

HUSTLIN' HICKS

By Wesley Joost

Bill Hicks, a man in black, has a few good words for the misguided people of a sinful city. A hip New York flock gazes up at him expecting a religious revival as much as a comedy show. This metropolitan audience is rare for him. For the most part he takes his subversive act, like Hustler Magazine, to the truckers and middle American underdogs of the world. "I've been on my flying saucer tour. Which means, like flying saucers I have been appearing in small southern towns in front of handfuls of hillbillies, and like them I am beginning to doubt my own existence"

"Well folks, this is a sentimental evening for me -- this is my final live performance. The last I'll ever do ever. No biggie, no hard feelings, no sour grapes whatsoever. I've been doing this every day for sixteen years and I enjoyed every second of it. Every plane flight every delay every canceled flight every lost luggage living in hotel rooms every broken relationship playing the comedy pouch in Possum Ridge Arkansas every fuckin' year it's been great -- don't get me wrong. I'm just very tired, very tired of doing comedy, very tired of seeing your vacant faces staring back at me wanting me to fill your empty lives with humor you couldn't possibly think of yourselves." A jolly smile and a roll of tobacco hanging from his lips. "Good evening."

Bill Hicks died of pancreatic cancer in 1994 at the age of 32. Hicks began his career a comedian but ended it being much more. Towards the end of his life his one man show evolved beyond doing mere comedy. His was more like a performance artist. In a free form context, he blends one association to another, sewing together his standards with improvised observations, shocking confessions and zingy one liners.

Much like . . . "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?" At the end of his performance the audience had not just laughed 'til they ached, but heard a fulfilling piece of spoken word culture: one man's attempt to deodorize the world's immense stench.

"I'd like to make a confession," The reverend spoke upon his giggling, tipsy pasture, "it's a confession in the way of a question. Is anyone here like me in that they are compelled, obsessed, and drawn beyond their will to watch the show Cops every fuckin' night?" Cheers and applause.

"I'm not alone? Oh, thank God! I thought I was alone. Hello, I'm Bill and I'm a Cops watcher. 'Hello Bill.' I'm obsessed by that fuckin' show! I can't not watch it. I'm like a guy with a sore tooth I can't stop touching' it.

"I've never been in so many trailer parks, ever! Each night I'm in a different one. I could buy a trailer now, I know so much about them from the show Cops.

"It's sick and I love it. Every night it's the same show. A women has been beaten by her husband, her head looks like a melon. The cops are called on a domestic call 'cause the trailer next door couldn't hear the results of the American Gladiators contest over her shrieking.

"They come to the trailer, her fourteen little cracker spawn are peering around her skirt. Their eyes are so close together their left eye is in the right socket and the right eye is in the left socket. Some genetic mutation due to inbreeding. I don't get it, what does their family tree look

like? A stump?

"Every time the women stands up for the guy. 'He didn't mean to hit me, he's a goo-ood man, don't take him away. I fell asleep in the driveway and he run over my head with the truck. He's a goo-ood man, he don't mean no harm. He's passed out under the trailer right now with his dog Skinner."

"Fuck cops, send in the S.W.A.T team. She doesn't need children. That's a judgment call and I'm making' it. But it happens to be true and that gives it the force, that extra oomph. Can't support 'em, can't raise 'em, don't even love 'em. Ponk! Why don't you get the cops camera and shine it up your pussy and film the little criminal coming out. This is crime prevention. Here comes another illiterate unwanted child! Cuff him, Banano! Hunk! Hunk! Hunk!

(In Hillbilly Policeman voice) "Can you calm down on your rutting just for a couple of seconds until we can figure out this food, air deal?

(As average person). "Well who are youuuu to judge? who are youuuu, unk, ugh, betah ugh than Jesus, unnhhh, here we are! unnnnnnnnn"

"And she's standing up for this guy. This guy is balls deep in this whore every night and I haven't been laid in three years! It's not right!"

Hicks spent his childhood in Nottingham Forest Texas under the strict rule of his church going parents. When he was twelve he hooked up with a boy named Dwight Slade. The comic prodigies formed a team; imitating Woody Allen's early routines they entertained themselves and their school mates. By the time they were fifteen they were playing The Theatre Workshop in downtown Houston. Unfortunately, they split up a few months later when Dwight moved to Oregon.

Hicks continued performing at Houston's Comix Annex on his own until he graduated high school. On his first night at the club there was a demon-eyed, former boy preacher, named Sam Kinison on the stage. Seething and screaming, Kinison expounded his sweaty schtick. In one of his skits he would put a pair of men's bikini briefs over his jeans and sing a song called "I'm Mr. Lonely." By the end of the song when he was singing, "I'm a lonely soldier," he would pick a guy in the front row -- this time it was Hicks -- and start humping him. Thus began a long lasting friendship between the two comedians. Soon they moved to L.A and were picked out by talent scouts to appear in HBO's Young Comedians Special.

