

PROPHET OF RAGE

UNCUT MAGAZINE (UK), MARCH, 1999

Bill Hicks was the most seditious, offensive, impassioned and rigious comic of his generation. He died five years ago this month. Simon Lewis gotta get a witness.

PROPHET OF R A G E

"GOOD EVENING...OH. OH, JESUS CHRIST. I'VE had more people in bed before than this. In fact, they were at the hotel. I left them to come here and do this... don't I feel like a fuckin' idiot? This could be one of my last performances, ladies and gentlemen. I'm serious. I've had it. Sixteen years I've pounded my head against the mentality of America. Bear with me while I plaster on a fake smile and plough through this shit one more time. I'm very tired of traveling, and very tired of doing comedy, and very tired of staring out at your vacant faces looking back at me, wanting me to fill your empty lives with humour you couldn't possibly think of yourselves. Good evening!"

The Laff Stop comedy club, Austin, Texas, October, 1993. Bill Hicks is trying to rouse a listless crowd. Post-yuppie couples, most of them. Seinfeld fans. Drunk frat-boys who just rolled in to see whatever "hey, ain't airplane food the pits?" observational bottom-feeder happened to be on stage. A lot of them don't even know Hicks is. He's been doing this since he was 13 years old -- and they still don't listen. Bill Hicks has some things to say. He knows time is right. He has four months to live.

Hard to believe that a comic this incendiary and insightful, who throughout his long career had been compared to Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, a man whom both Radiohead and Rage Against The Machine dedicated albums to, could wind up in a small club in his home state and still struggle to draw crowds. In Britain, he was mobbed in the street after just one TV appearance (his set at the 1991 Montreal Just For Laughs festival was shown uncut on BBC2, something he never achieved back home), and was selling out London's 2,500 capacity Dominion theatre within two years of first setting foot here.

But then, Hicks wasn't trying to bring down our government. America's government -- now that was a different matter. "A comic," he once said, "is the guy who says, 'Wait a minute' as the consensus forms." At least, that's

what he told the press. To audiences who dared heckle him, he'd phrase it differently: "Let's you and I chat politics on your fuckin' porch, you fuckin' redneck hillbilly piece'a shit, you. Fuck America if that's America, and fuck you, too."

America does not take kindly to that kind of thing. How Hicks -- anti-patriot, anti-Church, anti-corporatism -- fought against a country of "knobby-knee'd white guys walkin' the planet with the black nylon fuckin' socks, their fat fuckin' tick-like wives and their fat fuckin' hateful children" is a story as depressing as it is inspiring. He's dead now. Was it worth it?

WILLIAM MELVIN HICKS WAS BORN ON DECEMBER 16th, 1961, in Valdosta, Georgia, the youngest of three kids to General Motors area manager Jim Hicks and his wife, Mary, both strict Southern baptists. As a teenager, Hicks idolised Woody Allen, memorised his book, *Without Feathers*, got his mannerisms down and made his classmates laugh so much that his teacher had to give him five minutes of stand-up at the start of each lesson, just to get it out of his system. He wrote jokes every night, rarely speaking to his parents even at mealtimes. Hicks' first taste of fame -- a six-week run at an open mic slot at the San Filipe [sic] Theatre Workshop in 1978 when he was just 17 -- was cut short when his parents found out and grounded him. "We were living the American Dream," he complained of his folks' small-mindedness, "but there was no life, and no creativity. That, to me, is the suburbs. You get to a

point, and that's it... it's over." He became even more resentful and sullen. His parents took him to a psychotherapist, in time-honoured Southern "boy ain't right" style. The therapist took Bill aside after the session: "Listen, you can continue to come if you want. But it's them, not you." Hicks' career only began after his folks moved away to Little Rock, Arkansas, leaving him in Houston to hang around the Comix Annex, where the biggest draw was a wildly offensive ex-preacher from Oklahoma named Sam Kinison, who used to drag people out of the audience and fake-hump them onstage. The first night Hicks went to see him, he ended up the one pinned under Kinison's giant, thrusting beergut. You can't be choosy about career opportunities.

