

## **HICKS IS NOT AFRAID OF THE DARK**

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*By Rick Vanderknyff*

When stand-up comedy experienced its renaissance in the late '70s, it was heralded as the new rock 'n' roll, a clearinghouse for cutting-edge ideas. It was going to be dangerous. It was going to be subversive.

Anyone who follows comedy knows what has happened since. The scene flourished, but in all the wrong ways, becoming little more than a proving ground for faceless hacks hoping to land a sitcom or a movie or a TV commercial. Truly funny, original comedians are hard to find; funny comics with ideas should be put on the endangered species list.

Bill Hicks is one such comic, and his bracing set at the Coach House on Friday made one mourn for what comedy could have been. When Hicks looks out at America, he worries, and when he worries, two things happen: He gets angry, and he gets very, very funny.

This is not comedy for the easily offended. Hicks takes a dark glee in attacking religion, government or children. It's not shock comedy as performed by some more juvenile-minded practitioners, though he has a knack for putting things bluntly.

He talked about the heavily publicized case in which the parents of two young men who shot themselves were suing the band Judas Priest because they held the group responsible for the deaths. After ridiculing the notion that the band bore responsibility, Hicks went one step further and admitted he couldn't muster much sympathy for the victims.

"Morons die. They're good at it," Hicks said. "Tomorrow, I'm one car length up in traffic."

A bit attacking anti-abortion activists ("All those unwanted, illiterate children brought to Earth... Keep 'em coming") segued into his debunking of the notion that life is a "miracle" ("It's a chemical reaction") and finally into men on reproduction ("Guys don't want children. Guys are children and don't want the competition.")

Even children came under some heat. "If you have children, they are not special," he told the audience. Then, laughing: "This is the material that packs them in across America. I'm available for children's parties, by the way."

Hicks' dark sarcasm was leavened by several such self-mocking asides. Near the beginning of the show, he told the crowd: "Welcome to the comedy of hate. Enjoy yourself. Pull up a chair."

Later, noting he was single: "You'd think chicks would love to be hanging out with Mr. Sunshine. Where's that guy who ridicules all my beliefs?"

Not a joke-teller in any traditional sense, Hicks is more of an onstage philosopher. Though his judgments can be harsh, and it's unlikely that one would agree with all of his conclusions, it is nonetheless encouraging to hear a comic attack the status quo with such force and fury, rather than simply buying into it in the interests of career.

If there is one broad subject under which Hicks' targets fall, it is the forces that he believes are controlling the country, largely in concert: the government, the religious right, commercial interests and the media.

The JFK assassination still gets him going. He mistrusts the government's attack on the Waco home of the Branch Davidians: "The guy's real name was Vernon. Come on, let him be Jesus for a couple of months."

He worries that the media are scaring people into staying home and rarely venturing outside, for fear of crime. Soon, he said, there'll be "no one on the streets except Dominos delivery boys in armored Chevettes with turrets."

If there is one subject that particularly draws Hicks' contempt, it is the way his beloved rock 'n'

roll has become just another commodity. But some cases are so blatant that Hicks just has to laugh. The irony in the recent Kentucky Fried Chicken commercial, with rap luminary Hammer "jumping" for chicken, amazes Hicks.

"Every once in a while, the universe throws me a bone," Hicks said, laughing and shaking his head. "You happy, Hicks? Will that get the gun out of your mouth?"