

OVERDUE BILL AUSTIN CHRONICLE

By Ken Lieck

In March of 1994, everything was going gangbusters for the career of comedian/social commentator Bill Hicks. He had two albums of funny, penetrating material in the can and ready for release, two previous albums and a pair of HBO specials under his belt, a relentless touring schedule, and a growing UK fanbase that was making the American export with fearless material and killer timing an instant legend. And, in a move that's been the ultimate career boost for so many, he had just died.

Hicks' death at age 32 came as a shock to the growing number of people who were becoming fans of his acerbic, fearless brand of comedy, a scythe-like, relentless wit that had critics putting him in that small book of great comics, alongside Lenny Bruce and Woody Allen. It came as a shock to his friends as well; Hicks had chosen not to tell anyone about the diagnosis of his pancreatic cancer until he had literally weeks remaining in his life. Typical of Hicks, he couldn't be bothered to tell anyone -- there was too much to get done and too little time.

Hicks was born on December 16, 1961, perhaps not coincidentally Beethoven's birthday, and through his youth was bound and determined to be on stage, or make one out of wherever he was. One of his high school teachers got so frustrated with him that she offered Hicks the first five minutes of class to perform -- on the condition that he return control to her afterward. By age 15, he was sneaking out of his parents' Houston home to perform at the local Comedy Workshop, and in time became one of the founding members of the Outlaw Comics, an unruly group of comedians that also featured Sam Kinison. Hicks was easily as loud as Kinison, and he peppered his routines with language as shocking as that of any "raunchy" comic, but behind his epithets was a cry for reason, for understanding in a world he felt had gone mad. His use of obscenity was not a cheap ploy for "blue" laughs but an expression of rage. Once, I informed him that Andrew "Dice" Clay would be appearing in town the night before his own performance. "Consider me the antidote," he shot back.

A typical Hicks rant would find the boyish-looking tornado railing at some real obscenity, like war or hunger, using humor to deliver a scathing assault on the problem: "[hysterical woman voice] 'Oh, childbirth is such a miracle, it's such a miracle!' -- Wrong! It's no more a miracle than eating food and a turd coming out of your ass. You know what a miracle is? A miracle is raising a kid who doesn't talk in a fuckin' movie theatre. There's your goddamn miracle. If it were a miracle, then not every nine months any ying-yang in the world could drop a litter of these mewling fucking cabbages on the planet. And in case you haven't checked the single mom statistic recently, the miracle is spreading like fuckin' wildfire."

Fan and peer Dennis Miller admirably summed him up as "one of the best comedians in the world; a discernible point of view, great mind, attitude -- the whole bag. He works completely for me." Hicks' uncompromising stances kept him from reaching the heights Kinison did (though the two remained close friends), but make no mistake, Hicks was maniacally driven.

If getting his word out meant screaming to crowds of yokels in "comedy hollers" in backwoods towns every night of his life and sleeping in cheap, smelly motel rooms, then that's damn well what he would do. While Kinison gave up being a preacher to become a comedian, Hicks simply found a way to be both at the same time. As such, Hicks never really had one home to speak of, choosing instead a nomadic life that had him staying with friends or in hotels in cities such as Austin, which he first visited around 1980 when his friend Kevin Booth came to UT. Not surprisingly, Hicks grew to love Austin, considering it one of his homes, yet

claiming he couldn't stay here for long periods due to a dread of falling into the "slacker" lifestyle.

He hung around long enough to become friends with loads of Austin musicians, and at one of his last Austin shows offered up this typically astute observation: "I was in Australia, and the Australians had a big contingency at the Branch Davidian compound. I'm from Texas so they were very curious and they were asking me all about it. 'Oh, he's so weird, this guy Koresh is so weird,' and I was thinking, well, wait a minute... Frustrated musician, with a messianic complex, armed to the teeth and trying to fuck anything that moves... I don't know how to tell you this, but that sounds like every one of my friends in Austin! I don't know if this is gonna be an isolated incident -- I'm waiting for Will Sexton to build a complex somewhere." If memory serves, Sexton was in the audience that night, laughing harder than anyone.

