

About Bill Hicks - by Paul Outhwaite

With American comedian Bill Hicks there was always an awareness of other people, of how our society links together. With his name came an idealism and a vision of what the world could be. But first he had to slay all the "fevered egos" polluting the planet. He saw himself as a flame, Shiva the Destroyer, using comedy as a weapon to expose truths and show people how governments are screwing us every day of our lives. He also happened to be achingly funny, such was the accuracy of his comedy. At the age of thirteen Bill Hicks did his first gig. Six weeks before his death, aged thirty-two, he did the last. In the intervening years he frequently did over 250 gigs a year. He tried to reach as many people as possible, to put them in touch with inner and outer space in a majestic flight of one consciousness thinking. Those he inspired haven't lost the ability to take a ride.

People use and misuse the word "tragedy" all the time. It seems to accompany the death of anybody famous. But the real definition of tragedy evokes a sense of loss and poignancy, a sense of someone dying before they really gave everything they had to offer. Without hyperbole, Bill Hicks' death was a tragedy, for there was so much still to come from this creative, imaginative talent. When he died in 1994 the world lost a rare talent, but his spirit and philosophy still live on.

"As long as one person still lives in darkness then it seems to be a responsibility to tell other people". This encapsulated Hicks' philosophy; that we are all one consciousness, that it is the role of every individual to do something to enhance the human condition. Unlike those we place our trust in - politicians and all manor or professionals - Bill wanted to have a lot of fun doing it.

William Melvin Hicks was born on 16th December 1961 in Valdosta, Georgia. The family (father Jim, an executive at General Motors; mother Mary, a teacher; and elder brother and sister, Steve and Lynn) lived in Florida, Alabama and New Jersey before moving to Houston when Bill was seven. They lived in the Memorial area to the west of the city, a place called Nottingham Forest, a "strict Southern Baptist zone", as Hicks later called it. There, with friend Dwight Slade (both aged twelve), Hicks formed a comedy double act. Bill was bored with the area and mystified with the appeal of living the so-called "American Dream". "One time a friend of mine - we were nine - runs over and goes 'Bill, I just saw some hippies down at the store'. I go 'No way' and he goes 'I swear' and my dad goes 'Get off this property! We don't swear on this property!'"

In 1976 there were no comedy clubs in Houston. Bill and Dwight cycled to auditions, making tapes to send to agents. One liked a tape enough he got them a gig on Jerry Lewis' telethon, a slot from 2.00am to 2.45am. They didn't have enough material, and anyway their parents wouldn't let them. It was probably a good decision at the time (they were both fourteen), allowing Bill and Dwight to develop characters like Goober Dad. There was always affection in the routines he developed around his parents; a gentler kind of comedy, the kind his parents could appreciate. Mary and Jim saw the warmth, much as audiences did. Whereas they connected with Bill as a son more than a comedian, audiences were able to connect with him on every level, not just emotionally and spiritually, but even at the basest levels; anger, hate, lust, with experience and understanding, he could look on all subjects with the detachment of a neutral. He saw the positive and the negative, the grey area.

It wasn't easy at first though. Bill parents took him to a psychoanalyst when he

was seventeen. The therapist was unable to see anything wrong with Bill; he'd pretty much enjoyed the trip Bill had taken him on and joked he was more concerned about Bill's parents.

In 1978 the comedy workshop opened on San Felipe in Houston. Hicks began visiting whilst he was still in High School, best friend Kevin Booth driving Bill and Dwight. Sometimes Bill was allowed to perform. When the manager, Steve Epstein, saw Bill he was amazed at the 16 year old's sharpness and confidence. He had to sneak out of his house at night, playing records loudly like Elvis Presley, Kiss, Alice Cooper and B B King, his ruse to make his parents think he was still at home. At one club anarchic comedian Sam Kinison introduced himself to Bill by jumping off the stage with a pair of red panties on his head, landing on Bill. Kinison was to prove an inspiration to Bill as they became friends, Hicks taking Kinison's anger and some of his political ideology and shaping it into something more metaphysical. In the autumn of 1978 for five to six weeks, Tuesday at the workshop was for stand up, then a party at the Zipper Club, (a lap dancing dive). Bill and Dwight performed five times before Slade moved away. "There is a rapport with Dwight that makes me come up with things quickly". Hicks said at the time. Later, he built that same rapport up with audiences, able to connect with them, confident enough to make it up as he went along. An onstage philosopher, he thought on his feet, taking off tangents, the ideas and narrative forming and developing with ease.

Hicks was the youngest comic at Houston's Comedy Workshop, but that didn't stop him from holding back with his material. Early on there were doubts; "Sometimes you feel in control, and it's great, but sometimes you just don't feel in control and you really have to struggle to get laughs." But as his understanding and technique matured, more people came to see him.

