

RELENTLESS REVELATIONS AND A RANT IN E MINOR – THE GOAT BOY REMEMBERED

By Kevin Donoghue

“Hi, I’m Bill Hicks, and I’m dead now.” – Bill Hicks, *Relentless*

I remember the first time I ever saw Bill Hicks’ stand-up. I was fourteen, and it was his *One Night Stand* he did for HBO. I flicked onto it on Channel Four, saw Hicks in black and white, a man wrapped up in a massive coat and wearing a ridiculous hat. He was talking about hijacking a plane to its scheduled destination. As he tried to get out of O’ Hare airport, bemused and abused, something clicked in my head. That night, that guy from Alabama had a strange and abiding effect on an angry young teen.

The effect never wore off, transfixed as I was by his attitude and his vitriol. He informed my opinions and fed my burgeoning soul. And if that sounds like a fan-boy reaction, that’s because I am a fan-boy. After that one thirty-minute rant, I was hungry to find out more about his UFO towns, the hicks and hypocrisies that filled America. His was a United States much like my Great Britain, but I lacked the necessary experience or vocabulary to vent my anger. Hicks provided the soundtrack for the angry young man, but there was more to it than that.

“Bill was the first person I ever met whose goal it was to become enlightened.” – Kevin Booth
Most people are aware of Denis Leary. They’ve seen him in bite-size snapshots on MTV and he’s immensely popular because of his sell-out *No Cure For Cancer* show. And he is a sell-out. Mister Angry Hollywood mincing around in cock-sucking big-budget movies because he knows he’s been found out. To say he is the poor man’s Bill Hicks is no understatement.

When asked about the similarity in Hicks’ and Leary’s material, Hicks simply replied: “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.” While Leary rants and raves, Hicks stalks the stage like a jungle cat, throwing away lines and observations. His commitment to his cause is clear; he doesn’t have to shout about it like some child having a tantrum. There is, of course, that nasty little insider joke that the only reason that Leary is a star instead of Hicks is that there is “*No Cure For Cancer*”. The truth is, that Hicks would never have debased himself like Leary did. There was no way that Hicks would drop to his knees and suck Satan’s cock.

“We were very ugly children. Our mother said that when we were born, she was reminded of the time she got over her constipation...” – Hicks and Dwight Slade at age 12 pretending to be a couple of Woody Allens.

Hicks was a consummate performer. He started off working the Austin comedy clubs when he was thirteen, cracking dumb jokes and earning the respect of the audience. Slowly but surely, he became the comedian of the apocalypse and audiences loved him. It was the fact that he didn’t give a fuck about them that cemented his messianic rants. He had a message to put across and if he hurt anyone, then it was their own damned fault. On average he did 250 performances a year, a death-defying schedule for any normal comedian, but Hicks was no normal comedian. He had to get his message to as many people as possible. Cocky, a swaggering preacher with cloven hooves and a forked tail, Hicks was a commentator with a conscience.

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I don’t want to talk about the history too much. It’s been documented elsewhere and in more

detail than this fella could ever sum up. If you want to see Hicks and his equally talented friends and colleagues, I suggest you go to HYPERLINK "<http://www.sacredcow.com/>"www.sacredcow.com. But I'm not here to tell you a story you've already heard, no matter how good that story is. This is a personal view of Hicks. If I come across as a fawning geek, that's not my fault. Hell, you're reading it that way. All I'm doing is saying what Bill Hicks meant to me, a child brought up by movies and television, a teenager obsessed with sex, a young man angry at the world, at the news that gives us a sugar-coated view of life, of game shows, reality programmes, American and British kids taking their futures into their own hands along with a sub-machine pistol or shotgun. Let them massacre, and let the rest of us weep and evolve.

