IS BILL HICKS THE VOICE OF 1990s COMEDY?
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By Gerald Nachman

It's rare to be astonished by a performer, but astonishing is the only word for Bill Hicks' recent show at Cobb's Comedy Club. Hicks may be the freshest -- surely most daring -- voice in stand-up in years: dangerous, incisive, vulgar, original and very funny.

Midway through his act, I realized just how banal and predictable comedy has grown, with too few exceptions, and how long since a distinctive personality arrived, a new voice with a compelling message. Rick Reynolds made a definite splash, with ripples, but Reynolds soothes whereas Hicks seethes.

You have to go back to Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, George Carlin and Richard Pryor to recall such an individual, piercing, idiosyncratic mind. He doesn't just make noise, or trouble, but says something that hasn't been said before, venturing into new areas and taking on riskier issues than Dan Quayle and Madonna, both beneath Hicks' contempt.

He saves his bile for worthier topics -- Jay Leno, CNN and childbirth are matters he takes special pleasure in mocking in the most coruscating, often crude, terms. However rough he gets, I felt my head opened up by Hicks. He's not everyone's cup of chicory, and may put off as many people as he entices, but if you like your comic witch's brew strong, black and laced with acid, Bill Hicks is the wit of choice.

Comedy lately has been quiescent, a nice way of saying dead. The comedy-club renaissance is long over and many rooms are hurting, having lost their sense of excitement, daring and mission, if they ever had one. Even when comedy clubs were hot they lacked a social conscience. The influx of female, ethnic and gay comics created a few semi-radical blips, yet even the most ingenious or outrageous gay comics, such as Mark Davis and Marga Gomez, seem tame alongside Hicks. Everyone does.

Hicks is called an 'outlaw' comic, a sloppy label to slap on him. He leaves the work of such comic gangsters as Bob Goldthwait, the late Sam Kinison and Andrew Dice Clay in the dust. His jokes don't just shock, which anyone can do by stringing together the right words; they take you in a new direction, challenge or rile you.

By 1990, comedy clubs began running on automatic pilot. The party was over. Club owners (and audiences) got lazy, threw open the doors and booked any stand-up who was upright. Many clubs made money just by keeping open. Crowds came out of habit, to see whoever was on the bill, so there was no need to search for anybody better or unique. Once cable made comedy as available, and as exciting, as weather reports, the comedy club turned into the old mellow neighborhood tavern where you pop in for a quick one to wind down. Hicks winds you up.

At Hicks' show, the audience was made up mostly people in their 20s and 30s who had wandered in after dinner to check out the action, dressed in sweat shirts, shorts and baseball caps. They sipped Anchor Steam and, after 15 minutes of standard shtick from a warm-up act, were stunned by what they heard from Hicks.

Bill Hicks isn't a nonentity -- he's done David Letterman's show 11 times and was Rolling Stone's comic to watch in '93 -- but the crowd seemed largely made up of strangers to his lacerating wit. The laughs sounded uneasy, tentative, almost like gasps, many wondering if they'd heard what they thought they heard; a few people left. It felt like the early subversive '60s, the era of Sahl, Bruce, Tom Lehrer, and Nichols and May, when comedians were called 'social satirists' as opposed to 'stand-up comics' -- vitriolic wits, not just jesters.

Now, in a creative as well as economic recession, club owners are trying to reinvent the form, just to survive (the Holy City Zoo closes August 30), so that comedy clubs don't go the way of cabarets. Clubs die when owners stop being adventurous, book indiscriminately, cease scouting new talent in New York and don't develop performers or shape acts.

Comedy impresario Ann Fox of the Punch Line recently attempted to link cabaret and comedy at the Jessup Cafe in Larkspur. The first half featured singers Ruth Hastings, Craig Jessup and Barry Lloyd in an hour of well-chosen, fondly performed, sophisticated show tunes. The second half showcased wit Dexter Madison doing his thinking man's Foster Brooks. It was an interesting, enterprising concept that didn't quite work -- the two forms failed to dovetail and Madison's droll character is funniest in brief doses. All in all, however, it was a decent effort to put comedy in a new context.

Improv owner Mark Anderson -- who owns eight rooms around the country -- also is scratching around for a format that will combine improvisational and sketch comedy. He believes sketch comedy is the wave of the future, even if it's also the wave of the past -- a throwback to early TV, revues and vaudeville. Anderson is trying out groups in his rooms like a man tinkering in his basement to find a formula that can revitalize nightclub comedy.

Sketch comedy had its last hurrah in the '60s and '70s, with such groups as Second City, Beyond the Fringe, the Committee, the Premise and Cambridge Circus (featuring a gawky guy named John Cleese) that satirized the scene. Second City became a brand name, with road companies that, like protozoa dividing and recombining, re- emerged in Canada as SCTV and, in New York, as the National Lampoon Lemmings, which spawned 'Saturday Night Live.'

'Saturday Night Live' gave sketch comedy a huge boost, but 'SNL' long ago lost its sting, relying largely on goofy characters, impersonations and TV takeoffs. The original 'SNL' wasn't that socially relevant but the sketches were sharper and the comics intrinsically funnier and unique. 'SNL' inspired such offspring as Los Angeles' Groundlings or, here, the National Theater of the Deranged, Faultline and Pulp Playhouse.

After Bruce, Sahl, et al., folk singers took up the social agenda, then rock, rap and now maybe it's comedy's turn again to define the landscape in smart, aware monologues and sketches that lambaste rather than lull like humorous elevator Muzak. Humzak? At Hicks' show, there were startled looks on faces that had grown up with Robin Williams, Steve Martin, Leno and Jerry Seinfeld. The crowd was less shocked at the jokes than at the idea of a comic with a strong point of view and a tough slant on America, the radical notion that a comic could be both funny and angry.

On the way out, I remembered Sahl's famous tag line: 'Is there anyone here I haven't offended?' It felt good to be offended again.