

A DANGEROUS AND RELENTLESS RANT IN E MINOR AT THE ARIZONA BAY

by Rush Evans

There's an obvious irony in the fact that these four CDs were released three years after the death of comic Bill Hicks, but it also indicates the power of word-of-mouth advertising. The Hicks craze has been spreading for years, through his extremely loyal fans as they indoctrinate friends into their exclusive club via bootleg tapes and the Internet. The insightful Hicks commentary often strikes a nerve in people; especially the disgruntled and dissatisfied ones who harbor a growing intolerance for modern hypocrisies and the need to find humor in them. Bill Hicks found humor in everything he saw-and he didn't usually like what he saw. He expected better from our culture. His favorite targets included organized religion, intellectuals, rednecks, politicians, government, rock stars, rock music, and especially the marketing and advertising business ("If anyone here is in marketing and advertising, kill yourself"). I suspect that Bill would've taken pleasure in the fact that word-of-mouth has been the source of his posthumous success. He tackled everything, not with one-liners or catchy gimmicks, but with thoughtful insight-very angry, thoughtful insight.

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Hicks recorded two albums in the late '80s and early '90s (Dangerous and Relentless), and from there, his years on the road doing stand-up earned him several HBO specials and numerous appearances on the David Letterman show. Letterman's show was offbeat enough to include a controversial comedian like Hicks, but not daring enough to let him perform the same routine he did in the clubs. In an appearance on "48 Hours," Hicks described the experience this way: "They tell you, 'Oh, we like you on our show because you're edgy, or you're point-of-view, but when you come on our show, could you not do those?' It's like they fit you for a dress and high heels and say, 'Now go out there, be you.' Well, this isn't me."

Bill was born "screaming in America," as he put it, in 1961. He grew up in Houston, Texas and began a career in stand-up at the age of sixteen and enjoyed relative success in the business throughout his twenties. Hicks was only thirty-two when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and he knew that the clock was ticking fast. With the help of his best friend and producer, Kevin Booth, he managed to record another two albums worth of material. With nothing to lose, he became even funnier and went after everything with a vengeance-skewering every social sacred cow imaginable. It's hard to say whether this material would've ever found its way into a video or audio outlet had he lived. Toward the end of his career, while he was getting dropped at the last minute from a Letterman show (because his material was deemed unfit), other so-called "politically incorrect" humorists began to get far more attention than the Texan had ever dreamed of getting. Howard Stern caught on nationally with his special brand of shock radio, Dennis Miller sharpened his topical tirades and Denis Leary did a lot of television with his angry rants (portions of which were almost verbatim from Hicks' repertoire). These humorists brought something new and good to the comedy table, but without the subtlety or thought provocation of Bill Hicks. In other words, Bill made you think a lot. His audience was forced to think about the unthinkable-taboo topics such as, the benefits of drugs ("...if you don't believe drugs have done good things for us, do me a favor, go home tonight, take all your albums, all your tapes, and all your CDs and burn 'em. Cause you know what, the musicians who made all that great music-that enhanced your lives throughout the years? Real f***ing high on drugs. Man, the Beatles were so high they let Ringo sing a couple

of tunes"). Rock 'n roll was a subject near and dear to his heart and comments on music, past and present, run throughout his recordings.

It's only a short Hicks leap into his soliloquy against today's corporate rock-with its commercial endorsements, little social disobedience, and, worst of all, government approval. The worst offenders that he singled out include Madonna, Billy Ray Cyrus, M.C. Hammer, and many others who've graduated from artist to "barker" for products ("...you do a commercial, you're off the artistic role call, forever. You're another corporate shill, you're another whore at the capitalistic gang-bang. If you do a commercial, there's a price on your head, everything you say is suspect"). In fact, this is the root of Hicks' overall message. His quasi-Libertarian zeal was inspired by corporate and governmental power over anything and everything. Hicks was offered (and, of course, declined) the opportunity to endorse a soda in England, where he'd been a huge star for years. He even envisioned how it might have been scripted: "You know, when I'm done ranting about the elite power that rules the planet under a totalitarian government, that uses the media in order to keep people stupid, my throat gets parched!"

He railed on the perpetrators responsible for what's wrong with our society, then he tended to align them with Satan and all things demonic. This gave a dark, demonic tone to his work (after a particularly hateful section on one of the discs, he made himself available for children's parties as Beelzebozo, the Clown from Hell); however, anything beyond a first listen would reveal that he was far from being of the Devil. In fact, he was quite the opposite.