There is one rowdy performance at the Chicago Funny Firm which is Hicks dealing with hecklers and a drunken mob. It's less than an hour, and he riffs his way through it. He becomes the Miles Davis of comedy, a whirling dervish of hatred and bile and cutting one-liners. Dick Clark is the Antichrist, involved in a horrific porno with John Davidson. He apologises constantly for the bad show, but it rates as one of his best. It shows Hicks for the man he is, not some string of jokes. Hicks knew he was fighting an unwinnable war against the hypocrisies of modern living. It's a cry from the heart, a desperate scream from the soul that the human should have. Lost in a mire of wage-slavery and drunken fumbblings, Hicks tries, ever tries, to enlighten his audience. He taunts and pokes at their taboos, becomes that dancing witch doctor, exorcising the demons of the world.

"The fact that you don't get it is fine. The fact that you ruin it for everyone else is what makes you a cocksucker. Do you take your own guitar to Eric Clapton concerts?" - Hicks dealing with hecklers at Chicago's Funny Firm.

The Funny Firm fiasco highlights Hicks' battle against the idiots of America. It's a dark documentary look at how ruthless both an audience and Hicks can be. Listening and watching the performance is like watching a man digging a grave for himself and not giving a shit about it. It is a pinnacle in Hicks' career and it paves the way for his bitter later work. But while Lenny Bruce became self-centred and obsessed, Hicks began to rage even harder. His three later performances that are available (Revelations, Arizona Bay and Rant In E Minor) are harder than ever. But they're also some of the best, most incisive rants that any man could possibly have spat.

"The responsibility of the intellectual is to tell the truth and expose lies." - Noam Chomsky. Revelations is Hicks' gig at the Dominion in London, filmed on the last night of a British tour. He'd always had a more appreciative audience in Britain, one that was attuned to the irony and frustration, and Hicks plays it to the hilt. Dressed from top to toe in black, sporting a cowboy look and riding through the flames on a white steed in the opening credits, Hicks was the dark rider of the Apocalypse. The explosion of applause at his entry shows how beloved Hicks was in Britain. But it doesn't ostensibly matter to him. I always get the feeling that Revelations was one of Hicks' easier performances. It doesn't suffer for that, it just has the preacher quality to it. He's still exorcising demons, but he's doing it with the co-operation of the audience. He has a few digs at Britain, but nothing compares to the critique in Arizona Bay...

Hicks touches on the same subjects that he did in Revelations, but this is for an American

audience. He has the Rodney King beating, the collapse of George Bush and the LA riots as material. Under all the monologues is the music, composed and played by Kevin Booth and Hicks. It's the first time music has been used so efficiently on a comedy album. It underlines the points in red pen, brings out the jazz-stylings of Hicks the poet and makes the whole album seem like something out of Bruce's era, a rage against the government and the iniquities of common man.

"Los Angeles is like the appendix of the world – illuminating the notion that even some of God's creations can go awry. The Good News is that God can and will do something about it. Arizona Bay is what will be left when L.A. falls like a piece of pie. Bill had a fantasy that he would someday gather up a troop of Boy Scouts, give them crow bars, and take them to the San Andreas fault. Sometimes you have to lose a finger to save a hand." - Kevin Booth on the sleeve notes to Arizona Bay.

All the elements are in place for the end of the cod-civilised society of LA, the cess pool of navel-gazing and fad diets. The celebrity lizard culture is dissected with the glorious realisation that the riots were the best thing that ever happened to that loathsome little town. Bravo, I say. Sure, The City Of Angels is maybe an easy target, but it's never been so savaged. Hicks is a pitbull with his testicles tightened with an elastic band, a fighting dog and one whose bite is certainly more painful than his bark. Taking apart America's involvement in the Persian Gulf War, the tame nature of British crime, fundamentalist Christians and renting his millionth porn video, it's one of the better albums.

The thing with Hicks is that he got better later in his career. In his earlier work, it seems that he's going for the laughs. He's proving the points, but it's only later that he has sufficient desperation to finally forget the niceties and go for the throat. You can see it happening in Arizona Bay. He's pissed off with not being heard, fed up with American Gladiators clouding the American consciousness and blinkering that third eye. Squeegie it, baby, SQUEEGIE IT! "If you're so Pro-Life, don't block medical clinics, block cemeteries. Let's see how fucking committed you are." - Hicks, Rant In E Minor.

