

## **HARD-LINE LOOK AT HUMOR**

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*By Dennis McLellan*

He's been called everything from "a foul-mouthed moralist" who uses outrageous material to make serious points about the human condition to "a satirical comedic poet" who "gets into people's minds and, like a bright flashlight, exposes the dark and dusty corners."

Bill Hicks -- who performs Friday at the Coach House in San Juan Capistrano -- is without question a comedic provocateur whose all-black stage attire suits his equally dark humor. In a no-holds-barred act that is as serious as it is funny, he tackles everything from gun-control laws, smoking and politics to religion, pornography and drugs.

Here's Hicks riffing on:

\* Religion: "Why do Christians wear crucifixes around their neck? Do you think when Jesus comes back he ever wants to see another fucking cross?"

\* Drugs: "You never see positive drug stories on the news, do you? Isn't that weird, since most of the experiences I've had on drugs were real fucking positive."

\* The Los Angeles riots: "How many of you all wondered like I did during the L.A. riots when those people were being pulled out of their trucks and beaten half to death: 'Step on the fucking gas, man!'"

A Texan who came out of the same Houston comedy club that spawned Sam Kinison, Carl LaBove and the other so-called "Texas outlaw comics" in the early '80s, the 31-year-old Hicks was recently named by Rolling Stone magazine as the year's "hot stand-up." He is a frequent guest on Late Night With David Letterman, is the subject of an upcoming profile in New Yorker magazine, has a new comedy CD (Arizona Bay) and this summer HBO will air his first hour-long comedy special, Revelations.

But for all that, Hicks is less popular at home than in Britain, where he taped the new special. "I've been over there five or six times, but it's gotten bigger and bigger every time," Hicks said last week from his home in West Los Angeles. "I've had happen over there what I thought would happen here 10 years ago, and it happened there in a year."

"People in the United Kingdom and outside the United States share my bemusement with the United States that America doesn't share about itself. They also have a sense of irony, which America doesn't have, seeing as it's being run by fundamentalists who take (things) literally." The catalyst for his becoming known in England for what one reviewer called "his pleasingly sarcastic world view" was Hicks' acclaimed hour-long performance from the 1991 Just for Laughs Montreal International Comedy Festival. Hicks said it aired in Britain "unedited for language or ideas and therefore people got to see me unexpurgated, which is the only way to see someone who speaks up for free speech."

With a cackling laugh that often punctuates his comments onstage, Hicks added: "It's kind of funny to see a guy who talks about free speech (being) edited. That's America. God bless it." Hicks has been reported as saying the term stand-up comedian is too limiting for what he does on stage and yes, he acknowledged, "in light of what stand-up comedy is today, I'd say that term misses the mark."

"What's happened with this plethora of comedy on every channel is that it's totally trivialized what comedy can do and should do. But that's typical of this kind of system we live under. They trivialize everything so that nothing is accomplished."

Hicks laughed: "See, they'd be cheering in England right now. Here, they say, 'Hey, boy, love it or leave it.'"

Hicks, whose comedy is less a matter of telling jokes than taking a particular theme or subject and talking his way through it to reveal the inherent humor and absurdities, said that even he finds it difficult to describe exactly what he does on stage.

"Lenny Bruce did a neat thing (when he said): 'I'm not a comic; I'm Lenny Bruce.' I think he was trying to say, 'Don't label me.' I think I'll go the same route: It's funny, yet it's deadly serious. It's tongue in cheek, yet very overt... Who knows? Why have a label?"

Although his humor is often described as dark, Hicks doesn't view it that way.

"Do you think calling for peace or love is dark? Or having a guy going, 'We don't need weapons?' "

Hicks, who began sneaking out of the house in high school to perform at open mike nights at the newly opened Comedy Workshop in Houston, didn't start out being a comedic firebrand.

"It definitely evolved this way," he said. "I think I'm like that normally, but it took awhile to get the courage to do it onstage. At first, I'd be a (typical) comic and do jokes and talk about things I knew at the time in high school -- lack of dating and parents -- and then it just kept growing up."

Most of the topics he now deals with onstage "are things that have offended my sense of reason."

Hicks said his act continues to evolve.

"I think the ideas are more thought out, and there's less a nod toward entertaining people than getting the idea out. Consequently, it's either really entertaining or it really (ticks) them off. In other words, there is not a lot of compromise any more."

No doubt there will be little compromise in a series Hicks is developing for British TV. It's called Counts of the Netherworld and he'll be playing one of two Victorian-era counts "who sit around and philosophize." Like his act, the show is hard to label. "It's a talk show but not a talk show; it's a situation comedy, but it's not," Hicks said.

In the first episode to be taped next January, Hicks said, he'll talk about "how Carl Jung had the theory that there is a collective unconscious that mankind shares, and I agree with that. The only difference is I don't think it's supposed to be unconscious. As the agents of evolution, the job of the Counts of the Netherworld is to shine the light into mankind's unconscious mind and try to wake up the world" -- he laughed -- "and we have guests and stuff."

"You can imagine that when I presented that (to American TV executives), you could hear their brow furrow -- crunch! -- 'Excuse me..?' "

Hicks said he wants the show to speak for a generation that's not being represented.

"The people that have done talk shows here lately -- from Dennis Miller to Jay Leno -- it's amazing these young hip guys have done their best to put on 'The Mike Douglas Show.' Who are they speaking for? Not me."

His goal, he said, is to make the show a big success in England, then sell it back to the same network that turned it down, to have them pay dearly for it, and then "claim America's children one by one."

With his trademark cackle, he added: "I want parents burning copies of our posters and tapes. I want sermons written about us, like when Elvis first shook his pelvis."