

BILLBOARD

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RYKODISC HOPES TO BUILD ON BILL HICKS' CULT BASE

By Jim Bessman

NEW YORK-Many felt controversial cult comic Bill Hicks was on the brink of a mainstream breakout when he died Feb. 26, 1994, at age 32 of pancreatic cancer. A comedian of-ten likened to Lenny Bruce, Hicks also had a rock sensibility and enjoyed a rock musician following that continues after his death.

With the Feb. 25 release of his four albums, Rykodisc is hoping at least to garner Hicks the popular following that eluded him while he was alive, and is counting on his many fans in rock and throughout show business. Radiohead, for instance, dedicated its 1995 album, "The Bends," to Hicks, while Tool's current set, "Aenima," includes both a painting of him in the CD booklet and a vocal sample near the disc's end. Hamell On Trial's Ed Hamell, meanwhile, plans to include the tribute "Bill Hicks" on his next album.

Hicks "should have been and was going to be a phenomenon, Hamell says. "My biggest thing in singing 'Bill Hicks' is to build awareness. Thank God Rykodisc's putting out his albums, so at least he'll posthumously get the attention he deserves.

Rykodisc is making known such celebrity endorsements in its awareness campaign for the Hicks titles, which include two previously released but out-of-print albums, "Dangerous" and "Relentless" (released in 1990 and 1992, respectively by Invasion Records) and two new ones, "Arizona Bay" and "Rant In E-Minor," which Hicks was working on when he died and have been completed with the help of his friend Kevin Booth, the albums' producer and his mother Mary Reese Hicks. A CD-pro, "Clean Edits For Radio & Raw Tracks Ribbed For Your Enjoyment," is packaged with a quote sheet prefaced by: "The following are big name endorsements to throw out there to anyone still asking 'Who the fuck is Bill Hicks?' "Among the extolling luminaries are David Letterman, Brett Butler, Dennis Miller, ESPN's Keith Olbermann, and John Magnuson, who produced "The Lenny Bruce Performance Film" and says that Hicks is "the only performer in 30 years who truly reminded me of Lenny Bruce."

The pro-CD itself bears the photo of a large condom. It and the full set of advance CDs and cassettes are being sent out in brown paper bags tightly sealed with stickers bearing Hicks' warning for "Relentless," and now included on all four sets in commercial form: "Warning: this package contains EVERYTHING your parents hate EVERYTHING the church preaches against... EVERYTHING the government fears... Enjoy! Bill Hicks." A product of the Houston comedy scene that spawned Sam Kinison-with whom Hicks performed as a part of the Texas Outlaw Comics-Hicks' humor was socially and politically hard-edged, full of old-fashioned sex and drugs and rock'n'roll. He was especially big in the U.K., where his concerts set attendance records; in the U.S., he made 11 appearances on "Late Show With David Letterman" before a monologue reaming pro-lifers and fundamentalists slated for a show in October '93 was axed. Though reportedly promised a future Letterman slot, Hicks died less than five months later.

"This is the final chance to make Bill Hicks a star" says David Greenberg, Rykodisc product manager and A&R executive for its Voices spoken-word series. Greenberg became aware of Hicks through John Lahr's 1993 New Yorker profile, "The Goat Boy Rises." It didn't make sense to issue just the first two Hicks albums or release all four one at a time, continues Greenberg. "We thought of doing a box, but \$50 would be too expensive for people who don't know who he is," he says. "Having all four come out together better serves retail and makes

more of an impact: You see the full arc of his career beginning with his concert albums 'Dangerous,' which hews to a traditional comedy album format, and 'Relentless,' which shows more of a thought process going on and isn't just funny stories.

"Arizona Bay'-which depicts L.A. after it finally falls into the ocean-is more cinematic in dealing with subjects, with ideas flowing into each other and using music, with Bill playing guitar and Kevin Booth playing drums," says Greenberg. "'Rant In E-Minor' which is a collection of really explosive bits that builds and builds and is probably his most dangerous album in that the stuff in it-Waco, the Pope and Christianity, gays in the military, Jay Leno committing suicide on the air after yet another bad interview with Joey Lawrence-is very controversial and would have been censored anywhere."

He adds that the promo CDs will go out at the end of the month to alternative, college, rock, and triple-A formats. Ryko is also utilizing "The Bill Hicks Comedy Patrol" section on the label's World Wide Web site, which features audio clips, a chat room, information, photos, a 'Joke A Day" promotion, links to "Friends Of Bill" Web sites for such acts as Radiohead and Tool, and the monitoring of comedians ripping off Hicks' material.

For print media, Rykodisc is sending commercial CDs along with "Friends Of Bill" endorsement sheets to such men's magazines as GQ, Playboy and Esquire, and is targeting politically liberal publications, including Mother Jones, High Times, George, and Utne Reader. Also, alternative music press outlets, fanzines, and comics will be serviced, Greenberg says; Hicks product will be used as a subscription premium for an "alternative youth market" publication.

Rykodisc has obtained from a British production company a video of a Hicks "Relentless" comedy special, which it will use in a series of "Bill Hicks Nights" at comedy clubs tying in with local retailers. "We'll give out CDs and discounts coupons, and, if local retailers tie in, co-op ads to promote the nights," says Greenberg. "We won't get a lot of radio [support for his uncut material], so to really understand him you'll have to see him live."

Greenberg adds that Rykodisc hopes to connect with HBO, which has footage of Hicks performing 'Arizona Bay" and "Rant" material before the album visions were cut. He is looking for support from Comedy Central, which occasionally airs a documentary it produced on Hicks called "It's Just A Ride." But he stresses that word-of-mouth is the main goal of the label's efforts.

To this end, Greenberg reports, Tool is including a Hicks flier with its fan club mailing.

"Invasion originally serviced their albums to rock stations and got some 'clean' air play and a lot of rock bands trade tapes," he says, "so we've connected with them and sent them sets to play on their buses and get more word-of-mouth in that community" Hamell is among those artists with a Hicks bootleg tape collection.

"I saw him when he was saying he was doing his last shows," says Hamell. "He was doing his 'Rant In E-Minor' stuff like hunting and killing Billy Ray Cyrus, and I put a thank you to him on my first album, just for being alive and speaking to me. Southern culture can be very conservative, and he came out of it with such brutal honesty and courage, and while his audience was very open-businessmen to punk rockers to yuppies to hippies-he spoke for those who felt a little lost and made you feel like he was a kindred spirit."