

EXPOSING LIES WITH A LAUGH

THE GUARDIAN, MARCH 9 1994

By John Lahr

Bill Hicks, one of the most daring American stand-up comedians of his generation, liked to ask the non-smokers in the audience to identify themselves, then puff away at them while inspecting his cigarette pack. "What's cool is that every pack has a different Surgeon General's Warning, isn't that great? Mine says Warning - Smoking May Cause Foetal Injury Or Premature Birth. Found my brand! Just don't get the ones that say Lung Cancer - Shop around. Gimme a carton of Low Birth Weights!"

Last October, Hicks became the first performer since Elvis Presley to be banned from CBS's Ed Sullivan Theater where the David Letterman Show is in residence and where Hicks had made his 11th appearance. In an outraged 32-page letter Hicks wrote to me, he quoted Noam Chomsky: "The responsibility of the intellectual is to tell the truth and expose lies". While I do not consider myself an intellectual by any stretch of the imagination, his quote, coincidentally is the same way my parents taught me to live. So in honour of them, I'll continue doing what I'm doing, the best way I can. Then I'll see you all in heaven, where we can really share a great laugh together."

The incident sparked a press furore and resurrected my New Yorker profile on him, giving his American career new voltage. "It's almost as though I've been lifted out of a 10-year rut and placed in a position where the offers finally match my long-held, deeply cherished creative aspirations," he wrote last November. "Somehow the possibilities (creatively) seem limitless." Even before Hicks wrote that, he knew of the pancreatic cancer from which he died, at 32.

In his short and sensational life, Hicks found an audience for his brand of intellectual anarchy in Britain where he became something of a cult, winning the Critics' Award at the Edinburgh Festival in 1990 and touring Britain and Ireland twice in 1992 in his Dangerous Tour and Relentless Tour.

Hicks was at home with the English, whose sense of irony made them more receptive than the credulous American public to whom he played as many as 265 days a year. A lanky, good-looking man, old beyond his years from hard living on the road, Hicks improvised his material with an audience. Hicks thought against society as he teased it: "Ever notice how people who believe in creationism look really unevolved? Their eyes real close together. Eyebrow ridges. Big, furry hands and feet. 'I believe God created me in one day.' Looks like He rushed it." Hicks, who began writing comedy as an alienated 13-year-old, was oppressed by the soullessness of the Houston suburbs. He became so proficient and single-minded that his high-school English teacher allowed him a five-minute spot before the beginning of class. After graduating from high school, Hicks set off for Los Angeles to begin the long, volatile, comedy road. He leaves two memorable albums of the Relentless and Dangerous Tours, and a soon-to-be-released rant against California called Arizona Bay. The last words Hicks said to me were: "I believe everyone has this f***in' poem in his heart". He spoke his maverick heart, and he was very, very funny.