

SEND IN THE CLOWN

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By Bill Brownstein

...Today, Canada could use a few chuckles.

So, I called comedian Bill Hicks, my guru of giggles and one of the funniest people on this planet. Yo, Bill, how about a little levity for us on this deadly sombre referendum day? A simple little request.

Hicks, 30, may not be a Canadian, but he was born in Georgia, raised in Texas, came of age in New York and is now based in L.A. All of which suggests he has the sort of identity crisis Canadians can relate to.

Furthermore, Hicks has done plenty of time in Canada, particularly in Montreal - where he was the hit of the 1990 and 1991 Just for Laughs festivals.

And Hicks, who brings his shtick to Montreal's Club Soda Jan. 15- 16, just may be the closest thing we've got to Lenny Bruce working the comedy hustings today.

Hicks is abrasive, profane and very nearly over the top, but he is one nasty social satirist - and he has soul.

"So, Canada is a bunch of fractious little communities, each of which is at each other's throat?" Hicks asks in a telephone chat from L.A.

Yup, that just about sums things up.

"No big deal. Sounds like the rest of the world. Sounds like L.A. I don't see how anyone could complain about Canada," Hicks says. "It's ugly here in L.A. Every day is 80 degrees and sunny. Hey, only reptiles like that kind of weather. I'm a mammal. I can afford scarves, coats and rosy-cheeked women. I have the soul of a poet - not a Gila monster."

Great, the angry young man is getting pumped. "I'm wearing shorts and I'm sweating. I hate this place. Does that make you feel any better?"

Frankly, no.

"Hey, America has its own problems," Hicks shoots back. "When President Bush first mentioned the new world order, it sounded great until we realized we were going to be third."

"Not only are we waking up from the American Dream, but we are coming to in an emergency room, following a horrible accident - and all we can recall is that a guy called Reagan was driving."

"And you think your national unity debate is frightening. I'll tell you what's frightening - it's the political debates down here. It's like watching the live-action version of Animal Farm. And Bush is the most frightening man around. He's the only guy who can make human rights a bipartisan issue."

OK, I'm feeling a little better.

"Great, now I'm depressed," Hicks says. "I just quit smoking. And, as I was promised, I got my sense of smell back. I was living in New York - I didn't want my sense of smell back! So, I moved to L.A."

He still makes it back to New York to appear regularly on Late Night With David Letterman. And he also makes time for touring the rest of the country.

"I just did a concert tour in the deep U.S. South - I call it my Flying Saucer Tour. Like flying saucers, I too have been appearing in small Southern towns in front of handfuls of hillbillies - and have been doubting my own existence."

Hicks observes that while some student radicals are screaming about revolution in the rest of the U.S., there is another rallying cry in Tennessee. "Evolution, evolution: we want our

thumbs!"

"And you know what else we have that you don't: Madonna!"

Hicks is really ranting now. "Hey, Madonna, I'm real hard to shock."

This leads to a diatribe on pornography: "The U.S. Supreme Court says pornography is any art that has no artistic merit and causes sexual thought. Hmm. That sounds like every commercial on TV.

"No, pornography is spending all of your money on weapons technology. Couldn't we use that same technology to shoot food at hungry people?"

Talk of weapons leads to another of Hicks' pet peeves: handguns.

"Last year in the United States, where people are permitted to carry guns, there were 23,000 deaths by handguns. In England, where people aren't permitted to carry guns, there were 14 deaths - probably shot by American tourists. But you'd be a fool and a communist to believe there's no connection between owning a gun and shooting someone ..."

"On the other hand," Hicks adds, "there are 23,000 deaths per soccer game in England. I'm not saying their system is flawless."

Hicks admits he's a bit cranky. In addition to kicking his cigarette habit, he has given up drinking and drugs as well.

"I have to admit, though, I had a great time doing drugs. Sorry. Never murdered, robbed, raped or hurt anyone. Never lost a job, home, wife, car or kids, either. Don't get me wrong: I've had bad times on drugs, too. Have you seen my haircut?"

"But the point is drugs have done some good things. The musicians that have made great music over the years were real high on drugs. The Beatles were so high they even let Ringo sing some tunes."

For no apparent reason, Hicks next segues into a rant about the miracle of childbirth: "Hey, I'll tell you what a miracle is. It's raising a kid who doesn't talk at the movies."

And why do Christians wear crosses around their necks. Do you really think that when Jesus comes back, he wants to see a cross... ."

Well and good, but we've drifted off our Canadian constitutional course.

"Fair enough," Hicks replies. "I'll tell you what's good about Canada. You have lots of irony there.

"Sadly, there's no more irony in the U.S. any more - not when you see people wearing Buy American buttons pinned to their Desert Storm T-shirts. If you catch my drift... . Feeling better now?"

Yes, now if you could only do something about Sharon Carstairs... .