

“ANOTHER DEAD HERO”

By Andy Langer

"This is a Bill Hicks interview, not a Tool interview," declares Tool frontman Maynard James Keenan over the phone. Although California's progressive metalists have imposed a press blackout in order to protect the lyrical integrity of their brand new album, Aenima, Keenan has reluctantly made an exception to discuss Bill Hicks. After all, the late, Austin-based comedian gets big play on Aenima: several of his routines are sampled, there's a painting of him in the CD booklet titled Another Dead Hero, and the disc's back cover inlay depicts Hicks' California-in-the-ocean "Arizona Bay" theory. So, while Keenan says Aenima isn't a tribute to Hicks, he's fully aware what kind of exposure this highly anticipated album should give the late comedian. "[Our fans] will search him out," says Keenan. "That's why we put the picture on the album, so they can get a wider idea. It helps people understand where we're coming from as well if they can get perspective like that. They'll get Bill's tapes and listen to what he's talking about, listen to our album, and then hopefully have enough intellect to make the leap and say 'I see where the connection is.'"

Keenan says his own connection to Hicks originally came the same way most bands find musical inspiration -- from tapes someone hands them after a show. "They became a staple of the road," he says. By late 1992, after citing the comedian as inspiration on the liner notes of Tool's full-length debut, Undertow, Keenan mailed the album to Hicks, followed that up with a call, and started a phone dialogue. "He came down to Lollapalooza in Los Angeles and introduced the band," Keenan says. "We saw him a couple times after that, talked to him a couple times more, and then he decided to check out."

Although Keenan says they had almost worked out details for a co-headlining tour just before Hick's death in 1994, the mutual admiration society between the musician-turned-comedian and the ultra-political singer developed mostly by phone and tape exchange.

"The music is a catalyst for the ideas," says Keenan, who saw Hicks perform only once, but nevertheless owns bootlegged versions of the albums Rykodisc is planning to release. "His ideas were what really resonated with us. I think that's what he really liked about us as well -- that we were resonating similar concepts. Unity is the philosophical center. Evolution. Change. Internally and externally. Individually and globally. That's pretty much the gist of his comedy no matter what he was talking about -- music, porno, smoking. Whatever it was, it came back to the idea of unity and evolution. Evolving ideas."

Initially, finding the ideological middle ground between Hick's painstakingly straightforward comedy and Tool's gloom is obscured by the length and depth of Aenima's 77-minute attack. Still, the most obvious connection are the Hicks' samples that end Aenima's title cut and segue into the album-closing, "Third Eye," a song about the government's war on drugs.

"It didn't take too much digging," says Keenan of the sample selection process. "We've heard the tapes enough to where when we were coming up with that particular song, dealing with that particular medium, it was very simple to pick those particular passages. They definitely sum up the idea that's being spoken in that song."

Keenan says further explanation would constitute a Tool interview, but agrees to discuss the painting of Hicks on Aenima's CD booklet -- Kevin Willis' portrait of the comedian in a lab coat examining a three-eyed alien's leg. "I see Bill Hicks pulling my leg, using the medium he used the best to convey his ideas: comedy," he says.

"The message that he's bringing forward in his work is an age-old message. It's been around in every major religion and every sub-minor religion. It's all about unity. I just think it's important

that in his particular demographic he was spreading that idea. That's the important thing. We have such a diversity now of media and information dispersal that it's almost like each area has to hit its demographic. In Bill's particular demographic, the comedy circuit, people need gut laughter relief -- especially since comedians themselves are so tortured. People think that comedians are all happy and jovial all the time. No, they're pretty sad people, otherwise they wouldn't have gone into this medium. So, he served that purpose in that demographic."

While Keenan admits Aenima, which chart pundits predict as a sales blockbuster, is his own attempt to hit the teenage metal demographic with a message of unity, he says it remains to be seen if the Hicks/Tool common ground has limits. "We're speaking the same message," says Keenan, "but in a different language." And although the Tool frontman is saddened by losing the comedian's artistic feedback, he's also optimistic about Hicks reaching important demographics post-mortem.

"If you look at Bill's work and really understand where he's coming from, you start to realize he's not really gone, he's just going through a change. Which is what he said throughout his entire work.... He's just gone through a change, whatever aspect of him that was, whatever part of soul was in that physical form at that time has just changed form... Even in the passage when he's talking about the young man on acid realizing all matter is merely energy condensed with soil vibration, he says there's no such thing as death," says Keenan, paraphrasing one of Aenima's samples.

"I don't think we lost anything. Perhaps his soul decided it was time to check out," Keenan concludes. "I think in the particular medium he was working in, it was almost more powerful. It will be more powerful and more effective if he's not here. It may be one of those things that end up transcending themselves."