

BILL HICKS
ARIZONA BAY
(RYKO)

By Steve Holtje

A rising star before his death in 1994 at age 32 from pancreatic cancer, Bill Hicks inspired a rabid cult following including many of his fellow comics. The funniest and most thoughtful of the screaming comedians who rose to prominence in the 1990s, his routines would have worked even if delivered low-key.

Put together in 1992, Arizona Bay is one of the two of Hicks' albums that were issued posthumously (the other being '93's Rant in E Minor). With live bits broken up by oddly compelling interludes of music featuring Hicks on guitar and producer Kevin Booth on multiple instruments, it's Hicks' best-structured and most consistently effective album. Hicks referred to his work as "the comedy of hatred," and sizeable segments of Arizona Bay draw on his dissection of "Hell-A," which he fervently hoped an earthquake would drop into the ocean (hence the album title). He analyzes the L.A. riots and the Rodney King trial, gloats over the defeat of President Bush, takes on right-wing Christian fundamentalists, sincerely urges all marketing and advertising types to commit suicide, doubts the Warren Report on the assassination of President Kennedy, and revels in his love of porn and video games.

That may sound more like preaching than comedy, but every serious topic comes with a full array of not only righteous indignation but also wickedly hilarious zingers. The more pissed off he gets, the funnier he becomes. His targets are usually people or groups in positions of power, and his rants aim at stemming the blanding of America and forcing people to think, all the while enjoying the irony and stupidity of modern culture. A subversive force in the tradition of Lenny Bruce, Hicks was one of the comedic greats.