

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HICKS

GQ MAGAZINE, SEPTEMBER 1994

By Mike Sager. Thanks to Dan Savage

Part comic, part preacher, part philosopher, Bill Hicks had something important to say. And though it didn't make him a star or get him a sitcom, he kept right on saying it, brilliantly, till the end.

"Good evening, folks," says the comic, freeing the microphone from its stand, charting a course across the stage, his shadow following. His right hand searches the pocket of his baggy pants, puddled atop weary moccasins. The cool mesh orb grazes his lips, carries his voice over the crowd. "It's great to be back here in good ol'...where am I again!"

He is joking, of course, sort of. That's what Bill Hicks does. Sort of joke, sort of tell the truth. He knows where he is, the Comedy Corner in West Palm Beach, Florida-- black walls, flickering candles, glasses tinkling in the dark. Though he headlines more than 200 nights a year, he is not on the marquee tonight. This is a special performance. In the back of the club, little sprockets turn, tape rolls. He wants to get this down. The exact set that was canceled. He was to appear on The Late Show With David Letterman on October 1, 1993, his twelfth guest spot with Dave. Bill had flown to New York, taped his spot, and for the first time, he'd really killed on Letterman. Dave had even given him a fat Havana cigar. He was smoking it in the hotel bathtub when the producer phoned. It wasn't just a matter of "Sorry, we're out of time." It was the material, the producer said, too many "hot spots."

Tonight, four nights later, fresh from all the publicity, from Howard Stern to the Los Angeles Times, Bill Hicks wants to tape the fated set, to play it for as many people as he can.

All this hoopla over a spot no one will ever see. Seven minutes of jokes. Seven minutes that have turned his career around. Kind of spooky, the timing of everything. The news in June. Now this.

"Bill," the producer had said, "you don't understand our audience."

"What!" Bill had said. "Do you grow them on fucking farms !"

People. That's who's in the audience. And Bill has a little faith in the rest of humanity, a belief that they can handle some material with an idea attached to it, something a little more weighty than "Boy, the food on airplanes sucks, don't it!"

"Folks, this is my final live performance." He hunches his shoulders forward as he paces the stage, back and forth, hanging his head. It is hard to catch him all in one frame. The voice shifts from clean to rusty, from innocent to foul, from a smooth, lilting tenor to a rasping, asthmatic laugh. The face is round and rubbery, pixieish, devilish, always in motion, morphing from Sane Man to Goober Dad to Goat Boy to Li'l Willie. His eyes are deep and dark and wizened. They've been like that since birth, friends say, the eyes of a kid who seemed to disembark from the womb with his own special path in mind.

"Don't get me wrong," he says. "I've loved every moment of my sixteen years of total anonymity. Every delayed flight. Every Econo-Lodge. Every broken relationship. I loved it all. Playing the Comedy Pouch in Possum Ridge, Arkansas. It's been my treat."

Whispers ripple through the crowd. Quitting! It's a joke, right! Thirty-two years old, a stand-up since 15; Sam Kinison had called him the Little Prince. Earlier in the year, Bill was named Hot Stand-up Comic by Rolling Stone and was nominated for his third American Comedy Award. He's done three albums, two HBO specials, a special for British Channel 4. He's been on Letterman eleven times and was the subject of a lengthy New Yorker profile by critic John Lahr, who called him "an exhilarating comic thinker in a renegade class all his own." Len

Belter, dean of syndicated comedy radio, once described him as "the hippest, most intelligent, cutting-edge comic of our day."

Who?

Bill Hicks: best-known unknown in the business. The comics' comic. The critics' comic. In a class, really, all his own. The problem is, the stuff he talks about isn't network-ready. He can hardly say good evening in seven minutes. Every time he'd appeared On Letterman, he'd had to change his act. Written down, worked out, preapproved by the production staff, his sweet improvisational melody was sliced and diced into a sampled, discordant riff. He just didn't come across. And he hadn't yet figured out what to do about it. At least not until that twelfth appearance, resonating forever in the memory of the Ed Sullivan Theatre, there, center stage, near Elvis's swiveling hips. Another really big show, never to be seen.

Seven minutes. That's what they give you. Seven minutes of air before 15 million people.

Once, you were anointed by Paar. Then Carson. Now Letterman is the pope of comedians, bestower of Sainthood, steady work, big bucks, critical mass. Seven minutes. Where to begin! How to translate!

How to say simply that Bill Hicks is a man who believes, that 100 percent of nonsmokers will someday die. That guns really do kill people. That there's something strange about "Just say no" commercial followed by one for Budweiser.

