IT'S JUST A RIDE: PREVIEW
THE SCOTSMAN, SEPTEMBER 6 1994
By William Cook

It was April 1993, and the Irish comedian Sean Hughes had just come off stage at a small theatre at the Melbourne Comedy Festival.

Normally he'd be heading to the bar and winding down.

Instead he beckoned me over, whispered "you've got to see this guy, he's a genius," and we crept in at the back of a tiny hall where Bill Hicks was in full flow.

I'd seen Hicks in Edinburgh the previous August and been impressed by his baleful cynicism, his acerbic one-liners and his genuine commitment.

But not that impressed.

A lot of his manic libertarian attitudes, the smoking and pornography routines, seemed to overlap with his fellow American Denis Leary, without having Leary's youthful anarchism.

At times, Hicks seemed to care too much to be cool.

Melbourne was different.

Promoted by a rock impresario who didn't understand comedy, reviled by the Australian press, and booked into a shabby venue where the major audience draw was an "ethnic humour" revue entitled Wogerama! (I kid you not), Hicks had found a magnificent focus for his anger.

Building up a head of steam with some personal material, he shifted gear effortlessly into a viciously funny dissection of George Bush and the American Way.

His obsession with the evils of advertising was good for another twenty minutes, before he closed in his traditional dramatic manner.

The lights dimmed, three shots rang out from the back of the audience, and Hicks fell to the ground.

The silence held for a good five seconds before the applause began.

It was a memorable ending, given a bleak significance by the fact that only Hicks knew that he had just been diagnosed as having pancreatic cancer.

Nine months later, at the age of 33 Hicks died.

A Channel 4 documentary It's Just a Ride is a celebration of his life and comedy, as well as being a tribute to a stand-up comedian who was taking what is regarded as an essentially trivial entertainment genre into new and dangerous areas.

They often proved too dangerous for American audiences who regarded Hicks as something of a loose cannon.

An occasional gig as a rent-a-cynic on David Letterman's TV chat show was problematic in that Hicks was rarely allowed to be as politically abrasive as he was in live performance.

In the TV film, Letterman, and his rival Jay Leno offer sincere tributes to Hicks' talents, but it was in Britain that the comic picked up some of his most devoted followers.

Fellow comics adored him for his passion, honesty and his determination to take risks.

Sean Hughes and Eddie Izzard talk enthusiastically about their admiration for a performer whose material was wildly different from their own, but whose style they envied considerably.

The film uses archive footage of Hicks in performance, following his development as a performer and satirist.

Early routines attacking bimbo pop singers with a vehemence that borders on the misogynist are excised in favour of harder targets like the CIA, the Bush administration and the media.

Hicks' libertarianism, his delight in sex, nicotine and consumerism were reminiscent of P.J. O'Rourke, but Hicks came from the other end of the political spectrum, fuelled by a righteous

hatred of bigotry.
Part of this came from his family background, and the fact that he was brought up south of the Mason-Dixon line in a Southern Baptist family.
His family and personal experiences of the Deep South coloured his act with a hellfire passion that hip Yankee urban types like Leary could never match.
Hicks' father remained worried by his son's performance style to the very end.
"I never could understand why he had to use the F word. I used to say to him Bob Hope don't have to use the F word. But he didn't like that and he didn't like Bob Hope much either."