

A DANGEROUS COMIC ON THE CUTTING EDGE JUST FOR LAUGHS, 1992

By Jonathan B. Fox

Just when some people were expressing doubts about whether the comedy club boom of the '80s could be sustained, Bill Hicks has emerged to show us the future.

Hicks is the kind of performer who was really needed to bring renewed attention and appreciation to stand-up. We took a look at him last year and were impressed but since then he has gotten better and better. Like a Duracell battery, he keeps going and going, seeming at this point unstoppable.

Here is a guy that pours it on by exposing uncomfortable truths and offering penetrating insights while not forgetting his main job is to make audiences laugh. He's willing to stay out on the road 270 days a year showing audiences how much better the medium works in a live performance situation.

All kidding aside, he may be about to become the new comedy messiah. Hicks demonstrates that stand-up is a unique artform in its own right. Most impressively, he succeeds while going completely against the grain of conventional wisdom.

Take, for instance, one of his milder topics, Silence of the Lambs:

"I'm probably one of the only people in the world who thought that it was the comedy hit of the '90s. I howled. Didn't y'all think that was funny? That guy cuttin' up women and wearin' 'em as skin? Wearin' 'em as coats?"

"When I read in the papers the ads, stuff like: 'It's so scary you'll hold your seat until your knuckles are white. You won't be able to sleep at night after seeing this film,' I said, 'that's the way I feel after I see Chevy Chase movies, you know? I pace the floor; I can't sleep. I'm frightened. Every one of his movies sucks. How does he do it? Maybe they should skin Chevy Chase and put his skin on a funny person.'"

It takes huevos to go against doctrinaire thinking and it takes tremendous talent to convince the public to pay for the privilege. Hicks shows how it's done.

Getting serious while not forgetting to be funny, Hicks is able to expose himself as a former drug user who nonetheless believes there are positive aspects to taking drugs.

"Why did I quit? Because when you've been on a UFO, it's pretty hard to top that."

Off stage, he notes: "You can't deny the effects of the 60's, much of which was very positive, without giving credit to hallucinogenic drugs." On stage, he says: "Musicians today who don't do drugs--boy, they suck. Suckers of Satan's cock each and every one of them."

Simply put, he doesn't hold back, like when he indicates he collects pornography:

"One of my big fears in life is that I'm going to die and my parents are going to have to clear out my apartment and find that porno wing I've been adding on for years. There'll be more than one funeral that day."

What makes the subject especially interesting is that he continues with a convincing argument that the Supreme Court's definition of pornography as products containing no artistic merit and causing sexual thought applies to most TV commercials.

Then he brings religion into the discussion.

"People who are against things that cause sexual thoughts are also Christians who believe we should be fruitful and multiply. How do you do that and not think about it?"

Seldom content to offer only a single comment on any given matter, Hicks adds:

"A lot of Christians wear crosses around their necks. Do you think when Jesus comes back he ever wants to see a fucking cross? It's kind of like going up to Jackie Onassis with a rifle

pendant on."

During a phone interview with Hicks from Stamford, Connecticut, where he was playing the Treehouse Cafe, the Jackie Onassis reference prompts a discussion about Lenny Bruce. One of Bruce's most controversial bits concerned his feelings on exactly why Jackie abandoned the limo on that ill-fated day in Dallas. Surprisingly, Hicks is not very familiar with the man who could easily be considered the patron saint of what he is currently doing on stage.

"I never really listened to him all that much. But his myth as a comedian who spoke extemporaneously about things he believed in is why he's a hero to comics."

"The guy who really opened doors for me was Richard Pryor. He showed me the body movement to back up the material and the honesty of his feelings. It showed me what could be done."

Now 30, Hicks started performing when he was only 13 years old.

"When I started out, I thought Johnny Carson was the only comedian in the world. The one night I saw a guy on his show named Richard Lewis and realized this could be a career. When he was old enough, Hicks began sharpening his skills at the Comedy Workshop in Houston. He joined contemporaries like Sam Kinison, Ron Shock and Jimmy Pineapple in a creative atmosphere that is now looked back upon as a fountainhead of the modern American comedy renaissance.

"We just played off each other with the objective of cracking each other up. We shared a philosophy that we could make some kind of difference but you've got to speak the truth to do that," Hicks recalls.

Ironically, it may have been audiences' innocence at the time which allowed for such daring creativity. Fans came to the shows without preconceived notions of what to expect. Today's fans may be more judgmental as they have seen what types of acts make it big and compare their techniques to what up-and-comers are doing in the clubs.

"People used to come up after the show and say, 'how do you do that?' Now they come up after the show and ask 'how do you get an agent?'"

Fortunately, Hicks has established his style and now refuses to compromise. Although he has given up both drugs and alcohol, he actually questions the concept of clean living by offering a devastating routine in his act comparing Yul Brynner (who died of lung cancer) with Jim Fixx (who died while jogging). The bit makes you want to light up and party down.

He even has the nerve to show disdain for a major show biz personality like Arsenio Hall ("the son of Merv Griffin and Little Richard") who is obviously in a position to do his career a great deal of good.

"Everyone is doing that show. It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. Jesus is gonna do that show when he comes back. 'Tonight on Arsenio: Paula Abdul, Della Reese and Jesus of Nazareth. Let's get busy! Jesus, tell me the truth now, Mary Magdalene, didja do her? Arf, arf, arf, arf.'"

Hicks is a regular on "Late Night with David Letterman." He is also an alumnus of what to date has been TV's best attempt at capturing the essence of live stand-up, HBO's "One Night Stand" series.

Additionally, Hicks has a new tape and CD out from Invasion Records called "Relentless". It comes with the moniker: "This album contains everything your parents hate, the government fears and the church preaches against."

"Relentless" covers the above mentioned topics and more as well as a song by Hicks entitled, "Chicks Dig Jerks." Still, one wishes that Invasion would have released Hicks' act verbatim

instead of breaking it down into segments.

Listening to a performance straight through allows one to experience the building intensity of Hicks' impact as he adds outrage upon outrage to his act. Breaking it down into segments reduces this effect. It's not like making bits shorter is going to result in more radio play -- not while there's an F.C.C. around to protect the public's sensitivities.

For now, Hicks is a performer who is too hot for radio and mainstream TV. In that, he is a credit to the institution known as the stand-up comedy nightclub.