And being a fellow who has levitated through meditation, experienced altered states in an isolation tank, risen on a wave of pure energy into an alien spacecraft, ingested his body weight several times over in psilocybin mushroom, Bill Hicks is a man who has come to realize that out true nature as humans is spirit and not body, that we are eternal beings, that God's love is unconditional. Heaven is here heaven is now. To realize that is to achieve it.

Bill believes the comic has a special role, that he's a guy who says "Wait a minute!" as the consensus forms. Like Chaplin, Bruce, Sahl and Pryor, he's the antithesis of the mob mentality, a flame like Shiva the Destroyer, toppling idols, no matter whose they are. A guy who stands to the side and speaks a truth. Who plants seeds. Who tells dick jokes.

You gotta play to the whole room.

"I'm just very tired of traveling," he tells the audience, "very tired of your vacant faces staring back at me, wanting me to fill your empty lives with humor."

He stops, mugs. He feels a twinge in his left side, shakes it off. In his mind, he punches a stopwatch. Seven minutes. Go....

"Oh, hello. Good evening, folks.

"As I said, I'm very excited. This is my last live performance. I finally got my own show on TV, entitled Let's Hunt and Kill Billy Ray Cyrus. I think it's fairly self-explanatory. We're kicking the whole series off with our M.C. Hammer/Marky Mark/Vanilla Ice Christmas special.

"You know, I consider myself a fairly open-minded person, but have you heard about these new grade-school books! One's called Heather Has Two Mommies. The other one is Daddy's New Roommate. I gotta draw the line here and say this is absolutely disgusting. Grotesque.

"I'm talking, of course, about Daddy's New Roommate.

"Heather Has Two Mommies, on the other hand, is quite fetching. You know, they kiss in Chapter 4! Oooh! Go, mommies, go!

"You know what really bugs me these days! These pro-lifers. You ever look at them!"

A prune face, southern accent: "I'm pro-life." "Boy, they look it, don't they! They just exude joie de vivre. You just want to hang with them and play Trivial Pursuit all night long. If you're

so pro-life, do me a favor: Don't lock arms and block medical clinics, lock arms and block cemeteries!"

"I was in Australia during Easter. They celebrate the same way we do -- commemorating the death and Resurrection of Jesus by telling our children a giant bunny rabbit left chocolate eggs in the night.

"You know, I've read the Bible. I can't find the words 'bunny' or 'chocolate' anywhere. Where do we get this stuff! No wonder we're so messed up as a race. Like wearing crosses around your neck. Nice sentiment, but do you think, when Jesus comes back, he's really gonna want to look at a cross! Maybe that's why he hasn't shown up yet."

Jesus in Heaven: "I'm not going back, Dad. They're still wearing crosses. They totally missed the point, Dad!"

The audience roars.

"Thank you very much." Click. Seven minutes.

Applause. Whistles. Calls for more.

"Beautiful," says Bill. He beams. "I appreciate that, folks.

Friday night, I did that set on Letterman. It was canceled because they felt you are too stupid to know that those were jokes. This is exactly what's wrong with this country: Networks and politicians kowtowing to special-interest groups, to some guy in a trailer with a fuckin' crayon in his hand, writing in chicken scrawl: I saw a guy talkin' bad 'bout Jesus on your show. I ain't gonna tune in no mo'. Come on!

"The truth is, the majority of people are very reasonable. They don't write letters when something offends them on TV. 'Cause reasonable people know that IT'S JUST FUCKIN' TELEVISION! And not only that, reasonable people HAVE A LIFE! They know I was not making fun of Jesus. They know I did not make fun of gays. What I made fun of is the double standard that exists in this fucking country.

"And you know, the worst thing of all is that I love the Letterman show.

They've always been very good to--well, to be honest, every single set I've ever done they've de-balled me, okay? And I put up with it because I love Dave Letterman. I'm beginning to realize: I'm in an abusive fuckin' relationship.

"And do you want to know the punch line of this whole story?

" 'Bill, we really love ya. We want you back on in a coupla weeks.'

"I don't know if I can learn to juggle that fast."

In a bedroom in suburban Houston, two boys giggled into a tape recorder. Ladies and germs, Bill & Dwight, a.k.a. the Losers: "We were ugly children. Our mother said that when we were born it reminded her of the time she got over constipation.

"Our parents punished us cruelly. Once, they took away our legs for a week."

It was the summer of 1975, the height of the boom years in Houston, home of the largest petroleum companies in America during a decade when the price of oil would rise from \$2 to \$40 a barrel. Helicopters hovered over the city's skyline, Rolls-Royces sidled up to lavish postmodern skyscrapers. Only the best in Houston, the "Golden Buckle of the Sunbelt."