With an Andrew Dice Clay swagger Hicks lights his first cigarette of the show. "After the Clarence Thomas hearings and the Pee Wee Herman thing pornography has a really bad name in our country. And I'd like to state for the record right now: I love pornography. I love it. I have tapes that are pure art. People fuckin' and suckin', in every imaginable position, the finest looking women, fuckin', suckin' . . . I LOVE it . . . for the record."

Hicks became a regular at the the Comedy Store on Sunset Boulevard and at the club's Westwood venue, where he worked hard to improve his act and find his own voice. The clubs were owned by Mitzi and Sammy Shore; Hicks would earn extra money shuttling liquor between the two clubs and driving their son Pauly to school.

The HBO special didn't work out for Hicks. A few weeks later he was cast for a TV sitcom pilot called Bulba. It went nowhere and Bill soon moved to Austin. He roomed with college artists and film students David Johndrow and Kevin Booth. Together the three explored their own spirituality and political beliefs. They acquainted themselves with eastern philosophy, developed some radical anti-organized religion concepts and worked on some minor film projects together.

By 1983 he was still working at Comix Annex and getting frustrated with his career's lack of forward motion. "I suck, I'm not going anywhere. I can't feel anything," he wrote to his old friend Dwight. He had steered clear of drugs in the past but he felt to get in touch with the real geniuses of comedy -- like Bruce and Pryor -- he had to get in touch with their intoxicated worlds. That night he got wasted on tequila before a show. He came on stage pissed off, cursing, slurring his words and damning every so-called wholesome American institution in existence. He so insulted everyone in the audience that after the show two Vietnam vets broke his legs. His method had been sloppy at best that night but from that experience emerged a Bill Hicks with a purpose.

Like The Church Of The SubGenius's Reverend Ivan Stang, Hicks was a true Texan oddity -- a stunning example of human will power, giving the finger to the world's utter pinkness. Stang said of Hicks, "As far as I'm concerned that guy was a real hero, and it just figures that he's dead. He probably was the Messiah. Oh well. Frankly I feel that Hicks did perfectly what I've only been halfway successful at -- live preaching." For the next four years of his life he took the SubGenius commandment, "Too much is always better than not enough," to its self-destructive extreme.

He put meth, alcohol, mushrooms, LSD, cocaine, ecstasy, Quaaludes, Valium, crank, and anything else that could leave a man in shivers, into his body on a daily basis. Onstage he would drink, chain-smoke and rant -- not a joke to be found in his act. Soon he got a bad rep with the clubs and had most of his dates cut short. He was spending almost a thousand dollars a week on drugs and soon went broke. In January 1986 he was locked out of his apartment. "I have a killer idea. I was watching Terminator 2. I was thinking to myself, you know there's no way they are ever going to top these stunts in a movie again unless they start using terminally ill people as stunt men.

Nervous laughter. "Well, hear me out. I know to some of you this may seem a little cruel. (whiny voice) 'Ahh Bill, terminally ill stunt people? That's cruel.'" You know what I think cruel is, leaving your loved ones to die in some sterile hospital room surrounded by strangers. Fuck that, put 'em in the movie. Whaaaat? You want your grandmother to die like a little bird in some hospital room? Her skin so thin you can see her last heart beat work it's way down her blue veins . . .

"Or do you want her to meet Chuck Norris?"

"Hey, how come you dressed my mother up like a mugger?"

"Shut up and get off the set. Action. Push her towards Chuck."

"ssssssSSSSShhhhHHHCRUNCH!" "Wow, he kicked her head right off her body? Did you see that, did you see my grammy?" She's out of her misery and you've seen the greatest film of all time. I'm still feeling some resistance to this, what's up? You and your fake sympathy. Okay, not one of my more popular theories. But just do me one thing. Don't ever say you like film as much as I do. I think we've found your limit."

Hicks was taken in by a man named Jack Mark Wilkes who got him a rent-free room in a luxury high rise called the Houston House. In exchange Hicks, who was still a big name in Houston, would mention the House in his act. Wilkes and Hicks banded together with a gang of other comedians called the Houston Outlaws. They wore all black, threw epic cocaine-fueled parties and bounced off each other's manic creativity. This lasted until early 1988. When Hicks realized all his friends were junkies and drug dealers he decided to skip out on the whole scene. He got an apartment in New York, signed up with a manager and started playing about three hundred shows a year for the next four years. His act was finally at its peak; he was making it

as a stand-up philosopher with a mission. He compounded his radical opinions with the revelations in his personal life, and wowed audiences with the stinging pinball ricochet of his associations. He shocked audiences with his caricatures of Houston Hillbillies and trailer park turd people. He spoke out against pro-lifers, the Easter Bunny, Christians, politicians, and his love of vices, such as cigarettes and pornography. Hicks was the antidote to a nation being conquered by the politically correct. Perhaps earnest to a fault but he was funny enough to get away with it.

