

BILL HICKS

THE SCOTSMAN

By William Cook

The unexpected death of the American comedian Bill Hicks has robbed stand-up comedy of the most exciting young comic on either side of the Atlantic.

His explosive delivery and inflammable material were custom-built to cause controversy, but his taboo-busting style was underscored by a distaste for hypocrisy and a superficially decadent, yet fundamentally consistent, moral code.

Hicks was only 32 when he died - of pancreatic cancer - but his mature perspective and apparently effortless ability to control an audience made him appear at least a generation older. Born in Valdosta, Georgia, he moved to Houston, Texas, at the age of seven - and started writing comedy at 13. A child prodigy, he began performing live in his early teens, sneaking out of the bedroom window to play the nightclubs he was banned from by his parents. He started touring full-time at the age of 18, and was already a seasoned professional by the time he turned 20.

Hicks was much better known in the United States than in the United Kingdom, but the last few years of his life were marked by vigorous activity in the UK. His first British performance was at London's Queen's Theatre in 1990, and his debut during the Edinburgh Festival the following summer took the Fringe by storm.

He subsequently toured extensively around Britain's biggest theatres. In Scotland, he filled the Pavilion in Glasgow and the Queen's Hall in Edinburgh. His solo show at London's Dominion Theatre in November 1992 was filmed for Channel 4, and broadcast a year ago. At the time of his death, he was working on a series for Channel 4.

In the US, he had his own HBO special, the televised solo show to which all top-class American comedians aspire. However, his recent contribution to the prestigious David Letterman programme was cut, because his humorous castigation of anti-abortionists was considered too extreme for network TV.

It was an apposite conclusion to an ambiguous yet tempestuous relationship with his native land. "I love America but I hate Americans," he told *The Scotsman* in 1992. "With most Americans, it's the other way around."

Hicks was less of a liberal, more of a libertarian. He attacked the Republican Party and the National Rifle Association and embraced traditional leftist causes, like the legalisation of cannabis. Yet Hicks also lent his support to far less fashionable individual freedom issues such as hallucinogenic drugs and pornography.

At heart, he remained an unreconstructed idealist, infatuated with the utopianism of his favourite decade - the Sixties. One of his finest flights of fancy concerned a missile so sophisticated that it can fire food into the mouths of starving famine victims. Indeed, his funniest routines came closer to preaching than punchlines.

"Christianity would be a great religion," he once claimed, "if only someone would practise it."

Much of his material dwelt on his defiant addiction to tobacco - and hence his death from cancer was cruelly ironic, coming 18 months after he finally gave up smoking.

He is survived by both of his parents, who live in Bill Clinton's home town, Little Rock, Arkansas, and with whom he spent his last days.

"They can't figure out for the life of them where this voice comes from," he said of them. His was a self-critical and scathing voice, but it was unflinchingly honest. Comics like Denis Leary in the US and Rob Newman in the UK would do well to keep that voice alive.

He was compared with Lenny Bruce, but Hicks imitated nobody - and that was what made him the greatest comedian of his generation.