West of the city was the Memorial area, an upscale Levittown for the managerial class. Bill Hicks and Dwight Slade, both 12, lived in a subdivision called Nottingham Forest. Maybe 60 percent of the fathers worked for oil companies. Almost everyone was from somewhere else. Bill had been born in Valdosta, Georgia, and had lived in Florida, Alabama and New Jersey before arriving here. Dwight had come from Portland, Oregon. The houses in their development were mock Tudors, Colonials, Georgian Taras with columns, all cramped together

on quarter-acre lots. The high school, named Stratford, was on Avon Street. In an era of wild possibilities and great expectations, the children were the focus in Nottingham Forest. Mothers rose early each morning to plug in hot curlers for their daughters. Football began with full-contact PeeWee leagues. And everyone went to church on Sunday, no exceptions.

Bill and Dwight felt as if the clock were always ticking, as if they had to take all the lessons, play on all the teams, or their future would be ruined. In Bill's house, there were all sorts of stupid rules. Religious rules, social rules, arbitrary rules. The grass had to be a certain height. Bill would mow; Mr. Hicks would measure with a tape.

On this July day, Bill and Dwight's recording studio was Bill's bedroom, just up the stairs from his parents' room, the door of which was always locked. On Bill's wall was a silly poster of his idol, Woody Allen. Bill's dad, Jim, was a career manager at General Motors. He and his wife, Mary, hailed from Mississippi. The Hickses didn't consider themselves terribly religious. As his mom said, "We just knew to go and went." As his dad said, "It's all written down. Jesus was resurrected. There were many people who witnessed it. It's fact."

To get to Bill's room, you had to pass Bill's dad, sitting in his chair near the stairs. He'd ask a thousand questions. Mrs. Hicks would try to feed you fruit. She was petite with puffy hair, had a certain tone of voice, high and super duper friendly. There was tension in the house. You could feel it.

Bill kept his door locked, too. To escape from the world, he often tied a pillow around his head with a belt. At night, you could hear him typing. Now and then he'd steal silently into the hall and slip a joke under his older brother Steve's bedroom door. There was a sister too, the eldest, Lynn.

Books lined his shelves, were piled on the floor. He always brought a book to dinner. He kept a screwdriver hidden near his bed to pry off the storm screen over the window, his exit onto the roof. To disguise his absence, he'd put a stack of records on the turntable, turn it up loud. Bill liked Elvis Presley and Kiss, Alice Cooper and B.B. King. Bill played guitar, too. His teacher said he was a prodigy.

Bill's prize possession was a thirteen-inch black-and-white television, which he'd gotten the previous summer. He soon discovered The Tonight Show. Wow! he thought. Stand-Up comics! These guys get paid for being totally irreverent.

Soon after Bill and Dwight met, they became partners in comedy. Bill showed Dwight the jokes he'd written, hidden in the locked typewriter case beneath his bed. He lent him a book on stand-up comedy.

In truth, Bill was a little hard to be friends with. He was a great athlete, good at everything he did. Not just good. He wiped you out. Without trying, he made you measure your self against him. It was, in a way, even more maddening that Bill was so sweet and humble. If you were his friend, he was your biggest fan.

The boys patterned themselves after Woody Allen, thought about calling themselves by their middle names: William Melvin Hicks and Dwight Haldon Slade. Mel & Hal. That their parents could choose such names seemed to sum up their entire existence. In the end, they settled on Bill & Dwight, a.k.a. the Losers. The boys worked on jokes, began creating characters: Goober Dad, Dumb Jock, Mumsy, Maharishi Fatso.

After honing their routines, they decided they needed an agent. They found Universal Entertainment in the Yellow Pages. The agency signed them unseen. The secretary told them to send their eight-by ten glossies and a tape of their act. The boys rode their bikes eight miles

downtown pose for the pictures. Now, in Bill's room, they were trying to get something down on tape....

"Finally, we got a part-time job, so our parents were nicer to us. On Fridays and Saturdays we baby-sat for abortions. It was an easy job. The babies didn't make any noise. And we couldn't hurt them inside those little jars."

By Labor Day, the boys had their first gig, a forty five-minute spot on the Jerry Lewis telethon, scheduled for 2 A.M. Bill's parents said no way. Dwight didn't even ask.

In the fall of 1978, when Bill was in tenth grade, he spotted an article in the paper: The Theatre Workshop in downtown Houston was holding an open-mike night for comics. By now Bill and Dwight had added a running mate. Kevin Booth was a year older, kind of a head, member of the track team. He also had a driver's license.

That Tuesday night, Bill and Dwight escaped from their bedrooms, met Kevin, drove to the 200-seat theater. The place sold liquor, so the manager made the kids wait outside for their turn....

