

GUFFAW REAL
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By Keith Cameron

"I believe there's a commonality to humanity. We all suck"

- Bill Hicks

The same week as Kurt Cobain overdosed in a Rome hotel suite, Bill Hicks died of pancreatic cancer, aged 32. Scarcely anyone noticed. Although feted in British comedy circles since winning the Edinburgh Festival Critics Award in 1991, the Texan stand-up never impinged upon the mainstream consciousness of America. His refusal to clean up his act to suit the conservative sensibilities of network TV had confined him to the margins, to an endless cycle of playing small comedy clubs in obscure towns with audiences who didn't know who he was, nor cared. And when they heard what he'd got to say, a lot of them didn't much like it.

"This is gonna be one of my last performances," he told Austin's Laff Stop in October 1993.

"I'm serious." He was. Hicks' cancer, diagnosed that summer, had not abated. He knew that he could be dead in a matter of months.

"I've had it," he went on. "Sixteen years of pounding my head against the mentality of America. I'd say it's about an eighth-grade emotional level we're at, as a country." A hiss issues from the crowd. "You're doubting that?! Relax and enjoy your hair." Hicks pauses, then unleashes a tirade of invective against the stupid, bigoted, sedated, small-minded, reactionary ingrates he encountered everywhere and who was exhausting his will to live.

"And your little cracker spawn are back at the hotel, chocking down the mini-bar contents, probably fucking each other and producing more little crackers to come fuck with my life. You inbred redneck hillbilly fuckin' tourist, you! Welcome to No Sympathy Night! Welcome to You're Wrong Night! FUCKING MORONS! YOU FUCKING MORONS!" He relents, but only to wind up the next fusillade. "And God wept", I believe is the next part. As did the world, as more knobby-kneed white guys walked the planet with their black nylon fuckin' socks, their fat fuckin' tick-like wives and their fat fuckin' hateful children... Fuck America, if that's America, and fuck you too."

A little later, after mocking some hecklers as "a coupla cows getting arrogant", Hicks reflects.

"I have this weirdest style, don't I?! 'Bill, you do a little joke that's funny and then you start telling us you hate us, and you dig a big fucking hole! Where's Bill goin'? He's going to Comedy Death!'"

Really, though, he was already there. "This is the material that has made me virtually an anonymous figure in America for the last 16 years," he would say. "I have watched my crowds dwindle. I am going nowhere, and nowhere quick."

By the time of his final show, in New York, December 1993, Hicks hated the crowd, the business, and himself. "I could have walked around being a millionaire, franchising myself, but no, I had to have this weird thing about trying to illuminate the collective unconscious and help humanity. Fucking moron." Two months later, he was dead.

Bill Hicks is often compared to Lenny Bruce, for all the obvious reasons: both men were ostracised by the establishment for their political views, both railed with increasing desperation at the myriad hypocrisies of America, and both died young. Yet, before his illness at least, Hicks' humour was warmer than the frequently infantile Bruce's. Funnier, too. When Hicks did scatology, he did it with real gross style and a crucial attention to detail.

"Every time a guy comes, he comes 200 million sperm. That means I've wiped entire civilisations off my chest with a grey gym sock!" What makes this funny, of course, is the fact

of the gym sock being grey.

Vehemently pro-choice and anti-Republican, he trod a thin line of disgust and affection for the society that created him. Although organised religion was one of his pet hates -- his parents are both devout Baptists and the young Bill felt stifled by their staunch adherence to apple-pie values -- he believed in God, or certainly a god. Hicks' god ensured that marijuana and magic mushrooms grew naturally on Earth. He was evangelical about hallucinogenics -- audiences were urged to follow his example and "squeegee" their third eyes -- believing their illegality to be a form of population control, preventing the masses from getting in touch with thier real selves and loving each other. If that happened, Hicks reasoned, it would be bad for the arms industry.

Drugs, he argued, could do good things. He ordered anyone who disagreed to go home and burn all their CDs. "'Cos the musicians that made all that great music that's enhanced your lives throughout the years? Rrrrrreal fuckin' high on drugs. Man, The Beatles were so high they let Ringo sing a coupla tunes!"

Despite having wowed audiences at LA's legendary Comedy Store on Sunset Strip when barely out of his teens, and attracting the patronage of rising star Jay Leno, Hicks' career soon stalled in third gear because he would not compromise in order to please television, a prerequisite for comedic success everywhere but especially in the US. After Leno began presenting The Tonight Show, he felt there was no way Hicks could ever be presented in an unexpurgated form on such a straight-laced show. David Letterman proved more amenable, and Hicks made 11 (albeit toned down) appearances on Letterman's show. It ought to have been 12. Indeed Hicks' 12th Letterman slot was filmed in October 1993, and for the first time it was to be the real sex, drugs and rock'n'roll deal. Yet despite the material being approved in advanced, the routine was never broadcast. Letterman's corporate employers got cold feet, allegedly because they had scheduled advertisements from the anti-abortion lobby for the same show. By now, Hicks' commitment to never selling out had become an obsession, and this 11th-hour act of censorship by The Man all but destroyed his resolve to continue. He wrote a 32-page letter to New Yorker critic John Lahr, expressing the belief that he had been deliberately silenced because the capitalist rulers of America couldn't let the people hear the truth. Onstage, he had ranted at Leno, a man he once considered a friend, for doing a TV commercial, and thereby perpetuating the media-fuelled stultification of America. "What a fucking whore. And not even when he needed the money, either. The guy makes 3 million and he decides to hawk Doritos to make even more money. You not got enough money, you fucking whore?! You gotta sell snacks to bovine America now?! 'Hi everyone, I'm Jay Leno, anyone remember when I was funny?!' Satan fucking him the ass on national TV!"

Hicks fantasised about Leno shooting himself on the show and his brains spewing out in the shape of the NBC peacock -- "'Cos he's a company man to the bitter fucking end."

Always more preacher than comedian, for Bill Hicks there was no greater sin than to taste "Satan's scaly pecker". He was to take his purity to the grave. The irony of the proximity of his death to Kurt Cobain's is that Cobain did, in fact, sell out -- chiefly in acquiescing to the remix of both 'Nevermind' and 'In Utero' to sweeten the sound -- and went on to achieve huge fame, wealth and unhappiness as a consequence. Hicks died on February 26, 1994, having not spoken to anyone for almost two weeks. Who could blame him? After all, precious few bothered to listen when he had.