

BILL HICKS' HOT LICKS
EYE WEEKLY, FEBRUARY 27, 1997

By Shane MacDougall

If you're connected to the Internet, you already know that the Messiah has risen, only this time it took him 36 months. Three years after his death, the preachings of controversial comedian Bill Hicks are being released (and re-released) by Rykodisc.

You could be forgiven for not knowing who the hell Bill Hicks was. A comedic star in the U.K., where his following is still strongest, Hicks lived in relative anonymity in North America, despite having done 12 Letterman spots. It was his last spot on the show that cemented his reputation as a rebel. After doing a pre-approved set about pro-lifers, Hicks was informed that the segment would not be shown. In effect, he had become the first comic to be censored on Letterman.

Four months later, Hicks died of pancreatic cancer at 32. A tragic loss of a young talent? Or more fodder for the Hicks cult? A comedian since his late teens, Hicks had toiled across the U.S. doing an abrasive style standup. Respecting no taboos, Hicks did something that most comedians fail to: he actually said something. His act wasn't wishy-washy. He wasn't afraid to state his political beliefs. He hated pro-lifers, organized religion, the government -- hell, just about everybody. What was funny was that he could always justify his hatred.

The mere fact that these albums have been released is nothing short of a miracle. Hicks was the son of fundamentalist Texan Baptists who never embraced his material, although they later inherited his estate. A long battle ensued between Hicks' family and his best friend and collaborator, Kevin Booth, over who had creative control. It's surprising that the family not only let *Dangerous and Relentless* be re-released untouched, but also that they allowed the new material to be released. *Rant In E Minor* is a perfect addition to the Hicks library, especially since it contains a bluer version of the banned Letterman set.

All three CDs are packed with very funny riffs on pornography and pro lifers, and his takes on the Bible and drugs are instantaneously disarming. The miracle of birth? Hicks compares it to taking a dump. "You know what a miracle is?" the riff goes. "A miracle is raising a kid who doesn't talk in a movie theatre."

Arizona Bay, however, is the second new release, and it's downright annoying. The comedy is mixed with music written and performed by Hicks and Kevin Booth. Unfortunately, the music is distracting, and plays continuously. A performance that would otherwise sparkle is thereby mangled. In fact, it's spooky. It's as if you are being initiated into the Cult of Bill Hicks by way of a bad Dianetics tape.

If you have the stamina, you can still find gems in this recording. Hicks' depiction of truck driver Reginald Denny (severely beaten in the wake of the Rodney King verdict) as so shell-shocked he now refuses to stop at intersections is one of the funniest bits on the album. Denny's boss observes: "Wow, it's Reginald, here again ahead of schedule. I'd love to give him a raise but every time I run up to the cab he starts backing away... "