

THE BILL HICKS INTERVIEW

By John Cramer and Ramón Medina

Bill Hicks is this comedy guy who's dead now. He was a big mouth on the stand-up circuit, had an HBO special, a teevee show in the UK, a new album on the way, a bit on his ideologically-confrontational routines in **The New Yorker**, and it sure looked like he was on his way to something like success. But then he got cancer and died (or maybe was "MIBed" by the thought police) so in a few years you can pretty much guarantee that no one will remember him at all.

He's funny, though. And like those early 70s coke-snorting, anti-establishment comics who used to fight the power and shit (remember when *George Carlin* was funny?), he struck a few nerves. The British clergy were up in arms about the Satanic secular-humanist messages he brought to their fair island, and here in the free-speech United States, a stand-up segment he did for the David Letterman show (his twelfth) that touched on the subjects of Jesus and abortion was axed shortly before airtime and replaced with something safer. CBS pointed the finger at Letterman and Letterman pointed the finger at CBS, but ultimately the responsibility fell to the producers of the show. Hicks never performed on the Letterman show again and then, of course, he died.

John and Ramon cornered Mr. Hicks in a Houston hotel bar some time ago. Hicks, a Houston native, was in town promoting his act and had recently escaped from a KLOL rock radio promo session with local dumbfuck Howard Stern-wannabees Stevens & Pruitt. Here now is the transcription.

ROCK RADIO

BILL: So, get this. We're in the limo, I'm sitting there holding onto this empty coffee cup, chewing the styrofoam, trying to look busy and fascinated when this girl gets in and sits next to me. The seats are facing each other: She's next to me and I'm facing Stevens and Pruitt. They're being dropped off first, so I'm trapped. Anyway, the girl next to me starts taking her dress off. She takes her dress all the way off. The guy over here starts jacking himself off in his pants while this one here's like, "So Bill, tell me about your new album."

"Uh it's, uh, a jaunty type, uh, idea with music and, uh...."

So then we get there, the girl puts on the dress, and no comment was ever made. Then the limo driver gives me a ride back. He goes, "You believe those two guys? Chicks'll do anything for them. You know, one time we had a girl come in this very limo and take her panties off on the air."

"Wow, that must have been some good radio."

"Yeah," he goes, "it didn't sound like much but if we could get on TV we'd break some real ground."

JOHN: Well, would you do it again?

BILL: No, and I don't think it does any good, I don't think it's my crowd, and it's stupid. People are like, "Oh, it gets butts in the seats!" I don't want butts in the seats, I want minds in the room. I'd rather have one mind in the room than a couple hundred asses.

CHURCH AND STATE

BILL: Right now I'm trying to frame a couple of responses to some reverends in Great Britain concerning my show on Channel 4 which will be airing on HBO. I'm trying to frame them in a nice way and explain why I did the material without going, "Wait a minute: one quick point *I'd* like to make. I appreciate your being offended but *who gives a fuck?* Where do I take my list of things *I'm* offended by? Is anybody accepting applications? Oh, no one is?" Yeah, life's offensive... what now? Jesus!

I tried to put that in some words. I wrote in the letter that I find it interesting how they find their beliefs threatened when I guarantee they've never received one letter asking them why they have the right to say what they do. Yet, here I am receiving those kinds of letters. No one ever calls up going, "I was watching this religious program. Listen, I'm a physicist and I'd like to explain a couple of things..."

JOHN: I used to watch Jim and Tammy. We'd think, man, is there anything we can do to tell these people that they're idiots?

BILL: Yeah, Swaggart was my favorite. Man, Swaggart was Elvis. He was unbelievable, man! I'm so bummed he got nailed. But you know it's like you have the right to say anything you want. That's the beautiful thing about freedom of speech.

JOHN: Well, you're not on a street corner trying to force everyone; people are paying.

BILL: Yeah, and if it's on TV... Ya know, I'm sorry, that's one of the great myths going now: that TV is the great moral arbiter of civilization. But it's pretty much the coyote running the henhouse. "DRINK BEER! PUBLIC STAY STUPID! HERE'S THE NEWS."

RAMÓN: Yeah, It's like you can't say anything on the radio that's pro-illegal drugs but you can say "drink beer."

BILL: I know. Same thing with NBC. They have a blanket statement about illegal substances and yet...

JOHN: Did they give you a sheet when you'd go on the Letterman show?

BILL: No, but they'll explain the whole deal. All these shows will run it by you. It's like Noam Chomsky, my personal intellectual hero, explained it when he said these people internalize the values of the system. That's how these ideas are promoted. These people don't even realize they're passing this on when they tell you, "Uh, don't do that one thing about that."

