

HICKS PICS STILL KICK

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By Ben Thompson

It is nearly eight months since the death of Bill Hicks. The brave, iconoclastic American comedian would have been 33 in a few weeks' time. It might seem depressing to dwell on this, but it needs dwelling on. Death has cast an abnormally long shadow over the lively arts this year. Hicks, with River Phoenix and Kurt Cobain, forms a trio of prematurely departed icons who prove that whatever else you think of the grim reaper, he certainly has taste. Their passing has left a spiritual hole in the middle of each of their respective fields that is too big to walk around.

For both Cobain and Phoenix, the end was - purposely or otherwise - self-administered. Hicks was different. His act celebrated hedonism; he spoke out in favour of recreational drug use and was a fanatical defender of the right to smoke. Early on in his career, his profligate lifestyle seemed to court the excess-fuelled, rock-star premature death which eventually befell his fellow Texan 'outlaw comic' Sam Kinison; yet he eventually died of natural causes in the ugly form of pancreatic cancer, having long since given up not only drink and drugs but cigarettes too.

"The comic is a flame - like Shiva the destroyer," Hicks told The New Yorker critic John Lahr in an idealistic moment in 1992. "He keeps cutting everything back to the moment." Comics are so much of the moment that it is difficult enough to capture what is good about them on TV when they are alive, and harder still for them to have an after-life. Even when they do - as, say, Lenny Bruce has - anyone who didn't see them perform will find it hard to remember what was funny about them.

The way forward might, as so often, lie in commercial exploitation. It's Just a Ride, the tribute film which makes up the first part of Totally Bill Hicks, a new Channel 4 video, offers fascinating insights into Hicks' life and work. There are revealing interviews with his parents, God-fearing Southerners who "couldn't understand why Bill used the f-word so much"; and with the geeky friends with whom he used to sneak off to perform at a rough-and-tumble Houston comedy club at the tender age of 15.

The affection and envy mingling in the eyes of his fellow comedians speak volumes about Hicks' talents. Comedians are competitive, not given to abasing themselves at the feet of their peers. Eddie Izzard and Sean Hughes represent Hicks' British fan-club (it could just have easily have been Rob Newman and Steve Coogan), but American Brett Butler is more revealing. Hicks' treacle-voiced fellow Southerner, star of C4's Grace Under Fire, observes that "For all the talk about Bill being like Hendrix or Dylan or Jim Morrison, it was Jesus he wanted to be." The Messianic tendencies are apparent as he emerges from tongues of fire on to the Dominion Theatre stage on the last night of his 1992 Revelations tour. But it's the ordinariness of his appearance which is striking once he's taken his cowboy hat off - slicked-back hair, button eyes and chubby face like a potato in a stocking - and which throws the brilliance of his performance into even sharper relief.

Bill Hicks' command of the stage and of his material was so complete that it sometimes seems like he's using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, even when he isn't. His intensity - especially when personifying his own libido as the demonic Goat-boy (motto: "Let me wear you like a feed bag") - is almost frightening. Like the preacher he often fancied himself to be, Hicks could be self-righteous and he could hector, but he could also be devastating. "Ever noticed," he asks, "how creationists look really unevolved?" The industrial-strength sarcasm which went down so well in Britain landed him in trouble in the US, especially when applied to such targets as

fundamentalist Christianity. Last October, when he turned his scorn on anti-abortionists in a routine being recorded for the David Letterman Show ("These pro-lifers... You ever look at their faces?... screws up face and assumes bitter, pinched voice 'I'm pro-life'... Boy, they look it, don't they?"), Hicks became too hot for even the supposedly cutting-edge Letterman to handle. The cancelled slot had been recorded in the same theatre where Elvis's pelvis was deemed unsuitable for the Ed Sullivan Show, and the ensuing censorship furore spurred Hicks on through the rigours of chemotherapy to a final epic bout of creativity ("It was like Bill to the tenth power," said friend and producer Kevin Booth. "He couldn't be involved in any kind of mundane situation for even a second").

The fruits of this - two complete albums of new material and videos of his last live performances - should emerge early in the new year: further timely reminders that a comedian can do something more than just remember old television programmes or analyse the difference between cats and dogs. And if American fundamentalists don't like it - "Well," as Bill Hicks used to coo with deadly relish, "forgive me."