Kinison took the 17-year-old comedian under his wing as part of his Texas Outlaw comics group alongside Riley Barber and Carl LaBove, started referring to him as The Little Prince... sometimes The Prince Of Darkness... and asked him to come with him to LA to try and crack the Comedy Store, the stand-up mecca where Richard Pryor and Robin Williams were raking it in. It was Kinison, in fact, who persuaded Hicks' parents to let him go -- and even pay his way: "comedy tuition" instead of college. Critics often refer Hicks' debt to Kinison, who died in a car crash in 1992 -- even Hicks' brother Steve said, "My dad always said he hoped someone like Bob Hope would discover Bill and show him the ropes -- but instead he had Sam Kinison." Certainly, the shameless blasphemy, the demonic stage presence, the shrieks and the curses were Kinison trademarks. But since Kinison started his comedy career only a year or so before Hicks, he may well have "shared" his young protégé's material, the way all-smokin', all-gruntin' New York motormouth Denis Leary appears to have "shared" Hicks' entire set in the late Eighties. Compare Leary's No Cure For Cancer, Hicks' Dangerous and Kinison's Have you Seen Me Lately? Albums, and then check the dates. "I have a scoop for you," Hicks once said of Leary, "I stole his act. I camouflaged it with punchlines, and to really throw people off, I did it before he did."

THE OUTLAWS DEVELOPED A NEW KIND OF ANGRY, anti-authoritarian comedy that pitted them against the rapidly hardening Reaganite consensus ("All governments are lying cocksuckers," Hicks would growl). Only Lenny Bruce had attempted this level of politicisation before, and was banned from appearing in New York as a result. Hicks claimed never to have been influenced by Bruce beyond the way he flowed and free-associated onstage: this was their own thing. "I think one day the Houston influence will be a chapter in the development of comedy," Hicks said in 1992. "We believe it has a meaning other than making money. We have a philosophy that's very overt -- you should tell the truth, expose the lies and live in the moment." The 20-year-old Hicks was a hit at the Comedy Store, playing up the redneck thing... "In our troubled world, you hear a lot of folks calling for revolution. Down South, they're calling for evolution. WE WANT OUR THUMBS!" He sent scripts to film and TV producers and even got a part in a pilot sit-com called Bulba, which bombed. But he hated LA. "it's ugly here," he complained, "every day is 80 degrees and sunny. People say 'Ain't it great, Bill? Every day, hot and sunny.' What are you, a fucking lizard? I have the soul of a poet -- not a Gila monster."

In 1982, he moved back to Houston, where he toured the South, working for a time as Jay Leno's warm-up. He was depressed though, bored of comedy. One night Hicks, who had always steered clear of drink and drugs, gambled on a different approach: before going onstage, he took his first ever shot of tequila. And then another. And then another nine. "The whole show was him lying on the stage, screaming at the audience," remembered his friend, Kevin Booth. "Bill was like a guy on fire, and when he drank it was like throwing more

gas on. It was too much for even him to contain." This was Hicks mark II. For four years, Hicks took anything he could get his hands on -- booze, cocaine, ecstasy, speed, downers -- all in such huge doses that his friends ran a betting pool on when the fatal overdose would come. Hicks and The Outlaws thought they were the new Rat Pack. When they ran up a 3,500 dollar tab at one bar in town, they simply put on a show and called it "The Texas Outlaws Pay Off Their Bar Tab."

Hicks favourite drug was always psilocybin, the magic mushroom that grows in the cow fields around Houston. He often referred to a life-changing trip where he was taken up into a UFO by seven glowing entities. "With a five-minute UFO experience I got a taste of holiness I never got in 20 years of religion," he claimed. After that, he always urged his audiences to renounce organised religion and go "squeegee their third eye" with hallucinogens. He remained obsessed with UFOs... not in a credulous, X Files way, but as symbol of escape from this backwards little planet. "Logic," he'd often lecture crowds, "will help us all evolve and get on the spaceships and get the fuck out of here."

In 1988, Hicks woke up to the damage his lifestyle was doing to his career and moved to New York, joining a 12-step programme ("I don't drink any more and I don't do drugs any more... than the average touring funk band"). For the next four years he played nearly 300 shows annually. He recorded his first album, *Dangerous*, in New York in 1989. His HBO special from Chigago [sic], *One Night Stand*, aired in 1990. In November, 1991, came *Relentless*, recorded in Austin, Texas. Channel Four produced a live show, *Revelations*, in January, 1993. But still he was playing to 200-capacity dives in backwoods midwest towns. Still he was getting the blank looks. Still people were walking out of shows. By now, he didn't blame himself, he blamed them. They were morons.

"You get on stage," he would complain, "and you say 'Have you seen what this guy Reagan is doing? He's a demon.' And the crowd [would] laugh and go, 'He's a demon, hahaha!' 'No! Listen, he really IS a demon, I'm serious.' 'A demon, hahaha!' And you run down exactly how this guy is a liar and an idiot and they laugh and go elect him again."

