

DEATH WAS A FAVOURITE SUBJECT FOR MAVERICK COMEDIAN THE AUSTIN AMERICAN STATESMAN, MARCH 1 1994

By Kevin Phinney

On stage, Bill Hicks was invincible. His ascerbic observations could pack a nightclub to the rafters with one of the most eclectic crowds in town. Hicks' vitriolic humor resonated across the strata of Austin's young professionals and blue-collar workers, Boomers and Slackers, rock 'n' roll nightcrawlers and the collegiate cognoscenti.

Offstage, Hicks was a man with a hellhound on his trail.

Sometimes, on a whim, he would test the limits of his talent and the endurance of his rabidly loyal following - filling venues and emptying them out again in a single night. He wore that power as a badge of honor. "It gets too real for them," he would say later, as though he'd dared the audience to watch him self-destruct.

Hicks, who died Saturday at 32 of pancreatic cancer, will be remembered by those who watched his comedic high-wire performances as a true maverick. But he never disguised the fact that his humor derived from a childhood of misery, an angry adolescence and an outlook that could best be described as nihilistic.

He was always on the verge of the kind of career breakthrough that catapulted that other well-known Houston comic - Sam Kinison - into national prominence. Recently nominated for his third consecutive American Comedy Award, Hicks starred in two comedy specials for HBO, and his low-budget short, *Ninja Bachelor Party*, continues to be a popular video rental.

Like Woody Allen, Hicks' favorite topics were love and death. Unlike Allen, who uses humor to blunt the edges of life's tribulations, Hicks fashioned real and imagined indignities into weapons he frequently turned on himself and those closest to him:

"My girlfriend calls me up the other night, and says, 'I don't know who I am anymore...' I said, 'Jeez, how'd you know to call me? What are the odds of that?' She says, 'I'm thinking of throwing myself in front of a bus, and you're not being very helpful.' So I sent her a bus schedule."

He didn't like to talk about the experiences that had left him so angry and bitter. Whether he thought them irrelevant or too painful to bare, he kept his demons under tight lock and key. Only the jokes got out.

"When I was a kid, everyone was getting go-carts. I got a dictionary. On a stand. My father tried to cheer me up: He says, 'Look, Bill, it's got go-cart in it.' So is 'jerk', Dad. Look, here's 'cheapskate.' "

Hicks could be heroic, too. His material dealing with prejudice cut quickly to the bone, making audiences laugh and re-examine themselves in a heartbeat.

He spoke of a gig at some ramshackle Oklahoma comedy club where a redneck interrupted a joke Hicks was making about Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker - years before they were deposed from PTL. The guy, it turns out, was more interested in anti-Semitic humor. Hicks asked him why. "Because they killed my God," the fellow responded. "Listen," Hicks glowered, "if I thought for one minute that Jews killed God, I'd worship the Jews."

Contempt for rules, propriety, even the basics of etiquette, was stock-in-trade. "Could I bum a smoke?" he'd often ask, leaning out past the stage apron. "I left mine... in the machine."

In his first appearance on *Late Night With David Letterman*, Hicks dashed through a five-minute set of his oldest standards, then slumped into the guest chair and calmly lit a cigarette - which is not allowed. Letterman's response? He booked Hicks a dozen times in less than 10 years.

During the comedy club explosion of the '80s, Hicks asked and gave no quarter, in public or in private. He spoke with real disaffection for his visits home where he would have to answer his parents' call to "rise and shine." The best revenge, he announced one night, would be to have them come to his place and have to do things he liked on his schedule. "Come on, Mom and Dad, up and at 'em! It's 3 a.m. and I've got a line of coke for each of you on the coffee table! Let's go!!"

Hicks abandoned drugs and hard living in the late '80s when his excesses began to cost him too many bookings. But he remained angry, and without narcotics to diffuse the message, Hicks' dispatches from the frontiers of comedy became evermore pointed.

"Comedy is jazz thinking," he once explained to a television reporter. Bill Hicks was always his own best sparring partner, and he took audiences on nightly excursions into the musings of a surprisingly well-read and adroit mind. He loathed shopworn bits about dating and cars and foreigners who ran convenience stores, and he was a master at improvisation.

In an era of Top 40 comedy, Bill Hicks thought jazz.