Hard touring throughout the Eighties eventually paid off and Hicks graduated to television, racking up 11 Late Night appearances with David Letterman on NBC between '91 and '93, only to find his first (and only) Late Show appearance on CBS cut from the broadcast, even though his material had been approved and re-approved by the network. Letterman would later express his regrets over the incident, for what good that did. Hicks had already told me previous to the Letterman debacle that "I wanna come out on TV one night with a straitjacket and a gag over my mouth and just hop out, go 'hurrur, urrur, hurr hurrur,' and hop away." With an interest in his work rising in the UK, the Late Show incident was the final straw for Hicks regarding the States. Hicks gave himself over to England, where his performances were demanding larger and larger venues. Unfortunately, by this point, he was running out of time.

Hicks died on February 26, 1994. He left behind him a sizable body of work, including the albums *Dangerous* (1991) and *Relentless* (1992) on the Invasion Records label, and the unreleased *Rant in E Minor* and *Arizona Bay*. Three concert videos exist: the Austin-made *Sane Man*, an HBO *One Night Stand*, and the made-for-British-television *Revelations* (shown in truncated form on these shores by HBO). There is also an album of music by him and his friends under the name *Marble Head Johnson*. All told, a strong legacy. Now, if only some of it were available to the public.

More than two years after Hicks' passing, *Rant in E Minor* and *Arizona Bay* remain unreleased, *Relentless* and *Dangerous* are nearly impossible to find, and the concerts, aside from *Sane Man*, are available on video only in the UK. Fans around the world scramble for any and all bootleg Hicks material they can scrounge. They are frustrated and confused, and, as a search on the Internet will reveal, they are rabid, and growing rapidly in number. Imagine then the flurry of speculation created by progressive noise-metal mongers Tool and their new, expected-to-go-multi-platinum album *Aenima*, which features samples of Hicks' routines as well as a prominently displayed painting of the late comedian titled "Another Dead Hero."

Coupled with persistent rumors that Rykodisc is on the verge of releasing some of the aforementioned items, and it suddenly became clear that a few inquiries to the Hicks estate needed to be made. First stop, Kevin Booth. Entering Booth's central Austin home, I note with some irony that *I'm From Hollywood*, the documentary on the later years of comic madman Andy Kaufman, one of the few stand-ups whose flair came anywhere near Hicks', is running on Comedy Central. Still more ironically, when I leave, several programs will have gone by and the image on the screen will have devolved to that of prop-dependent gagster Gallagher preparing to smash a watermelon for a squealing crowd -- an act that particularly galled Bill: "Only in America can you have a comedian who ends his show by destroying good food with a sledgehammer!" Hicks once stated. "I guarantee there won't be any Gallagher World Tour

any time soon -- and if there is, there will be no dates in Somalia. [Child's voice] 'We will get tickets to Gallagher and hopefully we will catch a watermelon rind and live another day!'"

Booth is sitting in his home studio, Fossil Creek, where he does the audio portion of his work for Sacred Cow Productions, from whence has come works both with Hicks (Sane Man and the kung-fu parody Ninja Bachelor Party) and without (videos by bands such as Coffee Sergeants and Pam Mayo). It's very quiet, with the only distraction being his cat and two wolf-dogs milling about. Here is where Booth has been mixing and remixing Hicks' posthumous works, Rant in E Minor and Arizona Bay. Most of this summer, in fact, has been spent in mixing Rant. and Booth is happy to have not heard it for around three weeks.

In fact, it's been during the long mixing process that Booth says he found himself starting to fight with people: "You listen to your dead friend screaming 10 hours a day, and it starts to take its toll on you. My ex-girlfriend comes over and she's just, 'I don't know how you can do this'. I'm like, 'I have no choice -- I couldn't just walk away from it.' The very last time I talked to Bill and he could barely speak, I promised him I would see this thing through." Booth pauses at this point, then sighs, "I'm going to punch Bill when I see him again."

But the question is why is Booth mixing Rant. Why and for whom? The answer to both turns out to be Rykodisc, but to say that's the whole story would be an understatement of biblical proportions. Thus the story begins to unravel.

