

LOSS OF AN UNCOMPROMISING ARTIST

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By Duncan Strauss

When Calendar runs a piece acknowledging the passing of a significant artist or entertainer -- like comedian Bill Hicks, who died of pancreatic cancer Saturday at age 32 -- it's typically authored by a writer with particular expertise, not a member of that person's management team. Along with my partner, Colleen McGarr, I managed Hicks for the better part of a year, but before going into management a half decade ago, I spent several years covering comedy for The Times and other publications. So I may be in a singular position to reflect on Hicks. I had long felt Hicks was one of the two or three best comedians to take a stage in the last decade, an uncompromising artist of enormous intelligence, insight and command of language -- a provocateur with a razor-sharp point of view, shot through with irony, and one whose performances were consistently inspired and inspiring.

I became a bona fide fanatic years ago, seizing every opportunity to see any Hicks show I could. For those who were less fanatical, a Hicks show could be trying, and on any given night some percentage of the audience would walk out, outraged by what they heard. For many years -- he started doing stand-up at 15 -- that was because portions of his act involved formulating explicit treatises that heartily embraced the sexual and the scatological.

Within the last year or so, as he further honed his vision, that element played a smaller and smaller role. This is hardly to suggest that he became a cuddly, user-friendly, dime-a-dozen comic trafficking in glib observations about airline travel and fast-food joints. Virtually any type of hypocrisy became target for a Hicksian smart bomb. While now only traces of his material were X-rated, his *modus operandi* was every bit as challenging to the audience as he tackled such topics as anti-abortion activists, Fundamental Christianity and the Waco siege. Now, on any given night, the most common audience response was to beget a slew of new Hicks fanatics, from college students to their grandparents. Professional reviewers expressed considerable enthusiasm. Gerald Nachman, theater critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, wrote in a July review that "he's as original, caustic and challenging as were Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl and Richard Pryor in their day." Critic John Lahr was only four sentences into a nine-page profile of Hicks in the Nov. 1 issue of The New Yorker before calling him "an exhilarating comic thinker in a renegade class all his own."

But these and plenty of similar superlatives didn't even hint at the breadth of Hicks' talent, which finally had found myriad outlets in recent months. He had created "The Counts of the Netherworld," a show for England's Channel 4 that he would write and star in, and that surely would have been viewed as a pioneering piece of television programming. A fistful of publishing houses were courting him. He had been asked to start contributing columns to The Nation. He had written a few screenplays, was in the midst of a provocative new script and already had the ideas together for the next one. He was a gifted guitarist-songwriter, and while he had released two conventional comedy CDs, he had recently recorded two more, but these featured the innovation of a musical score that he composed and played.

And while it shook him deeply last October to have his 12th Letterman appearance entirely censored, it almost seemed to redouble his interest in exploring alternative ways to present his primary art: There were discussions with John Magnuson, who directed the Lenny Bruce concert film -- and who, upon seeing his first Hicks show in July had become a fanatic -- about doing a similar movie with Hicks.

As these things were coming together, his dream became to buy a house where he could hole

up and write the book, screenplay and columns, compose and play music, work on his records and get a dog named Lester. As dreams go, it was a relatively simple one, and Colleen and I desperately wanted to make it come true, especially when it appeared he was making a medically unprecedented triumph over the cancer.

People liked to be around Hicks, to do things for him. I was drawn to him just as much personally as professionally. For as extraordinary and inspirational as Bill Hicks was as an artist, he was equally so as a human being: uncommonly bright, intuitive, perceptive, emotionally direct, charming, amazingly well-read, insightful and capable of tremendous warmth and love once he trusted you. If he liked and trusted you, and you had an endearing quirk or two, so much the better.

It turned out that over the months we worked together, he had noticed -- I hadn't -- that when he delivered some weird or wild news, I had a tendency to respond by saying, "Oh my God," in something resembling a Valley Girl inflection. Once he pointed out this tendency, I naturally became quite self-conscious and tried to resist saying the phrase, while he subtly tried to bait me into saying it. One of the last times we spoke, he called rather discouraged about something career-related. And when he told me, I was shocked, and I did say it. He instantly perked up, gleefully noting, "I got an 'Oh my God' out of you!" It made him so happy.

I'd give anything for him to still be able to bait me that way. There were so many things he didn't have the opportunity to do. He didn't even have a chance to get the dog.

I'm pretty sure Lester would have thought Bill Hicks was amazing and would have loved him intensely. I know we all did.