"Our father's very lazy. He once worked in a mortuary, measuring bodies for tuxedos. But then he was fired. He was accused of having an intimate relationship with a corpse. The family was shocked. We all knew it was purely platonic" Ten minutes later, the audience was howling, and Bill and Dwight were taking their bows. The manager, Steve Epstein, a comic himself, was riveted by Bill. The kid's timing was impeccable. The faces. The accents. The characters. He was blessed.

For the next five or six weeks, Tuesday nights became a ritual: the Workshop, followed by a party at the Zipper Lounge, a nearby dive with porno movies and lap- dancing. Word spread. Kids from school started taking dates to see Bill and Dwight. There were lines to get in, old and young, no one was being carded. Inside, the crowd chanted: Bill and Dwight! Bill and Dwight!

Home from college one week, Bill's brother, Steve, went to see him at the Workshop. The kid who'd slipped jokes under his door! Steve was stunned.

So stunned, perhaps, that he thought his parents would be happy to learn that their younger son was a star.

Bill was grounded.

A few months later, Dwight's family moved to Oregon.

On the last day of tenth grade, Laurie Mango felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Hey, Laurie Mango," said Bill Hicks. "How'd you like to go on a big high-school date!"

He'd never spoken to her before. She laughed. "Sure."

It was a magical date, complete with a trip to a toy store and the purchase of matching rubber giraffes. Laurie's family was from the Bay Area. She had brown hair, dark eyes, was real smart. Like Bill, she felt like a lost soul in the suburbs. When Laurie looked at Bill she saw very intense brown eyes filled with a mixture of pain and amusement. She had the feeling that this guy was not 16. He was more like 130, you know!

Bill became very close to the Mangos. Mrs. Mango felt that she could talk to Bill on an adult level. She saw him as an iconoclast, a kid with a strong wind at his back, blowing him away from all he was born into, sailing him into the unknown.

At the end of eleventh grade, Laurie began to feel that Bill was too serious about her. She wanted to go to medical school. "We can still be friends," she said.

The kid shuffled out into the spotlight, guitar case in one hand, suitcase in the other. This was it, the Comedy Store on Sunset Boulevard.

It was a Monday night in September 1980. Bill had graduated high school in June. He was 17 and more than six feet tall, still skinny, with a little paunch, still baby-faced, T-shirt too tight in the armpits. Moving across the stage, he played a rube, craning his neck at the sights. He reached the microphone, dropped his luggage in a slapstick heap. He squinted into the crowd, one hand shielding his eyes.

"Well," he said, his doofus voice, "I'm here to be a comic."

After Laurie had broken up with Bill, his father announced that he was being transferred to Little Rock, Arkansas. There were fights, but Bill ended up staying in Houston to finish his senior year. He had the house to himself, the family Cadillac. Kevin came by when he was in town, and their garage band, Stress, would reunite and jam, but that was about it. Bill went to school every day, then to work at a shoe store. After supper, he went to the library and studied. At least, that's what he was telling his parents.

He was really going to the Comix Annex, a new room adjoining the Theatre Workshop.

Appearing nightly: Bill Hicks.

The very first evening Bill had gone to the Annex, Sam Kinison was performing. The gnomeish former boy preacher from Oklahoma had just begun his career. He had this bit where he'd put a pair of men's bikini briefs over his jeans, sing a song called "I'm Mr. Lonely." He'd go down to the audience, pick a guy in the front row, and by the end of the song, just when he was singing "I'm a lonely soldier," he would throw the guy to the floor and start humping him. Of course, Bill was sitting in the front row that first night. Of course, Sam picked him.

Bill became a regular at the Annex, great friends with Sam. By the end of Bill's senior year, Sam was exiled from the Annex after a brawl. At the time--spring of 1980-- the only true hallowed ground for stand-up was the Improv. in New York and the Comedy Store in L.A. Sam decided to move to L.A. To raise money for his trip, he rented a theater and set up a show called "Comics on the Lam." He hired locals Riley Barber, Carl LaBove and Bill Hicks, dubbed his quarter "the Texas Outlaw Comics." The special guest was Argus Hamilton, a regular on The Tonight Show. Bill killed that night at the Tower Theatre. Impressed, Hamilton told him that HBO was casting a Young Comedians special and that Bill would be perfect.

Bill called his parents in Little Rock to tell them he planned to skip college and become a comedian. Both his parents were college graduates, as were their two older children. The battle over Bill's future was ongoing.

Then, one night when the Hickses were back in town, Bill invited Sam to dinner. Sam may have been a wild man onstage, but he knew how to talk to church people like Jim and Mary Hicks. He told them that Bill was really funny, that this HBO show was a big deal.