"When somebody dies that everybody cares about a lot," explains Booth, "everybody just kind of freaks out and everybody really freaked out when Bill died. It's been kind of a long, hard road." Two grieving parties, Booth and Hicks' family, found themselves thrown into a situation where they became adversaries of sorts. Hicks was very ill when he wrote his will, resulting in a document that Booth says "didn't exactly spell out how he wanted everything done" and left Booth's and the Hicks family's lawyers with plenty of room for interpretation. Basically, it stipulated that the Hicks family owned all of Bill's material, while Booth owned the tapes that material is on. The result? "I inherited Bill's mom," jokes Booth.

Some fans who have seen Hicks' parents, Jim and Mary, on It's Just a Ride, the biographical documentary about the comedian -- or are simply aware of the fact that they are Southern Baptists -- have formed the (believable) assumption that they might be the cause for the delay. After all, Hicks was never one to shy away from controversial subjects like cross-wearing Christians ("When Jesus comes back, you think he wants to see a fucking cross?") or pornography ("One of my big fears is that I'm gonna die and my parents are gonna come over to clean out my apartment and find that porno wing I've been adding onto... There'll be two funerals that day -- I'll be the only one going through the gates of heaven with his Mom running behind spanking him"). These are not subjects that tend to get tossed around at the Ice Cream Social.

The elder Hickses are in the middle of a bus tour of the northern states and Canada when they get word I want to speak to them about the forthcoming Rykodisc releases. Mary Hicks, described accurately by Booth as "a very powerful woman," phones promptly to set up a time when we can speak. Jim Hicks is out with a group of other tourists observing the eclipse of the moon when I call back and appears to be quite satisfied to stay out of the negotiations. In fact, nearly everyone I spoke to during the course of my investigations repeated his same quote, the one immortalized on It's Just A Ride: "I couldn't understand why Bill used the 'F-word' so much. I said, 'Well, Bill, I don't hear Bob Hope using it...' And of course he didn't like that, and he didn't like Bob Hope too much, so he took issue with that statement." (Others repeat Bill's actual reply as "Well, Dad, Bob Hope doesn't play the shitholes I play!")

Mary Hicks is sitting out the lunar phenomenon and is brief and businesslike in her pronouncement that "You're lookin' for nitty gritty? There's no nitty gritty. It just took a long time. I don't know anything about this type of business -- I wish it had come out immediately, but as far as I can tell, things don't happen just like that. The bottom line of all of this is: All of Bill's material -- every bit of it -- belongs to the Hicks family. Kevin has been asked to be the producer." Things are not without tension, even at this stage. At one point she blurts out, "Why? What did Kevin tell you?"

Bill's brother Steve Hicks, speaking on his patio phone to avoid the "four 10-year-olds doing the Macarena" inside at his daughter's birthday party, elaborates somewhat on his mother's statements, offering that "there was some animosity, but that's probably normal in a situation like this." He shoots down the idea that his parents might have a problem with his brother's material: "Sure, their friends don't talk that way, [but] they would tell their friends at church when Bill was going to be on Letterman or HBO." He further describes a performance by Bill in Las Vegas where "my father was trying his hardest not to laugh, but he couldn't hold it in." Mary clearly respects her son's work; she just wants to be assured that people understand the soul behind it. "Bill was a very special person," she says sternly but earnestly. "He was a very gentle person. He was not like what he did on stage. He believed what he did and he believed what he said, if you get his underlying message, but he was not that person offstage."

Still, this attitude didn't keep Booth from sweating bullets when it came time for Mary Hicks to approve Rant. "When I sent her the first copy of Rant in E Minor, I was holding my breath," says Booth. "I had no idea what to expect -- [Motherly voice] 'Kevin, I like the second take of the "Suck your own cock" bit, but I think you should put a little more compression on the voice and tweak up the guitars.'" In the long run, though, Booth says that any offense to her sensibilities in the material takes a back seat to her maternal instinct: "I think she just likes hearing Bill talk." Between disagreements over the handling of the albums and dealing with their personal loss, it took nine months before the two parties began to accomplish anything. At that point, Bill's manager/fiancée, Colleen McGarr, initiated a deal with Zoo Entertainment which "went down the toilet" when the label balked on a clause allowing the rights to eventually revert back to the family, says Booth. Steve Hicks notes that there were long delays during that time when Zoo wouldn't return calls or the person they needed to contact was on vacation, dragging things out further.

