show, *Aspects of Max Wall*, in 1981. She painted a series of portraits of him, dressed as he was in the show.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Julie Walters

By Alistair Morrison

C-type colour print, 1985

Often described as a 'national treasure', Walters (born 1950) is an award-winning actor and comedian. She became friends with Victoria Wood when they were students, which led to their highly successful comedy partnership. Their television show *Wood and Walters* (1982) was followed by one of Walters's best known comedy roles, Mrs Overall, in the spoof soap *Acorn Antiques*, in *Victoria Wood - As Seen on TV* (1985-86). She also played Victoria Wood's mother in the comedy series *Dinnerladies* (1998-2000). In 2005, Walters again played Mrs Overall, in the stage production *Acorn Antiques - The Musical*.

Julie Walters became an international star for *Educating Rita*, and other films include *Billy Elliot*, *Mamma Mia!* and the *Harry Potter* films.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Elsie and Doris Waters

By Francis Goodman

Modern Bromide Print from a 2¹/₄ inch square film negative, 1947

Elsie (1893-1990) and Doris Waters (1904-78) were sisters, famous for their cockney characters, Gert and Daisy, created in 1930 and hugely popular on stage and radio for many years. They wrote almost all their own comic songs and sketches, and boasted that they never broadcast the same act or song twice. During the Second World War they made films for the Ministry of Food as well as touring with the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA), which was set up in 1939 to boost morale by entertaining people engaged in the war effort.

Their radio series included *Gert and Daisy's Working Party* (1948), *Petticoat Lane* (1949) and *Floggit's* (1956).

National Portrait Gallery, London

Paul Whitehouse and Charlie Higson

By Trevor Leighton

Bromide print, 1997

Brilliant comedy partners Whitehouse and Higson (both born 1958) created the characters Stavros and Loadsamoney for Harry Enfield and wrote sketches for *Vic Reeves' Big Night Out*. They became comedy stars in their own right with the hit television sketch series *The Fast Show* (1994-2000), which included two of their most poignant characters, Ted and Ralph. They also wrote a new version of *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)* (2000) for Bob Mortimer and Vic Reeves. As actors, writers and producers, they have had highly successful careers individually as well as in partnership. Paul Whitehouse starred in the melancholy sitcom *Happiness* (2001 and 2003) and has worked extensively with Harry Enfield, most recently in the BBC sketch series, *Harry and Paul*.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Kenneth Williams

By Anthony Buckley

Modern bromide print from original negative, 1957

An internationally known but very British star, Kenneth Williams (1926-88) was well known for his high-camp style and mastery of 'double entendre' (double meaning). He began his career as a stage actor before performing on radio. He had an important part in *Hancock's Half Hour* (1954-59), where his comical voices brought him great popularity. Other hit radio shows included *Beyond Our Ken* (1958), *Round the Horne* (1965) and *Just a Minute* (1968-88). Starting with *Carry on Sergeant* (1958), Williams appeared in over twenty-two of the *Carry On* films, alongside actors such as Sid James, Hattie Jacques and Barbara Windsor. He also continued to be a popular guest on radio and in chat shows.

Kenneth Williams was portrayed by Michael Sheen in the moving BBC4 drama about his life, *Fantabulosa!* (2006).

National Portrait Gallery, London

Norman Wisdom

By Trevor Leighton

Bromide fibre print, 1992

After leaving the army in 1946, Norman Wisdom (born 1915) embarked on a career as an entertainer, appearing in variety shows across Britain. He is most famous for his extensive film career, in which he played the role of a willing but hopeless 'little man' who struggled valiantly in situations the audience could identify with. His 17 films, mostly made during the 1950s and 1960s, included *Trouble in Store*, *The Square Peg*, *The Bulldog Breed*, *A Stitch in Time* and *The Sandwich Man*. His television work included appearances in *The Last of the Summer Wine*, *Casualty* and on chat shows. He was knighted in 2000.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Alexei Sayle

By Alistair Morrison

C-type colour print, 1984

Alexei Sayle (born 1952) was at the forefront of the alternative comedy scene of the early 1980s, with his tight-suited stand-up act. He was the first compere of London's Comedy Store when it opened in 1979, the venue where a new wave of comedians honed their talents. 'Alternative' comedy was a reaction against mainstream comedy, which the new wave of comedians thought was dated, often sexist and racist, and not engaged with social and political issues.

Sayle has appeared in many television series, with *The Young Ones* first bringing him widespread fame, and *Alexei Sayle's Stuff* being his first starring show. He has also appeared in films, had hit singles and is a successful writer.

National Portrait Gallery, London