And so the Hickses decided that Bill could go to L.A. Mr. Hicks arranged for him to pick up a brand-new GM Chevette at a dealership out there. Mrs. Hicks lined up an apartment in Burbank. The Hickses would pay for food and rent.

Though the bit with the suitcase onstage was theater, Bill actually had taken a cab straight from the airport to the Comedy Store and walked into the reception area carrying his luggage and a guitar.

Mitzi Shore and her husband, Sammy, an old-school comedian, had opened the Store in 1972, and Mitzi had turned it into a three-room comedy circus. For years, it was the only game in town for new talent. Richard Pryor, Andy Kaufman, Robin Williams, Jay Leno, Richard Belzer and Dave Letterman had all gotten their start here.

Now it was time for Bill Hicks....

"I grew up in what's called the Memorial area of Houston. It's a well-to-do area. My friends

were spoiled. But not me. No, sirree. As a 12-year-old, I wanted a go-cart. When Christmas rolled around, all my friends got go-carts. I got a Webster's college dictionary. Wooh! Party! My dad goes, 'Wait a minute, Bill. Go-cart is in the dictionary. "Yeah, Dad, so is tightwad." ' Mitzi had a booth off to the side of the stage, where she sat in judgment with her coterie. Often, comics would come over and try to distract her when a new act was on. But nothing could cover the sweet roar of laughter.

The thumb turned up.

Bill became a regular on open-mike nights at the Comedy Store on Sunset and also worked at the club's Westwood venue, where Mitzi sent her second team, including Marsha Warfield, Elayne Boosler and Andrew Dice Clay. Mitzi hired Bill as a gofer. He shuttled liquor between the clubs and drove the Shores' son, Pauly, to school.

Bill moved to the Valley, into a tiny efficiency on the second floor of a converted motel, overlooking the courtyard pool, not far from NBC Studios. It was stifling, and he had no air-conditioning. He wrote beneath a wet sheet.

"Well, I finally have my own place, hooray!" he wrote Dwight on October 10, 1980, in his tiny, intense scrawl. The two had kept in close touch since Dwight had moved away.

He went on to outline his goals. First, there was his "always goal, God, please," of improving as a comedian, "ever more funny, original, hilarious, refreshing, creative, lovable, wonderful, perfect." Then there was the movie he and Dwight had conceived, *The Suburbs*.

"Our characters will appeal to people because they are people like us, hating hypocrisy, mixed-up, confused by stupid people, hating school," wrote Bill. "We can affect movies for generations. We're original, we're hilarious, we've got something here, dammit, don't you see! This is Classic Comedy."

Though the HBO special didn't happen for Bill, Mitzi put in a good word elsewhere. Within a few weeks, he was cast in a pilot and signed by William Morris.

The half-hour sitcom was called *Bulba* and starred Lyle Waggoner. Bill played the grit marine guard at a zany American embassy. The pilot went nowhere.

Dwight arrived in L.A. the next summer. They shared Bill's tiny apartment, worked on *The Suburbs*, practiced transcendental meditation, became vegetarians. Midway through work on the screenplay, Bill's agent called. They had a meeting with the head script guy at William Morris in one week.

He was impressed. "You guys are 19 years old! How'd you get into my office!"

Two days later he got back to them. "You guys are gonna be great screenwriters. I want to see another one and another one, and after that, maybe we'll start talking.

FIVE IN THE MORNING IN A LIVING ROOM IN AUSTIN, the college digs of Kevin Booth and another friend, David Johndrow, an artist and film student, Stress's newest drummer. There were books on the floor, on the couch, on the table, everywhere. The Bible; *Satan's Angels Exposed*; *Listen, America!*, by Jerry Falwell; Upanishads; *The Autobiography of a Yogi*. In the middle of it all, Bill and David scribbled furiously in their spiral notebooks.

Down on L.A., Bill had moved back to Houston in the winter of 1982. By the following spring, the other Outlaws, minus Sam, had also drifted back to Houston, figuring to get more stage time themselves. Bill's plan was to work at the Comix Annex, see what happened.

Lately, he had been spending a lot of time in Austin, a two-hour drive from Houston. He and David read, cross-referenced, made notes, trying to build new systems of belief. They felt that the Church and their parents had run all these programs on them, internal things for keeping people in line, things that made people unhappy. They felt that Fundamentalist religion sought

to create unhappy bastards, people who never look below the surface of what society tells them is proper. To be creatively free, they believed, you had to be spiritually free.

