IT'S JUST A RIDE
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By Manuel Mendoza

"I delight in telling my brothers things they don't know, particularly when they're true... NONSMOKERS DIE EVERY DAY... SLEEP TIGHT."

When Bill Hicks was a teen-ager, his mother got a call from his school. It seems that one of Bill's teachers had the bright idea of turning over the first five minutes of class to her precocious student. She hoped that if he got it out of his system, he would be less disruptive. Instead, Bill took over.

"That's your problem," Mary Hicks told the teacher. "You shouldn't have let him get up there."

During his short, bright life as the best unknown comedian in the country - if not the best comic anywhere - Bill Hicks was a problem to all sorts of "right-thinking" people. He made it his mission to point out hypocrisy in the views of religious fundamentalists, warmongers, rednecks, flag-wavers, prudes, the anti-drug contingent and corporate America.

"He was just a very engaged person who felt compelled to make comedic chestnuts out of all these complex issues, and he was clearly gifted at it," comedian Richard Belzer says in Comedy Central's tribute to Mr. Hicks, It's Just a Ride, which debuts Sunday night at 10.

But even though he shared views with such identifiably left-leaning comics as Bobcat Goldthwait, Mr. Hicks never got labeled a liberal. He was much farther out there.

"He didn't want to affiliate with any particular place on the political map," David Johndrow says in a telephone interview. The Austin photographer met Mr. Hicks in his hometown of Houston during the summer between 11th and 12th grades. "He used to say he was a gentle anarchist. 'Let's find out what's true.' That overrode everything else."

When Mr. Hicks died in February of pancreatic cancer at age 32, he had already been performing for 19 years, averaging more than 200 dates a year on the road. He had made two HBO specials, put out two albums and appeared on both of David Letterman's late-night shows a total of 12 times - the last of which never aired.

Mr. Letterman and his CBS Late Show producers decided that bits about pro-lifers, the Easter bunny and cross-wearing Christians were too offensive, so they excised the routine from the show. It was the biggest censorship brouhaha at the Ed Sullivan Theater since Elvis' hips were deemed too racy in 1956.

"You'd watch him as a comedian, and you'd kinda feel bad," comic Richard Jeni says during the Comedy Central tribute. "You'd kinda go, I really should be doing more of this kind of thing. I should be telling the truth more.' "

"By the way, if anybody here is in marketing or advertising, kill yourself. There's no rationalization for what you do, and you are Satan's little helpers... This is not a joke. You are Satan's spawn, filling the world with bile and garbage. Kill yourself. It's the only way to save your soul."

Mr. Hicks made connections that exposed society's hypocrisy, especially among its self-appointed moral guardians. He found it ironic that presidents who believed the Bible was literally true, including the fire and brimstone of Revelations, had their itchy fingers on the nuclear button; that the people who most opposed sexual thoughts also wanted us to be fruitful and multiply; that religious fanatics didn't like what he said but weren't willing to forgive him.

In one bit, Mr. Hicks would talk about the government's definition of pornography:

"no artistic merit, causes sexual thoughts. Well, that sounds like every commercial on television to me. You know, when I see those two twins on that Doublemint commercial - I'm almost

embarrassed to tell y'all this - I'm not thinking of gum... Hey, honey, where's the Wrigleys? I feel like chewing on something.' "

In another routine, he would relate the story of a Waffle House waitress who asked him why he was reading. "I guess I read for a lot of reasons," he said, "and the main one is so I don't end up being a waffle waitress... It's not like I walked into a Klan rally in a Boy George outfit. It's a book!"

Onstage, Mr. Hicks was fearless. He didn't care what people thought of him, which gave him the freedom to say anything. Usually dressed in black and smoking up a storm, he never stopped pacing.

"He wasn't like a guy who comes up and stands at a mike and lays out one-liners, but rather that there's this sort of tornado moving around the stage and cycling around and throwing all this energy at you," says Eric Bogosian, the abrasive New York performance artist and actor (Talk Radio), in the Comedy Central special.

Comic Allan Havey says: "He wasn't concerned with what the audience thought, who would boo him. He wasn't concerned with how it would affect his business. He just said what he wanted to say."

Before expressing regret at the way their relationship ended, Mr. Letterman says during the special that he too was taken by Mr. Hicks' attitude. "What I liked about Bill was, here is a guy that nobody knew, myself included, who had a swagger to his demeanor, both physical and emotional. And I just liked that. For no good reason, for no justifiable reason, I'm cocky. Nobody knows me. Too bad.' You could almost see him turning his shoulder to the audience."

Mr. Hicks' mother likens her son to a preacher, and stand-up comic/actress Brett Butler (Grace Under Fire) says he was inspired by his love-hate relationship with the South.

Sometimes called a "rock 'n' roll comedian" because his audiences tended to be young, Mr. Hicks didn't want to be Jimi Hendrix or Bob Dylan or Jim Morrison or even Lenny Bruce, to whom he has often been compared, Ms. Butler says.

"It was Jesus that Bill wanted to be. He wanted to save us all... He wanted to be Christ at his angriest."

"I'm a heavy smoker. I go through two lighters a day."

At age 13, Mr. Hicks was entertaining the other kids at summer camp. By 15, he was sneaking out of his house to perform at the Houston Comedy Workshop's open-mike nights. And before he graduated from high school, he was the star at the club, outdrawing veteran comics.

In his spare time, young Bill liked to take in porno movies and drugs, especially hallucinogens that grew naturally in the countryside outside town. He liked to say he believed God put those substances in the ground to speed up human evolution. He also drank heavily, off- and on-stage, though he gave up alcohol altogether in the mid-'80s.

At about the same time, Jay Leno recommended him to the Letterman show, where he became a semi-regular. One of the so-called "outlaw comics," a group that included Sam Kinison, he became a star of sorts in the United Kingdom. Thousands would pack his gigs around the U.K., and in 1990, he received the critics award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland.

When he found out last year that he was sick, Mr. Hicks simply worked harder. Two more comedy albums, which he planned to set to music, are in the can.

Mr. Hicks' father, Jim, remembers telling his son about the use of a particular four-letter word onstage: "I said, Bill, I don't see Bob Hope using it, or any other well-known comedian.' He didn't like Bob Hope or any other comedian I would mention... I think his message came from his feelings and his observations about what was happening in this country. I think he was

passionately determined to try and make some changes through this medium." Hicks would often end his shows with a sentimental plea.
He wanted us to redirect the money being spent on bombs to feed and clothe the poor. And there would still be enough left, he would say, to explore inner, as well as outer, space.
"He was the darkest guy I knew, and he was the brightest - that's what was so brilliant about him," Mr. Johndrow says. "He would dig out all these demons and then have these very positive messages. He said he was a misanthropic humanist."