In 1983, struggling with his art, feeling he was going nowhere, he got into drink and drugs and got angry on stage, enjoying heated verbal arguments, lambasting traditional attitudes, mocking hypocritical beliefs. Drugs helped Bill explore expanded awareness, use his intellect and imagination to travel. Kevin Booth said of Hicks, "Bill was the first person I ever met whose goal it was to become enlightened." (Together they got into meditation, astrology and telepathy.) At first it was explosive rants to bludgeon his audiences into submission. At one gig two Vietnam veterans took exception to his routine and broke his leg. At another, a heckler, unable to keep up with Hicks' returned arguments, pulled a gun on him. Hicks left the stage but it didn't weaken his determination to say what had to be said. But he got noticed because he was actually funny with it. For all the unchecked anger there was an insightful perceptiveness which simultaneously made audiences think and made them laugh at the absurdity of the situation. Hicks was in touch with aliens, he'd seen Jesus riding a unicorn, and he didn't have time for petty politics. He became one of Houston's self-styled Outlaw comics, along with Sam Kinison, Ron Shock, Jimmy Pineapple, Carl LeBoue, Fred Greenlee and Robert Barber. He indulged in a variety of substances (LSD, mushrooms, cocaine, quaaludes, ecstasy, methamphetamine) over subsequent years, always remembering the experiences for his acts.

In 1984 Hicks got his first Letterman appearance, doing a five-minute slot, then slumping down in the guest chair and lighting a cigarette. This wasn't allowed on the show, but the attitude won admiration and further bookings.

He continued partying and taking drugs; at one notorious three-day party someone brought an oxygen tank for the Outlaws to experience with. Hicks found himself broke in January 1986 having spent all his money on a variety of

substances. In 1987 Rodney Dangerfield was given a tape of one of Hicks' shows. He was so impressed he invited him to appear on Dangerfield's Young Comedians Special.

Hicks first introduction to Britain came in November 1990 when he was one of eighteen comedians in Stand Up America!, a six week engagement in London's West End. His perceptiveness and sense of irony went down well in the UK and in 1991 he won the Critic's Award at the Edinburgh Festival. He toured Britain and Ireland extensively to sympathetic and responsive audiences. Explaining his success, "People in the United Kingdom and outside the United States share my bemusement with the United States that America doesn't share with itself. They also have a sense of irony, which America doesn't have seeing as it's being run by fundamentalists who take things literally."

In 1993 the booze, drugs and cigarettes were behind him when he recorded the Revelations video for Channel 4 in England. But in April 1993, whilst touring Australia, Hicks was eating badly, feeling sharp pains down his left side. Still, in May he began work on Counts of the Netherworld for Channel 4 in England, a show with Kansas City comedian Fallon Woodland. In it they would play two Victoria-era counts who chat and philosophise with guests.

In mid-June though Bill learned he had cancer. He only told his family, close friends and Colleen McGarr (now his fiancée), and after only a few days in hospital he left to do a gig.

By December Hick's deterioration was evident and he knew he was dying, moving back to his parents' house in Little Rock in January 1994. On 6th January, his health clearing ailing, he played his final show in New York.

In his final weeks he played his mother music by John Hiatt, Miles Davis and Elvis Presley, showed her documentaries on Jimi Hendrix and The Beatles. He read Huckleberry Finn again, tried to get his father to take mushrooms. He worked on a book, variously titled New Happiness or New Beginnings. There was a sense of optimism, engendered by Bill's belief in a one-consciousness universe. He was at peace with himself and the world, calling his friends to say goodbye before ceasing to speak on the 14th February.

At 11.20pm on Saturday 26th February he died in Little Rock, Arkansas, buried in the family plot in Leaksville, Mississippi. At the memorial service Hick's brother read out a piece Bill had written and requested he read: "I left in love, in laughter, and in truth, and wherever truth, love and laughter abide, I am there in spirit."

Bill's spirit then floated up into the cosmic one consciousness where he continues to enjoy the ride throughout eternity and infinity.

Since 1994 Kevin Booth has worked tirelessly on bringing more of Hicks' material to the public, two albums - Arizona Bay and Rants in E-Minor - appearing in 1997, reminding people of Hick's great talent and inventiveness. Rant in particular was an apocalyptic masterpiece, what with routines on Waco, strangling Jesse Helms, killing Billy Ray Cyrus and a savage attack on Jay Leno: "another whore in the capitalist gang-bang."

There is a positivity around Hick's legacy (for all the misanthropy he was essentially an idealist) which means his material stands up to repeat play. His themes continue to have relevance, but his great skill was always to make them scarily funny. He was fearless and there are few contemporaries to match the body of work he left behind. Now that he's jamming with Jimi Hendrix and partying with Yul Brynner and Sam Kinison in the afterlife, Earth continues to make the

same fuck ups as before. But hey, it's just a ride.

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