With Kevin they joined Float to Relax, a flotation-tank enterprise, got into John Lilly, author of *Altered States*. They meditated to a tape of Guru Muk Tadanda. They tied pillows around their heads with belts. They bought books on astrology and did their own charts. They worked on telepathy, trying to send cake ingredients to one another in separate rooms. On a more terrestrial level, they formed ACE Production Company (Absolute Creative Entertainment), later to become Sacred Cow Productions, a collaboration that would last more than ten years. Stress would record on this label, as would their later band, Marblehead Johnson. They also embarked on a decade-long film project called *Ninja Bachelor Party*. The video, a cult item, is still available in the Southwest.

As time went by, Bill and David began to realize that there are no certain answers to the big questions in the universe. Religions, philosophers, political movements--they were lust trying to make sense of something way too big to comprehend. As Bill once wrote: "No one can give you any answers. There aren't any. You have to discover for yourself- You must learn to navigate the mystery.

Bill took an apartment in a run-down section of Houston, bought a ferret that he named Neil. He began seeing Laurie again. On nights he wasn't working, she'd come over and they'd prop themselves up in bed and Bill would read to her from *The Princess Bride*. Laurie was in heaven. He cured her bulimia by feeding her ice cream and making love to her. What they had was beyond romance. Laurie felt loved by someone with a golden heart.

Happy with his personal life, Bill began struggling with his art. By 1983, he was working the Comix Annex and touring the South, keeping pace with the comedy boom. For a time he worked as a warm-up for Jay Leno, who would later get Bill his first shot on *Letterman*. Frequently, after a show, Bill would go home and cry. "I suck, I'm not going anywhere," he'd tell Laurie. He felt that he had gained all this knowledge but didn't know what to do with it. "I can't feel anything," he wrote to Dwight.

One night at the Comix Annex, Bill approached Steve Epstein. Eppy was a big party-er, as were the Outlaws. For many years, Bill had stayed clear of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. He had always been a man on a mission. He never wanted to waste time. But lately, he kept wondering why the real geniuses of comedy--Bruce, Pryor, Carlin, Kinison--had been into drinking and drugs.

"I wanna get drunk," Bill told Eppy.

Twelve shots of tequila later, Bill stumbled out of the wings with a cigarette dangling from his rubbery lips. He was in a rage.

"You people, you're the ones responsible for Gary Coleman! You're the reason why *Diff'rent Strokes* is the number-one show on TV!"

Drunk, slurring, Bill was angrier than anyone had ever seen him. Religion, parents, television, war, fire and brimstone. It was as if the flood of alcohol had broken a dam inside. Ninety minutes later, he was lying on his back onstage, sweating profusely, screaming into the mike: "You people, you're the reason for war! You stupid fuckin' old people, what the fuck do you care, man, just building up your fucking pensions!"

A woman in front stood up. "I lost a boy in the war," she said, sobbing. "I don't appreciate you criticizing us. We love our country.

Bill crawled to the woman. She had puffy hair. He smiled, a big, fake goober smile. "Listen, lady, maybe I was a little hard, BUT YOU FUCKING PEOPLE..."

The woman and her husband walked out. Bill lay there, ear to the floor. screaming after her: "YOU CUNT! CUNT! CUUUUUUUUNT!"

After the show, two Vietnam vets approached to complain. A fight ensued. They broke Bill's leg.

A NEW BILL EMERGED AFTER THAT NIGHT. Patrons would send drinks up onstage, and Bill would suck them down. He'd rant on and on, something new every night. It was as if he were having a primal experience up there before the audience, chemical group therapy, breaking down his old hurts, metamorphosing onstage.

So it went for the next four years. Alcohol, LSD, mushrooms, Cocaine, ecstasy, Quaaludes, Valium, crank, meth--everything in heroic doses. Onstage, he'd lecture, no jokes, just drinking and ranting, chain-smoking, on and on for hours.

On the comedy circuit, he began getting a bad rep. He'd pack his bags for a week long date and be back two days later. Still, there were clubs that welcomed him. Owners pressed eight balls of coke into his hand. Bill's traveling freak show: Wasted Man.

Bill tripped as often as he could. A strange, physical theme accompanied his trips. It first came up with Kevin and David. Bill said that when he died they would open him up and find a giant golden cross stuck upside down in one of the organs in his left side. With Laurie one time, he went through a birth experience, recalling the pain of forceps grabbing him on his left side. At other times he envisioned a Bible in there, an alien creature, a spear wound from an earlier life. It was odd, but he never felt the pain any other time.

Soon, Bill was broke. He and the others were spending hundreds, sometimes \$1,000 a week, on drugs. By early January 1986, he was padlocked out of his apartment.

On the periphery of the Outlaw clique was a young wanna-be comic named Jack Mark Wilkes. The night Bill was locked out, Wilkes gave him shelter. The next day, with Bill's approval, Wilkes met with the owners of a luxury high-rise apartment building called Houston House. Though Bill was having some trouble on the road, he a big name in Houston. In 1984 he'd done Letterman the first time. He'd finally made it--albeit as the bottom act onto an HBO Young Comedians show, which had already launched Andrew Dice Clay. The local papers were writing about him; he was featured on the cover of Houston magazine. Wilkes pointed all this out to the management of Houston House, and he promised that Bill would mention the complex in his act.

