

PROFILE: BILL HICKS

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By Doug Stern

Flames shoot up out of the black stage and 'Voodoo Chile' blasts from the loudspeakers. A figure rises up amidst the smoke. Bill Hicks, dark knight of the comedy world, begins his act. Hicks' comedy tears into everything. He stalks the stage dressed in black, the Johnny Cash of Comedy. He asks why exercise is so good for you if super-jogger Jim Fixx died of a heart attack. He makes quick work of television ads that use sex to sell everything and rock stars that come out against drugs after getting most of their inspiration from pharmaceutical adventures. Black is a good color for Bill Hicks.

Bill Hicks is a stand-up comedian like Muhammad Ali was a boxer. He is very successful at what he does. Not just because his jokes are better than anyone else's, though they are; and not because his observations are more dead-on, though they are; but, because Bill Hicks tells the truth.

Hicks grew up in Houston and got his start on stage at the Comedy Workshop. The Workshop spawned 'Houston Outlaw' comics like Fred Greenlee and the late Sam Kinison. "We all had that same philosophy. We all believed in what we said."

Audiences love Bill Hicks, probably because he doesn't care if they like him or not. Austin crowds especially enjoy him. "There is a weird energy in Austin, everybody knows that. I think they are open to the alternative," he says.

"Alternative" is a good word to describe Hicks. In May he begins shooting episodes of a TV series for the BBC entitled, "Counts of the Netherworld." The show features Hicks and Kansas City comedian Fallon Woodland interviewing "guests we like. People whose work we respect. Considering Hicks' tastes, it could make for some unusual guests. How about Simpsons creator Matt Groening and Charles Manson on the same show?"

The trend towards sameness bothers Hicks, who calls television "Lucifer's Dreambox." He feels performers often do not live up to their roles. He asks, "Aren't we supposed to be agents of evolution?"

Hicks views artist who do commercials as sell-outs, so it was ironic that a British company asked him to do TV ads for their product, 'Orange Drink.' He was skeptical. "Orange Drink? What the fuck is it? Well, it's certainly orange. Let's drink it. The Count of the Netherworld hawking soda pop?"

"Hi this is Bill Hicks. I get parched being an agent of evolution, so I drink Orange Drink." Somehow it's hard to imagine Bill Hicks ever selling out.

Comedians are often a paranoid bunch, seeing joke stealers behind every microphone stand. Unfortunately it does happen. Many observers tend to see large portions of Bill's act in that of new pop-icon and MTV star Denis Leary. Watching Leary is like seeing Hicks from two years ago. He smokes with the same mannerisms. (Hicks recently quit) He sports the same attitude, the same clothes. He touches on almost all of the same themes. Leary even invokes Jim Fixx. Hicks says, "I have a scoop for you. I stole his act. I camouflaged it with punchlines, and to really throw people off, I did it before he did."

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. In this case Leary is not Bill's only fan. The Count's career is taking off in all the right directions. And on his terms. He tours almost constantly and could be on the road even more. HBO specials have long been a badge of accomplishment for stand-up performers. Hicks, a veteran HBO presence, has an hour-long show coming up in May. This performance was taped before a live audience at London's Dominion Theatre.

Luckily it was before a live audience. The day after the show, a truck packed with explosives was found outside the theatre. The car bomb was probably set for the British Royal Family who were attending a show the next night, but Hicks is not convinced.

Terrorist bombings aside, Hick's no-nonsense approach has made him a hit in England. His popularity in the UK. is unusual for an American comic. "Perhaps," he says, "it's my pale skin."

Hicks has a new comedy album coming out and it was recorded live at Austin's Laff Stop on December 21. He was in town recently to work on mixing the album with local producer Kevin Booth. The album, 'Arizona Bay,' refers to what the West Coast will look like after the big earthquake hits and sends Los Angeles into the Pacific.

He recently went to Waco and shot footage of himself in front of the Branch Davidian compound for use in a video for one of the tracks on 'Arizona Bay.' "The bit on the album is about fundamentalist Christians. Right behind those walls, they were cleaning their guns." As might be expected, Hicks provides a fresh take on the events in Waco. "Are there people in Asia claiming to be Buddha? 'I'm staying in this Chinese restaurant, reading fortune cookies over the loudspeaker until my demands are met.'"

Hicks is on the road now, spending April in Australia and May in London shooting his television show. Don't worry the Count of the Netherworld will return to Austin soon. Rest assured he'll be back on his own terms. Bill Hicks will be back in black.