

**BEWARE THE BARK AND BITE OF BILL HICKS**  
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*By Gerald Nachman*

Bill Hicks is as American as apple pie a la cyanide. Love him or leave him, but listen to him. This rapidly emerging radical comic voice, cutting through the bland comedy-club air like a persistent, ear-shattering smoke alarm, is a different sound in contemporary stand-up humor -- dark, daring, dangerous. He's as original, caustic and challenging as were Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl and Richard Pryor in their day.

Hicks, who closes a four-night stand at Cobb's Comedy Club tomorrow night, is a take-no-prisoners comic -- tough, edgy, profane, vicious and hostile, even a little scary and crazy. He's one of the so-called 'outlaw comedians' (Sam Kinison, Andrew Dice Clay, etc.), with a crucial and, I suspect, lasting difference: Hicks is smarter and funnier.

His stinging wit draws blood, but you laugh. In a roomful of what looked like post-yuppies on spring break, the laughter was often in shock, like a gasp, at how deeply his comments cut. He uses a scalpel, not a bludgeon, or maybe a scalpel-edged bludgeon.

The bilious, biting nature of his wit gives him more in common with Ambrose Bierce and H.L. Mencken than to anyone on the comedy circuit; he's a meaner, leaner Will Durst, calling himself 'Noam Chomsky with dick jokes.'

"The only trouble with children is, they grow up to be people," he says, light years from the gentler approach of nice-guy comics like Jerry Seinfeld and Dana Carvey or new-age pro-family monologists Rick Reynolds, Sheri Glaser and Jack Gallagher.

"Some people out there are lookin' at me like a dog that's just been shown a card trick," he says, putting on one of his repertoire of doofus redneck faces. Addressing a table of slightly bewildered blond women, he said, "Just relax and enjoy your hair."

The thrust of his act isn't anti-audience, though; it's anti-American stupidity, which galls him but gives his lines their brilliant if poisonous flavor.

Dressed in black, to reflect his mordant mind, he roams the stage restlessly, bums a cigaret and match, lights up, tips back on a stool, leans against the wall and attacks everything in sight, including the audience for its herd instincts, mooing into the microphone in disdain. "You're morons, you're cattle, and don't you forget it!" he cries. Don't take it personally -- he's addressing America.

His mood is angry but his style of assault shifts. He muses, taunts, slashes, mimics and mocks, even turning self-pitying ("Sixteen years and I can't even attract a fuckin' crowd").

Calling himself "a 31-year-old curmudgeon," he loathes everything equally, taking on sacred cows with Swiftian relish: kids ("They don't allow smoking on airplanes, but they allow children"), Christianity, pro-lifers and pro-choicers, CNN, Billy Ray Cyrus, Stephen Spielberg ("I saw his latest cry for help the other day") and gays dumb enough to want to be in the military; he even made a crack about Somalians.

Before his seemingly rambling but tight, fast-moving 75-minute set was over, a few people had left.

On the down side, his excessive pro-drug stuff begins to sound like a legalize-pot campaign and he tends to shout into the mike, hyping punch lines that don't need it, his one similarity to comics of his vintage such as warm-up act Michael Meehan, a funny-business-as-usual counterpoint to Hicks' lacerating wit.

Hicks, a regular on David Letterman's show and soon to be profiled in *The New Yorker*, reserves his most venomous attacks for Jay Leno and Gallagher, whom he sees as typical

mindless mainstream entertainment.

In an wicked attack, he calls Leno "another whore at the capitalist gang bang," in league with the devil for doing anything for a buck, with a perfect imitation of Leno's lisping squeak interviewing a teenage sitcom star. He's at his funniest and most lethal going after child-worshipping Americans in a crude and lengthy segment on "the miracle of childbirth" -- "rutting" he calls it. Imitating poor women giving birth to "mewly cabbages," he remarks, "It'll be a miracle if they can remember who the father is"; he names the babies Pizza Delivery Man Jr. and Will Work for Food Jr.

Hicks calls himself "a humanistic misanthrope," but sounds like a Texas neo-liberal with a politically incorrect, reactionary bent ("You're afraid if you leave your house you'll be bit by some crack-smokin', AIDS-infected pit bull"), with a touch of the mad man.

"I'm the only one here who believes in freedom," he says. Then, voice soaked with goody-goody sarcasm answers himself: "Who are yooou to say?" To which he snaps, "I'm me. It's true. Shut up." After a savage line, he adds, "I am available for children's parties."

He's vituperative and vulgar (he uses the F word like most people uses commas), but his act has intelligence, conscience and a philosophy. He asks us to "take a squeegee to your third eye."

It's not just a blind, scatter-gun attack, though, for each line is as honed as it is pointed, and he picks his targets carefully, often turning on himself. Running a hand through stringy hair, he says, "I need to get laid, that's the problem. This is rancid semen talking." Later, he ruminates, "I don't mean to sound bitter, cold or cruel, but I am, so that's how it comes out."

True enough, but what makes you want to hear more of it is that, most of all, he's a new voice of comic reason -- shrill, nasty, literate and funny. Listening to Hicks is like watching a cobra about to strike: you want to close your eyes -- or ears -- but you don't dare turn away. You may miss an especially clever kill.