Wilkes came away with a rent-free apartment on the twenty-second floor. It had a balcony, a killer view of the city. When Bill and Mark moved in, they found a book on the floor. It was called Making Your Dreams Come True. "Guess we don't need this," Bill said.

Mark gave Bill the only bedroom. Bill covered the windows with aluminum foil. Houston House became party central. The core group was Andy Huggins, Eppy, Riley Barber, Ron Shock, a lawyer-comic named John Farnetti, a Cajun chef-comic named Jimmy Pineapple. Kevin and David were in and out, as was Laurie, who was now in medical school and seeing less of Bill. Everyone wore Outlaw black. They drank, did coke, smoked cigars, listened to Frank Sinatra. They had epic parties, lasting days. They hung out and let their egos dream, writing movies in their heads, envisioning a new era when Houston would be known as the Third Coast. They'd convene raucous late-night dinners at favorite restaurants, acting out scenes from The Godfather, throwing food. At one bar, after Wilks had persuaded the management to issue them house credit cards, they ran up a \$3,500 tab. To pay it off, they held a show: "The Texas Outlaws Pay Their Bar Tab;

Things continued apace until early 1988, when Bill found himself in a club in Raleigh, North

Carolina. As he sat in the greenroom before his show, a series of well-wishers came by. Every single one was a drug dealer or someone offering drugs.

Is this me now! wondered Bill. Are these my friends! Is this what I've spent my life for?

He returned home, gave notice at Houston House. He had a lot of work to do.

"Yes, I'm drinking water tonight. It's really amazing how much your fuckin' life can change.

Tonight: water. Four years ago: opium. Night and fucking day.

Bill moved to New York, got an apartment, signed with the first in a series of managers. For the next four years, he would play almost 300 nights annually. The metaphor safari that had been his life in general--and his Outlaw period in particular-- had yielded a roomful of trophies and insights, and Bill worked at breakneck pace to tell the stories, play the characters, share the epiphanies, get his point of view across. And along the way, he told a few dick jokes.

You gotta play to the whole room.

What he was doing by now wasn't really comedy. Stand-up philosophy, maybe, alloyed with a keen sense of mission, a feeling that his purpose in life was ministering to his audience, his flock. He thought he had found some answers; he thought he had a lot of love to give. Sort of joking, sort of telling the truth: That is how he gave.

A few months after he left Houston, he and Kevin and David collaborated on Sane Man, his first video. He released his first album, Dangerous, in 1989. Following in quick succession came an HBO special, One Night Stand; then the Ninja Bachelor Party video; another album, Relentless in 1991, then Marblehead Johnson, in 1992; a special on Great Britain's Channel 4, Revelations, filmed in January 1993.

Bill's following grew, especially on the other side of the Atlantic. He mounted two sellout tours of theater venues in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. He won the Critics' Award at the Edinburgh comedy festival. On the streets of London, he was mobbed by fans. He began writing a column for Scallywag, the British satire magazine. Channel 4 signed Bill and another American comic, Fallen Woodland, for a show--Bill's concept--called Counts of the Netherworld.

In America, comedy was in a slump. Though Bill kept notching the Letterman dates, he remained on the periphery, turning down a part in a sitcom as a truck-driver, a part as a hospital patient in a movie with Dana Carvey.

During his heavy time on the road, Bill stayed in touch with his friends by telephone. He talked with Kevin and David and Dwight, who was married by then and doing stand-up in Oregon, and to all the Outlaws, some of whom would follow him into AA, some of whom he got work. In April 1993, Bill was touring Australia, and the person he was speaking with by phone most often was his new manager, Colleen McGarr. She was based in West Palm Beach and had a partner in L.A. Duncan Strauss.

Colleen had met Bill when she booked him into the Montreal Comedy Festival, in 1989, and they'd become friends. Colleen was a gregarious Canadian with attentive green eyes, a shock of reddish hair, a quick, throaty laugh. In a way, Bill had always taken care of himself and nurtured others. But Colleen was also a nurturer. She ministered to Bill.

Recently, Colleen and Bill had realized that they were in love. In April, calling from Australia, Bill told Colleen that he was feeling weak. He was eating badly, he said, couldn't get used to the food. He had this sort of malaise, he just felt crummy. And there was this pain keeping him up at night, probably just stress or anxiety. A sharp pain in his left side....

