

## **TELL THE TRUTH, LAUGHING: THE LIFE AND WORK OF BILL HICKS**

*by Nick Doody*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In late 1992, a college friend who was editor of one of the university papers asked me if I would be interested in interviewing the comedian Jack Dee and then writing up the interview as an article. He knew I had an interest in stand-up comedy and that I performed myself, and although I agreed, the prospect worried me slightly. Firstly, I had never interviewed anybody before and had no idea of how to get hold of a major comedian, or indeed, how to persuade someone to do an interview. The second thing making me reluctant was that I already had some ambitions towards becoming a stand-up myself. The questions I might want to ask a successful comic weren't necessarily the questions that would interest the average student reader. There is also a phenomenon known to most comedians which I suspect is common to other professions, especially creative or artistic ones: the need for confirmation. A struggling and unpublished writer can feel perfectly comfortable describing himself as a writer when talking to most people. In the presence of a successful novelist, however, this suddenly feels dishonest. Similarly, a stand-up comic who is unknown and not yet making a living from comedy can tell people he is a comedian. Talking to a famous comic, though, he is suddenly relegated to the status of a 'punter' with an interest in comedy. Many comedians, for this reason, remember their first paid gig with a special fondness. It is like a stamp of approval, the opposite of the statement, "Don't give up the day job."

After some procrastination, I persuaded myself that I could do the interview, and do it well. Jack Dee was playing a local theatre the following week, so I phoned the theatre to get his agent's number or the address of his PR company. The theatre were absolutely no help at all, and several attempts later it seemed I would be unable to do what I had plucked up the courage to do. Frustrated, I wondered if there was anyone else performing in town whom I might be able to interview instead. A quick look through the listings and I found it: next Monday, Bill Hicks. Ideal.

The first time I had come across Bill Hicks was on television the previous Christmas, when Channel Four had screened *Relentless*, the concert film of his one-man show at the Montreal Comedy Festival. My brother and I had watched it, shaking with laughter while I kept one hand on the TV so as to be able to change channel instantly if necessary - it had quickly become clear that this was something our parents would not appreciate as much as we did. The tall, pale figure in black we saw on screen, pausing every now and again to peer over John Lennon glasses in between pacing the stage with restless energy, screaming diatribes into the faces of his audience, becoming a range of characters from an illiterate waitress to an Iraqi soldier attempting to steer a 'Buick Scud' missile and acting out one-man scenes with the precision of a mime artist, was not only the funniest comedian we had ever seen but also the most complete. Nobody in my experience of comedy up to then had gone so far beyond the stand-up's minimum of standing at the mike, reciting set-ups and punchlines. Hicks's own term for what he did, as I discovered in the interview, was "a one-man movie."

Nearly a year later, then, I was speaking to the man himself on the telephone. His PR agency had sent me the video release of *Relentless*, less edited than the TV version, and Bill's new album, an audiocassette of the same title but with largely different material. It was certainly

clear why Channel Four had felt the need to cut the Montreal show (although not as much as it would have been cut in the USA). The new material explained the proliferation of the adjective 'hard-hitting' in the press cuttings which had accompanied the tapes. Indeed, I began my article by saying:

Bill Hicks is scary. He's scary when he walks on stage, he's scary when he mimics Satan being orally gratified by Madonna and MC Hammer ("Oh, sorry, it's just 'Hammer' now - he dropped the 'MC'.

I can't wait until he drops the 'Hammer' too.) and he's scary when you know he's going to call you in ten minutes.

Bill was, however, very enjoyable to interview. He was, at points, every bit as passionate and insistent as he could be in his stage show, especially when the subject turned to politics (this was, after all, the day after Clinton's election), but for the most part he was laid-back and conversational, although clearly very used to doing interviews (unlike his interviewer). The twenty minutes I had agreed with his manager had soon been exceeded, but the conversation continued, and now Bill started asking me questions. It came out that I 'did comedy' and suddenly to my astonishment Bill said, "Cool! Well, if you want to go on during the show and, I don't know, M.C. the show or something, you're more than welcome."

This still amazes me, years later, when I think of it. For a comedian of that stature, based on a single phone conversation, to invite a completely unknown, inexperienced student comic to support him in a show on a national tour, is unheard of. Obviously, I did it.

For the record, I died horribly. Although there were problems which in those days I did not have the skills to deal with, I am doubtful whether that particular battle was winnable. Even now, nearly seven years after that night, friends who were in the audience evoke it as an 'impossible gig.' Firstly, the show started at eleven p.m. - pub closing time - making the several hundred people present rather livelier than the average theatre audience. The support act, a folk band called Balloon, were heckled solidly throughout their forty-five minute set, and then there was an interval, with an open bar, after which it was my turn to go on.