"Well, it's true. It's a real life story that people can relate to and they have throughout all my life."

"Bill, you have to understand our crowd."

"What? Do you grow them on a farm? Is your crowd made of humans? Hey, I know them! I play to them all the time. Even in the midwest... that fictional 'death of intellect.'"

JOHN: You seem to have developed a certain love for the media.

BILL: The media... Yeah, that's the new thing. The democracy that controls the information.

JOHN: Yeah, the censorship boards don't force you to remove offensive material but they can pressure you in a way where you're not going to be able to sell any of this stuff unless you take the 20-year route.

BILL: Right, or they'll trivialize what you do by selling a watered-down version: someone who looks like he's doing what you're doing but, in fact, is a sell-out and people won't know it. I think people do know the difference ultimately, but it is the 20-year plan--which is one

reason I quit smoking, drinking, and doing drugs. I realized I might be here a while with this; I've got this anonymity thing down pat, man. But in England this whole thing worked and in two years everything I wanted to have happen happened.

JOHN: I think the big secret is if you actually seem to give a damn about people and you actually have a certain amount of anger about the way things work then you have to be stopped.

BILL: Precisely. They want to keep problems unresolvable and they want to keep people helpless and hopeless. This Bosnia-Herzegovina thing is a classic example. All the pundits are so "HOW CAN AMERICA OF ALL PLACES... AMERICA THAT STANDS FOR CIVIL RIGHTS... *[chortles]* keep drinking beer... uh, STAND BY AND LET THIS CARNAGE CONTINUE." This carnage has been happening for thousands of years. I don't know, I think we'll let another week go by until we commit people over there.

JOHN: So do you get any intelligent opposition?

BILL: No, it's fairly stupid unfortunately. I'd love to debate people. That's why these letters from these preachers in England, while they are absolutely idiotic, help me formulate my own stance and I think it's important to be able to know what you're doing and why. It's good but it gets a little tiresome explaining the concept of freedom to people. It would seem you wouldn't have to after a while. Freedom of speech means that you support speech--particularly that speech that you disagree with--otherwise you don't believe in freedom of speech, you believe in what you believe and then you're a fascist. It's just semantics at this point, there's no theorizing at this point. Get a dictionary.

Christianity has a built-in defense system: anything that questions a belief, no matter how logical the argument is, is the work of Satan by the very fact that it makes you question a belief. It's a very interesting defense mechanism and the only way to get by it, and believe me I was raised Southern Baptist, is to take massive amounts of mushrooms, sit in a field, and just go, "Show me."

COPS

BILL: What is this show **Cops**? What is America getting off on? Why don't they have one called **Stormtrooper**. "Hey, they're bustin' down doors without warrants. I love America. We're the greatest country in the world. We have freedoms."

JOHN: Yeah, in one episode of **Cops**, the cops break into this guy's apartment, he runs out the door and leaps over the ledge except they're on the second floor. He breaks his leg and they're all standing over there going, "Well, looks like he broke his leg."

BILL: Yeah, I love that stuff. "Ya, havin' fun?!" I saw one where they pulled a guy over and he had a heart attack while they were abusing his rights to search and seizure.

JOHN: Laughing at him?

BILL: Laughing at him. He's havin' a heart attack and they're like, "You havin' fun?!"

JOHN: "He's dying HUHHUH."

BILL: And all the people at home, I guess, are supposed to think, "He's got to be dying... let's watch him die. GET A CLOSE UP!" It's really quite frightening how dehumanized we've become.

TEXAS

BILL: How does Houston feel about having that moral empty sack George Bush residing here? That's gotta be depressing.

RAMÓN: Man, you're talking about the city that had the Republican convention. I mean, you'd watch the news and they'd be doing a piece on "Officer Bob and his happy horse" but for anyone who was there, that was the most frightening thing to see. These people were beating the shit out of anybody. Houston took it and loved it.

BILL: I was telling someone else today, how if you control the airwaves, you control perception and people's minds. For instance, the perception of Houston. I don't care if it's a manned space launch to Mars in the year 2023--when the national news goes down to Houston, they're gonna cut to these old people two-step dancing. I've lived here my whole life and never seen these people. I was in a punk band when I was 13. What is this? Some kind of intergalactic space flight Hillbilly Hayride? Houston is the fourth largest city and someone is controlling the idea that Houston is this redneck hillbilly enclave. Like you were saying: "Look at the police doin' a fine job." *[pantomimes cop with person in head lock]* Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! *[stops struggling]* "Smile officer." *[smiles, waves, continues struggle]*

A perfect example for a Chomskyesque book would be the 51-day siege of spin control, changing stances, and outright lies at the Waco compound.