"Mind if I smoke! You do! Tough. I realize I smoke for only one reason: spite. I hate you nonsmokers with all of my little black fucking heart. You obnoxious, self-righteous, whining

little fucks.

"Ever seen that commercial Yul Brynner did right before he died! 'I'm Yul Brynner and I'm dead now because I smoked cigarettes.' Okay. That's pretty scary, but they could have done that with anyone. How about Jim Fixx! Remember the big runner who died while jogging! 'I'm Jim Fixx and I'm dead now and I don't know what the fuck happened. I jogged every day, ate nothing but tofu, swam 500 laps every morning. Yul Brynner drank, smoked and got laid every night of his life. I'm running around a dewy track at dawn, and Yul's passing me on his way home in his big, long lime, cigarette in one hand, drink in the other, two girls blowing him. Where did I go wrong!'"

"Yep, they're both dead. But what a healthy-looking corpse you were, Jim--look at the hamstrings on that corpse. Look at the sloppy grin on Yul's corpse!"

In mid-June 1993, Bill was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. How much time did he have! The doctors couldn't say.

Bill began chemotherapy, told only his family and Colleen, now his fiancée, of his illness. He continued to tour, with her at his side. He put the finishing touches on his fourth album, Arizona Bay, which included an impressive soundtrack--his guitar, voice and songs--something new for a comedy album. He started another, Rant in E Minor. He started writing a book called New Beginnings and wrote a screenplay, The King's Last Tour, about Elvis's turning up, having staged his own death. Another movie was in the treatment stage, as was a television show, Free Press, a sort of Northern Exposure set at an alternative college newspaper.

He had been living in L.A., but now he moved to West Palm Beach to be with Colleen, leaving the bad air and the black clothes behind, giving away everything else, except his Jeep, the first car he'd ever bought himself. (His dad had lobbied for the GM version.)

Bill was happy with the work he was doing, delighted with his shows, the seamlessness that he had finally achieved. All the doors were starting to open. He felt loved and appreciated, completely happy for the first time in his life. Like that book from the day he'd moved into Houston House. Making Your Dreams Come True.

The Letterman censorship incident was picked up by the press. Then The New Yorker published the lengthy tribute by John Lahr. The Nation called and asked him to write a regular column. Four publishers began bidding on his book.

It was not to be.

In the end, Bill went home.

In January 1994, he moved into the room of his parents' house in Little Rock that was always meant for him. He was losing weight, growing weaker, in pain, but the mind was fine. He turned his mother on to Course in Miracles; he played her Elvis, John Hiatt, Miles Davis; showed her documentaries on Jimi Hendrix and the Beatles; burned incense and explained the Tibetan Book of the Dead. He told her that death would be his greatest adventure. That he was like a drop of water reuniting with the ocean. He sat on the back deck and talked to his dad about the lawn, about the trees and the crickets, about the year's new line of cars from GM. And he tried to get Jim Hicks to take mushrooms. He bet Steve \$500 that Dad would do it. Mr. Hicks asked a lot of questions and took it under consideration.

Bill set about reading Huckleberry Finn again, then went to work on The Hobbit. He spent a lot of time with Steve, who shared his memories of their youth, dragged out photo albums, pictures of the Hickses and their cousins at the family farm back in Leakesville, Mississippi. Bill called all the friends he'd ever had--gave his advice, said his good-byes. On Valentine's

Day, 1994, he finally got in touch with Laurie Mango, now a pathologist in New York. Then he stopped speaking.

"I've said all I have to say," Bill told Colleen and his family. Though he lived for two more weeks, walking around the house, going for drives with Steve or his folks, those were his last words.

He died at 11:20 P.M. on February 26. At his own request, William Melvin Hicks was buried in the Hicks family plot in Leakesville. Five months later, following a special, hour-long documentary on Great Britain's Channel 4 and on Comedy Central, following live tributes in Houston, San Francisco and New York, Colleen and Bill's family signed with Zoo Records to release Rant in E Minor and Arizona Bay. His film and TV projects are also being shopped....

"Here is my final point. About drugs, about alcohol, about pornography and smoking and everything else. What business is it of yours what I do, read, buy, see, say, think, who I fuck, what I take into my body--as long as I do not harm another human being on this planet! I'm not scary. I'm basically just a joke-blower. That's basically all I am, a joke-blower on the back of some Mexican gardener, blowing jokes all over the driveway, a fairly harmless guy, believer in love and truth, antiwar, believer in the values under which this country was originally founded: FREEDOM OF FUCKING EXPRESSION.

"And for those of you out there who are having a little moral dilemma in your head about this, I'll answer it for you. IT'S NONE OF YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS!

"Take that to the bank, cash it, and take it on a fucking vacation out of everybody's life."