

## **DEAD. FUNNY.**

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*Thanks to Nick Barlow*

Imagine for a minute Joe Pasquale, or Brian Conley or any of those other dismal comedic ants that ply their heinous trade; 'gags', 'impressions', 'skits' and, God help us, even songs, in the name of laughter on a Saturday night. Picture them as insects and then imagine them crushed beneath the sole of a heavy, black, boot. That boot would be on the feet of American comic Bill Hicks, one of the greatest stand-ups of all time. The tragedy is that Hicks died nearly three years ago on the very cusp of stardom, whilst on screens and stages the world over mediocre so-called comic talent continues to pack 'em in like nothing ever happened.

Still, there is some good news. This month sees the re-release of two classic Hicks albums, *Dangerous* and *Relentless*, as well as two previously unreleased ones, *Arizona Bay* and *Rant in E Minor*.

Hicks' career started early. Raised in Texas by Christian parents, by age 13 Hicks had sufficient messianic zeal and anti-social tendencies to regularly blag himself and his friends slots in Houston comedy clubs. Together they formed and outfit known as The Houston Outlaws under the auspices of the equally self-destructive and equally deceased Sam Kinison. Together they carved themselves a reputation for outrage. As well as the shocking nature of their material the Outlaws were famed for taking drugs on stage and throwing furniture at hecklers. In the years that followed Hicks distilled that energy into what were to become the most uncompromising and downright funny routines to hit the American comedy circuit since Lenny Bruce. Inevitably much of mainstream USA found it all too much to take and Hicks played to some of his best audiences in the UK. But small wonder - the truth as they say, often hurts, even if it is funny. Check this for example from *Rant in E Minor*.

'This is the idea that has made me virtually an anonymous figure in America for the last 10 years... If you have children here tonight, I'm sorry to tell you this, they are not special. Don't misunderstand me, I know you think they're special, [laughs] I'm aware of that. I'm just telling you they're not. Do you know that every time a guy comes he comes 200 million sperm?...And you mean to tell me you think your child is special?? Do you know what that means? I have wiped entire civilisations off of my chest - with a grey gym sock! THAT is special.'

And so on. Hicks' blowtorch attitude encompassed politics, abortion, AIDS, death, drugs, aliens, women, advertising, life and religion. Especially religion. A friend of his even noted that, 'For all the talk of Bill being like Hendrix or Dylan or Jim Morrison, it was Jesus that he really wanted to be.' Which is perhaps to understate his lighter side. 'I have a TV show,' he used to joke, 'it's called Let's Hunt and Kill Billy Ray Cyrus,' a singular hate figure for Hicks whom he referred to as 'that jar-head, no-talent cracker asshole.' He was also obsessed with the ramifications of, in the event of his death, his parents coming to collect his stuff and stumbling across 'the porno wing'.

Drugs were another of his specialties. It was Hicks who coined the phrase 'If you're on acid and you think you can fly...take off from the fuckin' ground!' Other classics on these albums include the LA Riots, a routine called Rockers Against Drugs Suck, advising pro-lifers 'link arms outside cemeteries', the tale of Satan appearing to claim the earth but instead being accosted by women who make him mow the lawn and do the shopping, and a truly disgusting monologue involving Barbara Bush and her string of pearls.

'I don't do drugs any more,' Hicks used to announce, 'any more than say the average touring

funk band.' The irony was that before he succumbed to pancreatic cancer at the age of 32 he had given up, but never renounced, drink drugs and tobacco. He had appeared on the Letterman show 11 times before his final appearance, which contained an incendiary anti-pro-life piece, was censored. After that and aware that he was dying, Hicks went into creative overdrive. 'He couldn't be involved in any kind of mundane situation even for a second,' said a friend. And it's our good fortune that so much of Hicks' genius survives. It's hard to imagine that the idea of death really phased him, he was a committed realist and got more than his fair share of comic mileage from it. Before he died he was asked why he had to be so angry. 'This isn't anger,' he replied, 'this is me, this is passion.' We were lucky to have known him at all