His real message was one of love, tolerance, and beauty, and it sprinkled through everything he said. For instance, in a bit about a family getting high together, he managed to work in some of his metaphysical philosophy, as he describes a hallucinating father sharing wisdom with his son:

"It's like we're all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively. There is no such thing as death, son, it's only an illusion that we are all separate beings. In actuality, we are all one consciousness."

(Hicks had something of a history with drugs and alcohol himself, quitting both in the late '80s.)

Another favorite controversial subject was pornography, but like anything else, he quickly tied it into the media and government elite. "To me, pornography is spending all your money and not educating the people of America, and instead spending it on weapons, to me, that's pornography." He then describes the official description of pornography as defined by another faction of the grand conspiracy, the Supreme Court. "Any act that has no artistic merit and causes sexual thought.' Hmmm. Sounds like every commercial on television, doesn't it? You know, when I see those twins on that Doublemint commercial? I'm not thinking of gum."

He bravely went into the mostly uncharted comedic waters of religion. He dared to see God as something that was non-judgmental and non-religious, and when he got into this territory, he only got into deeper trouble. He regularly attacked the religious right and its intolerance; "Nice sentiment but do you think that when Jesus comes back, he's really gonna want to look at a cross? Isn't that a little like going up to Jackie Onassis wearing a rifle pendant? 'Just thinkin' of John, Jackie.'" It was comments like this that got him edited out of that Letterman show.

For every already controversial subject, Bill had an even more controversial opinion; subjects like gays in the military ("where did the military get all these morals all of a sudden? 'Hey is that a village of women and children? Get me the napalm. I don't want a bunch of gays around me when I'm killing children.'"), abortion ("[a fetus] is just a bunch of congregated cells. You're not human until you're in my phone book"), the death penalty ("Christians supporting

the death penalty, it seemed ironic to a lot of people who actually know the words of Christ"), and flag burning ("My daddy died in the Korean War for that flag.' Oh, yeah, my flag was made in Korea-what a coincidence. No one has ever died for a flag. A flag is a piece of cloth. They might have died for freedom, which includes the freedom to burn the flag").

His thoughts about Rush Limbaugh, Jesse Helms ("another fevered ego tainting our collective unconscious"), Barbara Bush, the Rodney King trial, and a number of other topics are unprintable, but nothing seemed to be unspeakable for Bill. Again, shocking as his material often was, it was never

without a point, and on an entirely different plane from those comics whose shock value is obligatory.

Everything Bill said was funny, but the subjects weren't always of the heavy, social commentary variety. A radio-friendly Hicks tune called "Chicks Dig Jerks" is included, as well as a hilarious Elvis impersonation, with Bill crooning "Blue Christmas" and obsessing on the importance of Elvis's terribly vital scarf-provider, Charlie Hodge, repeatedly introducing the man with the goofiest job in show business history.

Despite the topical nature of some of Bill's observations, they have a timeless quality and "big picture" outlook ensuring that they will ring true for some time, just as the thoughts of Lenny Bruce have.

It's impossible to recommend one of the four discs over another, except to point out their distinctions: the first two (having been issued already once before), contain the timeless material that was spread throughout his appearances on David Letterman, the Tonight Show, and an early HBO special. Arizona Bay is something of a concept recording, with Bill's own haunting instrumental rock providing an appropriately uneasy soundtrack behind and between his running commentaries, and underscoring his philosophy. It's a type of comedy set to music that Allan Sherman and Weird Al Yankovic never could have imagined. Arizona Bay (the name makes sense once one understands Bill's disdain for L.A.) also includes much of the material that appeared on his last HBO special, Revelations, which was taped in England where he had become a huge star. Rant In E Minor, like Arizona Bay, was recorded near the end of his life, after Bill knew of his sad fate. It's a particularly biting, universal look at our world. Indeed a classical masterpiece, as the title implies.

Bill didn't get to say everything he wanted in the forum he deserved, but with these four Rykodisc releases, it is literally from the grave that he can now speak more freely than ever. Along with Ryko, Kevin Booth is also keeping Bill's spirit alive his own way, with a Hicks mailing list. To get on it, just send a self addressed stamped envelope to Sacred Cow Productions, P.O. Box 26231, Austin, Texas, 78755.