Finally, Rykodisc, a label known for its reverential treatment of the late Frank Zappa's catalog, came through with an offer, and negotiations (and the delays that come with them) began anew. What with working things out among Ryko, Booth, and both Booth's and the Hicks' lawyers, it took until May of this year to get all the contracts signed. So, that leaves us with the albums, or at least Rant, on the racks now, right? Unfortunately, no. Things seem fuzzy in the latest delay; Ryko and Mrs. Hicks have both implied that Booth didn't get all the tapes to the label when he was supposed to. (Ryko A&R director Jeff Rougvie says, "I've been waiting for that tape of Rant." but adds without indignation that "it was worth the wait!") Booth, on the other hand, says that Ryko had Rant. in hand for months before the one person who needed to listen to it did so.

When I make a return visit to Booth's house, he plays back a phone message that has just come in from the person in charge of the project at Ryko, David Greenberg. In his message, Greenberg says he has just listened to the album and suggestions are on the way. "Now he wants to be a producer," moans Booth. The notes, which arrive the next day, are extensive, calling for less music with the comedy and a major rearrangement of the material. Booth sighs

deeply, wondering aloud if Greenberg is aware that the music in question is Hicks', and that it's there because the comedian wanted it there. Booth wants it, too.

"The music is like the sugar that helps the medicine go down," explains Booth. "It gives insight into who he is; it shows a very vulnerable side of Bill you don't see in his comedy." Booth steels himself for a long letter of his own to Greenberg, who has also included a draft of a potential warning sticker for the album where "weenies," "right-wingers" and "hoo-hahs" should prepare to be offended. Greenberg's notes do not explain precisely what characterizes a person as a "hoo-hah."

It's not likely that having tapes in hand -- if in fact they didn't -- would've saved a 1996 release date for Rant., as Ryko says they didn't want to lose the album in the pre-Christmas shuffle, anyway. This, then, pushes the release date back to February, 1997. (Booth, sounding uncannily like Hicks, asks the inevitable question: "What better to buy your honey [for Valentine's Day]? I could get her a box of chocolate, flowers, or this guy screaming about Barbara Bush's flaccid labia lips"). Wait a minute, scratch the Cupid gig. Rougvie says he can't guarantee a February release, though he seems sure Rant. will come out in the first quarter of next year.

And here's a surprise: Rougvie says that all four albums will be making their appearance at the same time, though separately packaged, not as a box set. In fact, he's already looking forward excitedly to the release, gushing that "I'm pretty much ready to do anything." Since many bands are known to listen to whatever Hicks material they can get their hands on while in the tour van, Rougvie jokes that "I almost feel like putting an ad in Pollstar saying, 'If you're going on the road, call this number and we'll send you a free tape!'"

His enthusiasm is admirable, but I doubt even that would save him from Hicks' wrath. As the comedian cries in the Revelations video: "By the way, if anyone here is in advertising or marketing... kill yourself. No, no, no it's just a little thought. I'm just trying to plant seeds. Maybe one day, they'll take root. I don't know. You try, you do what you can. Kill yourself. Seriously though, if you are, do. Aaah, no really, there's no rationalization for what you do and you are Satan's little helpers. Okay -- kill yourself -- seriously. You are the ruiner of all things good, seriously. No this is not a joke. You're going, 'There's going to be a joke coming.' There's no fucking joke coming. You are Satan's spawn filling the world with bile and garbage. You are fucked and you are fucking us. Kill yourself. It's the only way to save your fucking soul, kill yourself."