In retrospect, I should have been expecting a tough time, but the following had not occurred to me:

Although I do not bear a particularly close physical resemblance to Bill, I was however a white male with dark hair, wearing a black shirt.

The audience were expecting Bill; no warm-up comic had been announced or advertised.

As I went onstage, there was no announcement.

In short, almost the entire audience thought I was Bill. The applause as I walked to the

microphone was deafening. Here, at last, was the man they had all paid to see! Only when I began to speak did the truth of the matter become clear to them. The applause died, and if the cheers had been loud when I walked onstage, the realisation I now saw sweeping over the crowd was correspondingly bitter. Bill Hicks did not have an English accent.

"Get off!" "Who the fuck are you?" "You're ruining my night!" "We want Bill!" The shouts came from all parts of the theatre. Nothing I could do or say would change the fact that I was not the man they wanted, that they felt cheated into giving undeserved applause under false pretences.

Unlike the band, however, I had a killer closing line: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Bill Hicks."

The crowd went wild. This time there was no doubt. As I left the stage, the entrance music started: something loud and exciting (Hendrix, I think). Bill was waiting in the wings, introspective and almost motionless. He looked up, nodded an acknowledgement with a slight smile, shook my hand, "Thanks a lot, Nick." There was an empty seat on the front row which I had spotted from my vantage point on stage, and I quickly made my way there.

What followed over the next three hours or so was, to this day, the best stand-up comedy I have ever seen. By 'best' I am comparing it to other comedy (of which I have seen and heard a lot) in terms of the sum of the delivery, material, subject matter, style, rapport, stage presence, crowd control and, yes, amusement. It is difficult and, in my view, not particularly desirable, to compare comics in terms of quality. Good comedians vary as much as do individual senses of humour, and the original comic can remind us of this variety. There are, of course, bad comedians as well, and in these cases quality-comparisons can be worth making, but if I insist that, say, Steven Wright is better than Emo Philips, the apparent value-judgement is really only a statement about my own taste and sense of humour. When I describe Bill Hicks as the 'best' stand-up I have seen, therefore, it is a statement about the impact his show had on me personally. I do not even mean 'funniest'. Perhaps 'most impressive' would be a better phrase.

I consider Bill to have been a superb comic and an important satirical voice, certainly worthy of a book, but nobody has ever been worthy of a book for no other reason than how funny they were. Certain fans of Bill speak of him as a genius. Although I understand this, I personally would not use the word for any comedian I can think of. I am a Bill Hicks fan, but not a fanatic. I agree with much of what he had to say, but not all of it. In short, if you want a hagiography, you are reading the wrong book.

A couple of weeks after that night in 1992, Bill performed at the Dominion theatre in London, recorded as *Revelations*. This was televised, as the Montreal show had been, on Channel Four. The next time I heard about Bill Hicks, it was that he had died.

When a talented artist dies young, a kind of aura of martyrdom sometimes surrounds them, at least as far as their fans are concerned. Kurt Cobain, who died around the same time as Bill, left behind a body of music into which, for some, his death became somehow integrated. As Jean-

Paul Sartre pointed out, no-one's life's work can be summed up until it has been fixed by their death. The life's work of a young and intense artist seems somehow more intensified by an early demise, and while some fans of Nirvana killed themselves in a sacrifice to their idol Cobain, Bill Hicks's fanbase has steadily

broadened since his death, some fans hanging on every recorded word they can find with the fervour of religious followers. The point of the last few paragraphs is to make it clear that I am not one of these fans. My aim in writing this book is not to praise everything Bill ever did or said. I consider that if Bill Hicks is worthy of being considered a major artist with serious messages, then he is worthy of the treatment one would accord a thinker or artist in a different sphere.

Bill enjoyed being called, "Noam Chomsky with dick jokes." My feeling is that if Chomsky were to publish a joke book, it would in no way make his work in linguistics, philosophy and politics less worthy of serious study. The following chapters will at times read more like a literary criticism than the biography of a comedian, but perhaps they will go some way towards redressing the imbalance that H. L. Mencken noted when he stated that America's biggest failing was its inability to take comedy seriously. Bearing in mind, however, Bill's words, "Ultimately, it is in fun. It is supposed to be highly entertaining," whilst I examine seriously the comedy of Bill Hicks, I will try not to forget the jokes.