It all comes to a head with Hicks' last album, Rant In E Minor. So called because Bill used to write songs in that key. To placate Kevin Booth, he wanted to call it Rant in D Minor, but when the cancer struck, he felt it was better to stick with what he knew. This is the performance he should be remembered for, a raging, angry whirlwind of indignation. Nobody listened to him, nobody cared, everybody nodded, smiled and went back to masturbating in front of their television sets, suckling on the teat of the government and gobbling down all their lies, regurgitating them as some sickening truth.

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This is Hicks at his angriest. There is humour in the album, but you don't want to listen to it with the lights off. What he said back in 1993 still holds today in by the balls. It won't let go until we listen, too. This time, he breaks the taboos he hasn't troubled with before. Pro lifers, the Artistic Roll Call (which includes a nasty attack on Jay Leno, suck-up extraordinaire on the It's Just A Ride documentary), and his ideas on the heaven he is about to attend. It's a fond farewell to those that understood him and a damnation of those that didn't. He'd given up smoking when he heard about the pancreatic cancer, and suddenly just started again. He wasn't a prop comedian, but the cigarette was a part of Hicks. As Leary waved his cigs around like some penis substitute, Hicks just needed 'em.

"It was an observation. I didn't say the Pope sleeps with Burroughs, even though I believe that..." - Hicks in his last interview October 93.

There was a last appearance on the David Letterman show that was cut out. Up until that point, Hicks had been a regular contributor, but that last appearance hurt. He said in his last interview (on public access TV, the last hope for America to find freedom of speech) that the Letterman execs found the material a little too risqué. What they meant was that they couldn't show it because a Pro Life group were paying for an advert in the commercial breaks. Suddenly, the only show that had championed Hicks had sold out to The Man.

"We live in the United States of Advertising. Freedom of expression is guaranteed... if you've got the money!" - Hicks in his last interview.

There was to be a show called Counts Of The Netherworld, a fascinating premise that might have included Charles Manson and Dr Joyce Brothers on the same talk show. From what I've seen, it was something that television desperately needs: a programme that challenges beliefs and reasserts the power of individual thought. Television has had enough of real people studied by a camera, had enough of Cops, Big Brother, Survivor and When Bread Goes Bad. It's about time that we started delving beyond the banal and evolved. This is what Hicks was all about.

"Bill never took anything literally so it cracks me up when Hicks fans get stuck on specific opinions of Bill. Bill was the ever changing man. He would always take the other side of an argument. I remember him saying, "Whenever two people agree on a subject, I form on the other side." This applied even when he agreed with the people he was arguing with." - Kevin Booth.

Okay, so maybe I fucked it up. I do have specific opinions of Bill Hicks. I believe he was a philosopher, a prophet, a stubborn son-of-a-bitch, a contrary bugger when he wanted to be, and most of all a funny guy. He did more for enlightenment than most comedians. He waxed lyrical, showed himself adept at both assailing the powers that be while admitting his own faults. As much as he was strong, he was also fraught with his own inadequacies. That's what made him human and that's what struck a chord.

Bill Hicks died of pancreatic cancer on February 26th 1994. He was 32. We have to thank Kevin Booth and the Hicks family for allowing the posthumous releases of his last two albums and their continuing commitment in spreading the word. Most people, including myself, only ever discovered Hicks after he'd died and that's a shame. I'd loved to have seen him live just once, loved to have felt the buzz that is almost palpable on his albums. He repeated his material in new and ever-evolving forms and had one of the most infectiously insane laughs on the planet.

So what is the point? Is there a point to my essay? I would say so. I have to. If I've learned anything from Hicks, it's that as much as I worship him, I wouldn't want to live his life. I wouldn't want to quote him as a substitute for my own opinions. My message to all the rest of you Hicks fans is this, and I'm being totally presumptuous here, but don't emulate. Be your own man or woman, be yourselves and strike back at what you feel is wrong.

And if you make people laugh, then all power to ya.

"I left in love, in laughter, and in truth, and wherever truth, love and laughter abide, I am there in spirit." - Bill Hicks, as read at his funeral (1994)

We'll miss you, Bill...