

**THE IRISH TIMES, MARCH 1, 1997**  
**LIFE AFTER DEATH**

*By Brian Boyd*

WHEN he sloped on, grabbed the mike and said "folks, this is my final live performance" the audience gasped. He passed it off as a gag: "The reason I'm quitting is that I finally got my own show on TV - it's called Let's Hunt And Kill Billy Ray Cyrus." Over the next hour-and-a-half of what really was to be his last performance, the part-poet/ part-preacher/part-comic set out his philosophy, touched all the bases and left us with his own personalised view on life and death and the whole damn thing.

That was October 1993. Five months, later at the age of 32, Bill Hicks died of cancer. If in life he was known as the best comic of his generation, possessing as he did the social satire of Lenny Bruce combined with the refined wit of John Updike, in death he became known, and strangely enough in this most secular of times, as a prophet.

On this, the third anniversary of his death, that last performance has been released on CD for the first time (along with three more CDs). It is one of the most astonishing live performances by anybody. He knew his time was running out and he wanted to get it all down. He did. Beginning by tearing into the pro-life movement and ending by calling Bill Clinton "a murderer and a liar" this is his final will and testimony. And in many ways, it's the end of comedy.

Bill Hicks was not widely known during his life. From Houston, Texas, he was initially just a wild, anarchic figure on the American comedy scene, a performer who once had his legs broken by a member of the audience who felt he was being unpatriotic. Because of his sustained attack on American society and culture, he was marginalised in his native country, except by David Letterman who had him on his show a record 12 times. He fared slightly better in Britain, where his shows at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival are now the stuff of legend. In London, he could fill the 2,000-seater Dominion Theatre: Channel 4 filmed two of his live shows and when he died, The South Bank Show devoted a whole programme to his life and times.

In the years since his death he has attracted a massive "celebrity" following: his fellow comics spew out superlatives about him and rock bands such as Radiohead and The Bluetones dedicate albums to him. With the increased profile arising from the release of his last performance, people will soon be used to seeing his name mentioned in the same company as Charlie Chaplin and Lenny Bruce.

In an interview with this journalist, he spoke fondly of his early days as a stand-up, a career he began at the age of 12. "I came from a very ordinary, middle-class Houston background, and when my parents thought I was upstairs in my room doing my homework, I had actually slid out the window, got on my bike and cycled into the local comedy club to do a routine." As some measure of his precocious ability and burgeoning genius, consider one of his first gags (and

remember he's only 12): "My dad's very lazy. He once worked in a mortuary measuring bodies for tuxedos. But he was fired. He was accused of having an intimate relationship with a corpse. The family was shocked ... we all knew it was a purely platonic relationship."

A few years later he moved to Los Angeles where he became a regular at its Comedy Store. Here he decided that if he wanted to become a real genius of comedy, like his heroes Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and Sam Kinison, he would have to do what they did and consume large amounts of drink and drugs. "I would drink my own body weight in whiskey and snort my own body weight in cocaine," he remembered. Somebody who saw his act got Lenny Bruce's close friend and producer, John Magnusson, down to see him.

"Bill Hicks was the only performer in 30 years who has truly reminded me of Lenny," says Magnusson. "Both have the very important qualities of savage, in-your-face, straight-to-the-gut satire. Each also has the moral courage to deal with the important issues of their time without fear of media, corporate, political or quasi-religious censorship or disapproval."

Hicks soon became known as the most important, confrontational, controversial and extravagantly talented performer on the circuit. "I want to expose the lies and deflate the hypocrisy," he said. "I am appalled at the anti-drug movement in my country, I am appalled by the fact that they can transmit a 'Just Say No' anti-drugs advertisement on our television screens and then follow it up with an advertisement for Budweiser beer. I am equally appalled by the arbitrary value system that deems one thing as pornography and another thing as 'erotica', I am appalled by our totalitarian government which has consistently lied to us about everything from the JFK assassination to selling arms to Iraq. And there's also pro-lifers and antismokers ... there's a lot of people out there."

ALTHOUGH he grew up in the Reagan/Bush era, he was not as enthused as many by the arrival of a Democrat in the White House: "Clinton's just a puppet, they've all just been puppets. Whenever a new American president is elected they are brought into a small dark room in which the 12 biggest industrial/corporate/military/economic heads are sitting. One of them pulls down a film screen and shows the new president a video of the JFK assassination from an angle never seen before. They then turn to the president and say 'Any questions?'"

On a tour of Australia in 1993 he began to feel unwell, getting sharp pains down the left side of his body. It was diagnosed as pancreatic cancer. How much time did he have? The doctors didn't know. He told nobody about his illness and hence there were more than a few raised eyebrows watching him perform during this time - he was neither drinking nor smoking. "Yes, I'm drinking water tonight," is how he opened one of his shows. "It's really amazing how things can change. Tonight: water. Four years ago: opium."

After performing his last gig, he readied himself for death. In February 1994

he telephoned all his friends and told them the news and died on the 26th of that month.

"Here is my final point," he once said, "about drugs, about alcohol, about pornography and smoking and everything else. What business is it of yours what I do, read, buy, see, say, think, who I fuck, what I take into my body - as long as I do not harm another human being on this planet. I'm basically just a joke-blower, a fairly harmless guy, a believer in love and truth, anti-war, a believer in the values under which this country was originally founded: freedom of expression. And for those of you out there who are having a little moral dilemma in your head about this, I'll answer it for you: It's None Of Your Fuckin' Business. Take that to the bank, cash it and take it on a vacation out of everybody's life ...