

BILL HICKS: GONE BUT STILL RIFFING ON RUDE TRUTHS

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Sunday, September 30, 2001; Page G01

Guy shambles out on stage, takes in the applause.

"How you doing, folks? You gotta bear with me. Uh, I'm very tired. Very tired of traveling." He lights a cigarette.

"And, uh, very tired of doing comedy. Very tired of staring out at your vacant faces looking back at me . . ."

Some fidgeting in the audience.

". . . wanting me to fill your empty lives with humor you couldn't possibly think of yourselves. Good evening."

An explosion of laughter. That's a howdy from Bill Hicks, the start of his set.

Uncomfortable truth as humor is what Hicks did so ingeniously, and what made him one of the best stand-up comics of his time, and why most likely you never heard of him.

"Philosophy," a new CD that Rykodisc calls the Best of Bill Hicks, isn't. It's funny, and sporadically brilliant, but it is not his best. Hicks would have hated the mislabeling: He would have publicly trashed it as blatant marketing hype by a recording industry in the satanic thrall of the almighty dollar. Why not? Hicks never quailed at sabotaging his own career or at firebombing bridges in his wake. He had a terrific, ruthless bit about what a sellout Jay Leno was for hawking Doritos; that would be the same Jay Leno who helped launch Hicks's career and who would remain, to the end, his somewhat shellshocked mentor.

We are in the past perfect here because Bill Hicks is dead. He died of pancreatic cancer in 1994 at the age of 32, a comic who might well have achieved the stardom he merited had he not based his best material on subjects so unnerving that he scared anyone with a paycheck to protect. Even David Letterman's show, not known for its cowardice, censored him.

By stand-up standards, Hicks wasn't particularly vulgar or profane. The Texas-raised comic was much more interesting than that. He nakedly praised pornography, but only the really *good* stuff. He thought cigarettes were swell, up to a point. ("If you are smoking out of a hole in your neck, you might want to consider quitting.") He mocked organized religion. ("Why do Christians wear crosses around their necks? Do you think when Jesus comes back he ever wants to *see* a [expletive] cross? It's like going up to Jackie Onassis with a

rifle pendant on.") He thought death was a hoot, advocating the use of terminally ill people as movie stuntmen. ("What, you think that's cruel? You want your grandmother to die like a little bird in some hospital room, her skin so thin you can see her last heartbeat work its way down her blue veins?" A conspiratorial smile: "Or do you want her to meet *Chuck Norris*? 'Hey, he kicked her head *right off her body*! Wow! Did you see that? Did you see my grammy?' ")

That last bit isn't on "Philosophy." Neither is the Leno evisceration, or Hicks's savage take on police perjury in the Rodney King trial, or his uncontained glee over the ironic jogging death of messianic fitness guru Jim Fixx. For these you will have to mine previous Rykodisc releases of his work: "Dangerous" (1990), "Relentless" (1992), "Arizona Bay" (1996) and "Rant in E Minor" (1997).

Hicks was nasty and judgmental and at times his lefty sanctimony could run on past humor and into tedium. But mostly his targets were deserving, and his aim was true. He decried what he saw as a creeping anti-intellectualism in America, and the hypocrisy of the religious right, and the insipidity of the mass media. He clearly enjoyed being an outlaw, but from time to time, almost against his will, he gave the audience a glimpse of a fella with a heart and soul. Complaining once that the network talking heads were too negative, he crafted a nightly news segment more to his liking:

"Today a young man on acid realized that all matter is merely energy condensed to a slow vibration, that we are all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively, there is no such thing as death, life is only a dream, and we are the imagination of ourselves. Here's Tom with the weather."

Inevitably, Hicks is likened to Lenny Bruce, but other than that both died young and angry, the comparison fails. Without Bruce there would have been no Hicks; Bruce was an iconic figure, central in the struggle for free speech because his intellectual persecution came at the hands of the American government itself. Hicks's censorship troubles were negligible by comparison but in a way equally insidious -- they came from the custodians of his own craft. Both Bruce and Hicks were beclouded by drugs, but Bruce succumbed to addiction and Hicks escaped his.

Ultimately, the comparison fails because Bill Hicks was a lot funnier than Lenny Bruce. Unlike Bruce, Hicks never forgot that however loaded the social commentary, his primary mission was to entertain.

Wisely, the compilers of "Philosophy" saved for last Hicks's most shocking routine, a relentless, take-no-prisoners assault on redneck stupidity and the so-called Miracle of Birth:

"Where did this veneration of childbirth come from? Trailer parks all over America are filling up with little miracles." Childbirth is no more a miracle, Hicks says, than what happens a few hours after you eat a hamburger.

The line is almost unbearably rude, but it draws a blast of laughter. This is the end of a set, and you think Hicks is going to cut and run, but he doesn't. He's got his audience off balance, guiltily guffawing at heresy. It's precisely where he wants them, and he keeps going, and what follows is a descent into three of the best, and most disturbing, minutes of modern stand-up comedy. As Hicks waves goodbye, the laughs are laced with gasps of disbelief.

Early in 1993, Hicks learned he was dying. He told only his closest friends, and kept up a ferocious schedule of comedy gigs. That August, he made his 11th and final appearance on the Letterman show, where he did a seven-minute routine that reviewed children's books about the gay lifestyle (he was righteously appalled by "Daddy's New Roommate" but, y'know, kinda *dug* "Heather Has Two Mommies") and extolled the beauty of the message of Easter ("... in which we commemorate the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ by telling our children that a giant bunny rabbit left chocolate eggs in the night.")

No, you never saw it. The night the show was taped, the CBS censors informed Hicks that he had pushed too many "hot buttons," and that the entire gig would be edited out.

I have heard the routine, because a few days later Hicks delivered it -- verbatim, cleansed of all profanity, exactly as he had performed it for Letterman -- at a small comedy club in West Palm Beach, Fla. A friend of mine was there. He taped it, and sent me a copy.

I never heard Hicks quite like this. Imagine it: A man who is constitutionally incapable of diplomacy has just been publicly humiliated. In this room, he and only he knows he is dying. He is furious and has nothing -- *nothing* -- to lose.

The show was terrific. It was irreverent, hilarious, witheringly denunciatory of what he saw as the hypocrisy of social conservatives and religious fundamentalists. When he was done he explained to the audience how he had been censored for trying to deliver it on TV, and he laced into Letterman, and CBS, big time:

"They felt you, the audience, are too stupid to know these are jokes, or to have material on that might have ideas associated with them other than, 'Boy, food on airlines sucks, don't it?' ... or any number of other stupid, banal, trite, puerile jokes we all know by heart, so they can keep you without any kind of social awareness and keep us separated from each other while they hawk their [expletive] beer commercials."

Hicks went on and on. Much truth, few laughs.

The gig is difficult to listen to now, knowing how sick he was at the time. I have always felt that anger and fear help inform the best humor; this tape seems to be telling us that no, anger and fear can exterminate humor. Just when I thought Hicks had finally lost his way, he said, in his defense:

"Hey, it's not like I said the [very solemn and dignified representative of a major religion] is a [highly objectionable term for a person with an alternative lifestyle]."

Pause.

"Which he *is*, but I didn't *say* it."

A roar from the crowd.

I'm saving this tape. I think it may be the *actual* Best of Bill Hicks.