JOHN: You just watch that stuff and you can't believe its happening.

RAMÓN: What I liked was how the three officers' lives were worth more than anyone else's lives.

BILL: Exactly. I loved when they did the kids. The psychologist goes, "We asked the kids to draw pictures of where they lived and here's a picture of one of them." It's a house with a beautiful rainbow over it. That's very nice. "And I said, 'Is that all?' and the little girl thought about it, picked up the crayon, drew little dots on the roof. And I said, 'What's that?' and she said 'Bullets.' We'll be right back." Well, wait! Whoa! Wasn't it the ATF who shot those bullets? *Heeeey!* If I had to draw my childhood home, it would be a dungeon. They looked like they were living pretty happily up there.

RAMÓN: The big thing is the concept of cult versus religion.

BILL: Sure, that's what I wanted to point out: What's the difference between people following David Koresh and people following George Bush into the Persian Gulf War? See, the media didn't confront any of these issues. Every time they interviewed somebody leaving that compound it was: "You have to understand the Seven Seals... We'll be right back."

Wait a minute, go for it. Give Koresh a camera. What are the Seven Seals? Explain it. I'm all ears. I've got nothing but time. I think you're fascinating. Could ya, while you talk, just play a couple riffs on the guitar, cuz this is just great. The rockstar messiah? I'm in! Count me in.

RAMÓN: The other great thing about that was how the media loved the idea of being held at bay just like in the Persian Gulf War. They couldn't get any information and they took whatever the ATF gave 'em. Which is not what the media should be doing. They should be in there trying to get that story.

BILL: I'll tell you the ultimate message of the Waco siege. Here's the message and here's what they wanted to convey both subconsciously and consciously: state power will always win, do not question authority, and no matter what your motives we will paint you as a bogeyman and destroy you all the way to the point of burning you down with your children in your own home. Any questions? Media: "No questions." That's the message.

JOHN: How do you keep from losing your mind and becoming another post office guy?

BILL: Actually, It's so dark and fascinating that I wanna see it to the bitter end.

JOHN: You just might too.

RAMÓN: Do you think that the reason people don't get alternative points of view is because the media doesn't allow for rational argument? Especially in television, which is the main media form in the US.

BILL: Oh precisely. It's not supposed to provide that, it is there to sell products. That's what it's there for. There's no truth search, it's not on, it ain't happening. It's in fact frowned upon. Look, we live in a time so indoctrinated right now to believe that the only things we value are fame and money. Those are the only two things this culture values. If you're not famous or rich, what do you really have to say? You lost. We live in a time so odd that a plea for sanity comes off sounding like sour grapes. "Can't we all love each other?"

"Yeah, LOSER! You wouldn't feel that way if you were driving around in this car." KEEP DRINKING BEER.

You know what I mean? It's phenomenally perverted, man. Lie upon lie upon lie. The media has no interest in the truth.

Like Dupont with that commercial. With the guy? "He lost his arm in the war and thanks to Dupont..." And this fucking pathetic gimp is paraded around. Excuse me, but wasn't it Dupont that made the bomb in the first place?

ORANGE DRINK

BILL: In England I got an offer to do a commercial for "Orange Drink." Isn't that typical fucking UK?

"What will we call it?"

"We'll call it Orange Drink."

Anyway, they offered me really good money and I said no, and they're like, why not?

RAMÓN: Don't you ever sit there and go, "Well maybe just this once."

BILL: That's what they want you to do: sell your soul just once--the rest is easy. I think it would be very phony of me to do a commercial. Plus I really don't want to do it. I'm trying to make this statement and uh..."Yes, after I try to subvert the public to a new way of thinking, I get parched! That's why I drink Orange Drink."

RAMÓN: Here's one last question. Rush Limbaugh.

BILL: "Ya, know Rush has got a point. I know it's not to your liking, but once you see the subtext that he's a fat guy with a small pecker and he hates black and brown people and ultimately..." You know he looks like one of those gay guys who likes to sit in a tub while other men pee on him. You ever get the impression that he'd love to be surrounded by Bush and Reagan with them just urinating on him while Chuck Berry films it and somehow the Earth just spins out of its axis and we free float through space?

JOHN: But there in bliss.

BILL: In total bliss! We've freed ourselves from this total gruck. Ahhhh... and Stallone will play him in the film version...

JOHN: Everything is locked into place.

BILL: It's like this wonderful cosmic massage. Ahhhhh... So, when do we start this interview?

Bill Hicks's two stand-up albums, **Dangerous** and **Relentless** (Invasion Recordings), are apparently really hard to find in the continental United States and most offworld colonies.

You'll just have to wait for the Rykodisc reissues.