"I'm from Houston, Texas originally, I moved up here a year ago. The first thing I noticed when I came here was the homeless situation. Now I'm no bleeding heart, okay? But . . . when you're walking down the streets of New York and you step over someone who might be dead do you ever stop to think, 'wow, maybe our system doesn't work.' Does that push a memory bubble up out of you? If there was only a couple of bums I'd think 'well, they're just fuckin' bums,' but there's THOUSANDS of these guys. I'm running a bum hurdle down the street. It's the hundred yard bum hurdle.

"gotanymoneygotanymoneygotanymoneygotanymoney? I tipped that last bum but I didn't tip him over. Okay, that hurdle counts.

"Some of these guys look healthy but they're just bums. The very idea. They want me to just give them the hard earned money my folks send to me every week. "You leech. Get a job, my dad works eight hours a day for this money."

"You ever get those bums that turn mental on you? "Sorry, I don't got any money."

"MOTHERFUCKER!" "Wo wo, where's my checkbook? Hold on. Is that Mr. Bum? How do I make it out? Is that Capital Vagrant? I didn't know you were psycho, definitely wasn't your personality that put you on the street was it?"

With another guy, he said, "Thanks a lot, buddy. You don't know what it's like to be broke!" I said, "Yeah I do, that's why I work. I know exactly what it's like. You sleep on the pavement, you dig through the garbage for food and you bum money from strangers. Am I right?"

"That is what I do."

"I feel sorry for these guys because I don't know why they're bums. Nobody every asks them.

"What are you doing? Why are you digging through the garbage."

"You got a quarter?"

"Hey, for that same quarter I can get that bum to squeegee my window. I'm going to comparatively bum shop. I want the most for my bum quarter, and I want a receipt. That's how you get rid of them. Get a receipt.

"Some people say, "Don't give him any money, it's probably for drugs and alcohol"

"Yeah. You've never been a junkie then. Drugs are pretty important to a drug addict."

"God damn right it's for drugs, lady! And if you don't give it to me I'm going to cut out you fuckin' heart and eat it front of you."

"Well, if you put it that way." Ding.

"Thank you."

Over the next five years Hicks did a One Night Stand HBO Comedy special, filmed his first concert video, Sane Man, put out four comedy albums, Dangerous, Relentless, Arizona Bay and Rant In E-Minor, became a cult figure overseas, touring in Canada, Australia, and England, and appeared on David Letterman eleven times.

Yet his most infamous Letterman appearance was one no one ever saw. He had always done well on David Letterman but his act was always gutted by the shows' censors. Everything he

said had to be approved and re-approved. This sanitized Bill Hicks just didn't come across that well. On his last appearance he went for broke and did his act his way, taking no prisoners when it came to his favorite targets. He killed that night. It was never shown, "Too many hot spots," he was told by the show's producers. This got him more media attention than all his other appearances on Letterman combined.

"This is my final point (oh thank you god). About drugs, about alcohol, about pornography (whatever that is). What business is it of yours what I do, buy, read, see or take into my body as long as I do not harm another human being on this planet. And for all those people out there who are having a little moral dilemma in your head about how to answer that question I'll answer it for you: none of you fuckin' business! Take that to the bank, cash it, and take a vacation out of my life.

"But see, here's their argument to that each and every time: "but we have to protect the children, we have to protect the children." Listen children are smarter than any of us. You know how I know that? I don't know one child with a full time job and children. They're quick these kids. Fuckin' quick.

"But where did this veneration of childbirth come from? I missed that meeting. Childbirth is wonderful, childbirth is a miracle. Wrong. It's no more a miracle than eating food and a turd coming out your ass. You know what a miracle is? A miracle is raising a kid that doesn't talk at a movie theater.

"If it were a miracle then not every nine months any yin yang in the world could drop a litter of these mewling cabbages on the planet. And in case you have not checked the single mom statistics lately the miracle is spreading like wildfire. Hallujeh.

"Trailer parks all over America filling up with little miracles. Thunk, thunk, thunk. Look at all my little miracles. Filling up my trailer like a sardine can. Look at them.

"You know what would be a little miracle? If I could remember your daddy's name. I guess I'll have to call you Trucker Jr. That's all I remember about your daddy was his fuzzy little pot belly riding on top of me shooting his caffeine ridden semen into my belly to produce my little water head miracle baby child. Thunk. There's your brother, Pizza Delivery Boy Jr., thunk here's your other brother, thunk here's your other brother, Will Work For Food Jr."

One wonders what Hicks could have done if was given another couple of decades to achieve the brilliance he was striving for. But you can relive his recently re-released work on Rykodisc Records. Relentless, Dangerous, and Rant In E-Minor are all examples of Hicks at his best. Arizona Bay, produced after his death is poorly edited and is lacking in real Hicks energy. But when you listen to any comedy record you only get half the experience of seeing someone perform. To get the whole thing order his Video Sane Man, by sending fifteen dollars to Sacred Cow Productions P.O. Box 26231 Austin, Texas 78755.

"There's dick jokes on the way, please relax. People are goin', "this guy better have some good dick jokes, I'll tell you that honey. This guys better have a big long purple vain dick joke to pull himself out of this comedy hole." Throw down the big purple veined dick and I crawl out of it -- and that's gonna be the joke."