The resentment built up. "FUCKING IDIOTS!" he'd shout almost every night. And then, backtracking, "I have this weirdest style, don't I? 'Bill, you do a little joke that's kinda funny, then you start tellin' us you hate us.' Where's Bill goin'? He's goin' to Comedy Death! It's my particular style, it's OK. It's all done in... in hate." He was coming across as increasingly spiteful, seemingly convinced, Nietzsche-like, that he was more evolved than his bovine audiences: "That argument doesn't work with me, flapjack. Go back to your fuckin' cracker lifestyle and I'll meet you at the evolution bell-curve. I'll be sittin' there awhile. It's a kind of tortoise and the hare story."

It didn't help that his biggest allies in cracking the mainstream, David Letterman and the producers of The

Tonight Show, put such restrictions on what he could talk about on his show -- "de-clawed" him, as he put it -- that he never really came across right. His frustrations grew, began to knot up inside him.

IN APRIL 1993, HICKS WAS TOURING AUSTRALIA WHEN HE called Colleen McGarr, his manager and, of recent months, girlfriend, complaining of a pain in his left side. In June, the pain got so bad he was referred to a cancer ward for tests. "The results came back the next day," his doctor, William Donovan, recalls. "I told Bill flat out -- and it was as if somebody had shot him. He was a bright person and he knew what cancer of the pancreas

meant."

He checked out and played the Comedy Corner the next night. The remaining shows from that year were nasty, confrontational affairs, without any doubt the best work he ever did (posthumously collected on the album, *Rant In E Minor*). "It was like Bill to the 10th power," his friend Kevin Booth explained. "He couldn't be involved in any kind of mundane situation even for a second."

By now, Hicks didn't even care if he made the audience laugh. He was working on a primal, almost shamanistic level -- exorcising a shit-storm of pent-up angst. "I assume that you're enjoying this," he would tell the crowd, "or if not, at least that you're emotionally involved, even if it's anger. It's supposed to be a fuckin' catharsis. You're supposed to be released from the fuckin' daily grind... I wish it worked for me. Ha! I'm killin' me! Join me!"

He was unstoppable. The show had a new momentum, he was getting offers from TV, he was writing a book. For awhile, the tumours seemed inexplicably to be getting smaller. He was all set for his crowning achievement, a carefully- negotiated 12th appearance on *The David Letterman Show* which, for the first time, would be the real Hicks -- Christian-bashing and pro-choice politics included. In October, they filmed the show which went perfectly.

It never went out. Letterman and his producers pulled the whole slot, claiming that he had touched on too many "hot spots." Hicks was shaken -- all the material had been pre-approved. He couldn't understand it. Weeks later, a friend mentioned that in the week of the banned routine, the Letterman show was running highly lucrative commercials for the anti-abortion lobby. It was the final insult.

In December, 1993, the fight went out of him. At his last show ever, in New York, he told the crowd, "This is the material, by the way, that has kept me virtually anonymous in America. Gee, I wonder why we're hated the world over? Look at these fat Americans in the front row -- 'Why can't he hit fruit with a hammer?' Folks, I could have done that, walked around being a millionaire, franchising myself but no, I had to have this weird thing about trying to illuminate the collective unconscious and help humanity. Fucking moron."

In February, Hicks went home to his family. He called all the friends he could track down and said his goodbyes. Round about Valentine's Day, 1994, he gathered his family around him. "I've said all I have to say," he told them. Although he lived on for two more weeks, he never said another word. He died at 11:20 p.m. on February 26.

SO WAS IT WORTH IT?

The week Hicks died you would have been hard-pressed to find an obituary, because Kurt Cobain had been rushed to [a] hospital in Rome after an overdose. Two months later, Cobain, too, was dead. Hicks always said of heavy metal suicides, "We lost a moron, fucking celebrate. I don't mean to sound cruel or vicious. But I am, so that's the way it comes out." Hicks spent his whole life trying to inflame, enrage, and enlighten. Yet Cobain -- a man so afraid of saying anything, let alone anything inspirational, that he used to feign narcolepsy in interviews -- got to be the Icon Of The Decade.

Since then, not a single comedian has stepped up to fill Hicks' shoes. Comedy in America means sit-coms, wry observations and doofuses hitting fruit with hammers. Most Americans still don't know who he was. "Bill didn't want to die," Steve Hicks says. "Nobody wants to die. A couple of weeks before he passed away, he told me, 'I've worked my whole life to get here and told a million jokes along the way. And now I realise the joke's on me.'"

The Bill Hicks CD collection is available on Rykodisc; *Totally Bill Hicks* is released by

Channel Four Video.