

**BILL HICKS WILL BE MISSED FOR COURAGEOUS COMIC VOICE**  
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*By Jeff Rusnak*

On a brisk Saturday night in December, Bill Hicks was talking hopefully about the future, even though he knew privately that he was dying.

He was hanging out at the Comedy Corner in West Palm Beach, where Colleen McGarr, one of his managers, is the booking coordinator. With his legs propped on the rail in front of him Hicks laughed generously at a performance by Carrot Top, a comedian he was usually wont to malign.

Hicks, stand-up comedy's rebel with a cause, was energetic and expansive that night as he outlined his plans. He wanted to issue a four-CD box set of his recordings, and he was excited about a just-completed deal to host *The Counts of the Netherworld*, a talk show for British television.

Outwardly, this inspired comic masked the fact that he wouldn't live to realize either project. On Jan. 6, an ailing Hicks played his final show in New York. Two weeks ago the shocking news came that he was seriously ill. Saturday, Hicks died of pancreatic cancer in Little Rock, Ark., at 32.

I first saw Hicks in August when he tried out new material during a 10-minute set at the Comedy Corner. Less than two months earlier he had learned he had cancer, but there was no lament in his voice.

Hicks rose mightily from the sea of comic mediocrity that night. He roared at our cultural, religious and political hypocrisies in impassioned and ironic tones.

Like a writer or painter, Hicks worked thematically, and put a high price on artistic integrity and individual freedom. He had the spirit of a '60s radical, and drew upon the unholy trilogy - sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll - for some of his funniest material.

He decried our diminishing intellectual standards. He was merciless on "celebrities" like Marky Mark and Vanilla Ice. And he loathed Jay Leno for advertising junk food on television.

"Once you start hawking products, you give up all artistic integrity. End of story," Hicks declared.

In October, Hicks did a one-hour Comedy Corner show that laid waste to religious fundamentalists. It was the same material that got him censored by CBS from the David Letterman show on Oct. 1.

"You know what bugs me about (abortion opponents)? If you're so pro-life - don't lock arms and block medical clinics. If you're pro-life, lock arms and block cemeteries ...

"I've been traveling a lot lately. I was over in Australia during Easter. It was interesting to note they celebrate Easter the same way we do - commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus by telling our children that a giant bunny rabbit ... left chocolate eggs in the night.

"Gee, I wonder why we're messed up as a race. You know, I've read the Bible. Can't find the words 'bunny' or 'chocolate' in the whole book."

Hicks appeared on Letterman's show 11 times on NBC, and always struggled with producers who wanted to make his material network friendly. It was OK'd for the October show on CBS, but given the hook after it was taped before an approving studio audience.

Hicks was told he would be invited back, but he never was. What Hicks wanted most was for Letterman, a celebrity he respected, to explain what happened, but Letterman never called.

On Sunday, Hicks will be among five comics up for the American Comedy Awards best male stand-up for 1993. The winner was selected by a popular vote on a Comedy Central call-in

number. Carrot Top will probably win. Hicks should win, but that's really immaterial now. More importantly, an artist who had the power to enlighten and entertain has been cut off in mid-sentence.

"I feel like a big unknown X in this country," Hicks said a few hours before the fated Letterman show. "I haven't done anything I want to do. I want to change the world and you do that by changing our perceptions."

Hicks produced four CDs, Relentless and Dangerous, and the unreleased Arizona Bay and Rant in E Minor. He did two HBO specials, One Night Stand and Revelations.

Hicks was a courageous and necessary voice. He will be missed.