McGarr, whose voice evokes a cheerful spirituality akin to Hicks' more introspective moments, takes the delays as a blessing. She points out that while the albums may still not be available, "every year since Bill has left, something has happened, just not on album." She cites the It's Just a Ride documentary, a recent tribute to Hicks at the Montreal "Just for Laughs" International Comedy Festival, and a snowballing underground interest. Steve Hicks presents a partial list of Bill-related items and events: references in books by New Yorker critic and Hicks aficionado John Lahr, comedienne Brett Butler, and a British professor named Will Kaufman, the last of which gave Booth a few chills: "He came to my house and seemed normal enough, but then he jumped out of his chair and asked, 'Did Bill ever sit in this chair?' I said 'Yeah, I guess,' and he got all excited and took pictures of it."

McGarr, who still manages comedians as a partner in Strauss/McGarr Entertainment, further asserts that when Hicks was around, comedy albums were "pretty much a dead issue," and that due to successful discs from Jeff Foxworthy and Adam Sandler (both comics that Hicks would've had many choice expletives for), "now there's a market for comedy records again."

Steve Hicks, a manager for the Hastings Records chain flagship here in Austin, points to last week's Billboard, which sported no less than five new comedy albums in a cover feature, and the fact that Eddie Murphy is now starting a new comedy label. Bill's friend and fellow comedian Dwight Slade currently has an album out that's dedicated to Hicks and contains a photograph of the two of them together, while several bands including Radiohead have dedicated albums to him as well. That's not surprising, as critics have often referred to Bill as a "rock & roll comedian," in that he brought an edge to comedy similar to that in rock, making him interesting to the young and rebellious.

The biggest boost to public awareness of Hicks then, probably comes in the form of Aenima, the aforementioned new Tool album. Tool founder Maynard James Keenan even defies a band decision not to do interviews just to talk about Hicks (see sidebar), all but shouting, "Our album was out October 1 and at least Relentless and Dangerous should be available so kids can go and buy the records... I've spoken to [Ryko] quite a bit. They don't seem to get it. I've yelled at them, but they don't seem to get it!" McGarr, a friend of the band, says that Tool has already been getting e-mail to their website demanding information about Hicks.

Steve Hicks says he gets e-mail "constantly" from fans and is accosted at his retail job when Bill followers realize who he is. Fortunately, he says, he never tires of talking about his brother. Booth does tire, but then he gets the bulk of the communications. For example, he showed me one recent letter from a 15-year-old wanting to purchase videotapes of Ninja and Sane Man, shows that he produced for and with Bill, which caused another snag along the road of negotiations since the Hicks family doesn't want him selling the tapes. This only frustrates him further since the Internet is full of fans selling bootlegs of the videos because they're not available.

Booth also finds himself frequently asked out to dinner by fans of Hicks, and mutters that, "There's nothing like sitting down with a complete stranger and answering a million questions about your dead friend. Really helps the food settle, alright...." Then there's the one about the young lady from Scotland whose entire American vacation was built around visiting the Hicks' home and Graceland.

All this, however, is better than no interest at all in Hicks. Still, some fans worry that by the time Hicks' final projects finally reach the marketplace, his material will be dated. McGarr will hear none of this. Calling Hicks' material "timeless," she says that "every time I look at the news, the players haven't changed." Nevertheless, Booth bemoans the fact that Arizona Bay would be perfectly timed right now because current events in Iraq so closely parallel what Hicks called the "Gulf War Distraction": "People said; 'Uh, uh, Bill. Iraq had the fourth largest army in the world.' Yeah, maybe, but you know what? After the first three largest armies, there's a real big fuckin' drop-off, alright? The Hare Krishnas are the fifth largest army in the world, and they've already got our airports, okay? I think that's the greater threat right now." There is one fear that overshadows Booth's concern about Hicks remaining topical, and it's a telling one on the subject of topicality; the pilfering of the comedian's material. Booth says he hears Hicks' best routines coming from the mouths of vampiric young comics every time he watches Comedy Central -- sometimes almost verbatim. But McGarr remains unfazed.

"There are always going to be people trying to emulate Bill in the wrong way," she explains, her words betraying no trace of negativity. "But no one can do the material the way he did. That's why Bill is eternal."

Hopefully, sometime in the first quarter of 1997, a lot more people are going to find that out for themselves.

