

BONUS TRACKS

BILL HICKS

Dangerous (Rykodisc)

Relentless (Rykodisc)

Arizona Bay (Rykodisc)

Rant in E-Minor (Rykodisc)

Who can tell one Bill Cosby album from another? This one might be funnier than that one, while this other one over here may have "Buck, Buck" as opposed to "Fat Albert." Whatever the case, they all follow the standard rule: Funny man tells comic routines in front of an audience while a tape machine rolls. Comedian Bill Hicks was so far afield of the typical comic -- let's make it clear that *any* recording of his material is essential listening -- that even his four albums, two previously released and two "new" ones, violate that rule; they're all markedly different in tone and style.

The first, *Dangerous*, originally released in 1991, follows the comedy concert format, while the second one, *Relentless*, issued in 1992, moves into the classic Shelley Berman/Bob Newhart-pioneered "collected routines" territory. From there, with the two new albums, *Arizona Bay* and *Rant in E-Minor*, things get really strange.

Hicks was determined to take comedy beyond what the stand-up boom of the Eighties had watered it down into. Rather than rely on props, low-brow blue material, or corny jokes, Hicks imbued his routines with a comic's greatest asset, the truth, verbally attacking hypocrisy and idiocy in its myriad forms, and forcing his audiences to think -- all the while remaining hysterically funny.

Hicks fought to rethink the conventions of comedy that had made it irrelevant, and as such, with *Arizona Bay*, he tried a new experiment designed to make that album a whole entity rather than a collection of bits. Hicks bridged the routines on the album with music, to the extent that in its early bootlegged versions, many fans said they found it difficult to listen to. With some restraint taken on the musical portion, however, the new official release succeeds far more than anyone could have expected, merging the merciless wit and wisdom of Hicks with the relaxing, spiritual side he displayed in his bluesy guitar playing. He was no Hendrix, to be sure, but in its secondary position, the music does give the album a solid, if dual, personality of its own. Left to compile the material from the comedian's last days on this planet (Hicks died in 1994 from pancreatic cancer), friend/producer Kevin Booth elected to take things even farther out on *Rant in E Minor*, bringing in more instrumental cues and effects and occasionally even collaging more-or-less random chunks of material into a psychedelic soup of ideas. It corresponds well to the words coming from a man who at this point knew he had only a few months left to live, and was shooting commentary out like buckshot with no attention paid to who might be shocked or offended by his words. If this album were to follow the tradition set by the titles of the first two, it would have been called *Fearless*.

Still, taken without warning, *Rant* is a bit of a shock, and can even be confusing to the uninitiated. Longtime fans should brace themselves before they dive in; the inexperienced would be better served by listening to the albums in the order in which they were recorded. And remember this: While most of those old Cosby albums have a few funny bits, all four volumes of Hicks' recorded legacy are positively *wicked*.

-- *Ken Lieck*