

PRINCE OF DARKNESS

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By Rupert Edwards

Bill Hicks was one of the most provocative and independent comedians in the United States, but it was on the British stand-up circuit that he found his natural and most enthusiastic audience.

Hicks made his mark in Britain in 1991 at the Edinburgh Festival where he won the Critics Award. He followed this up in 1992 with two sell-out tours culminating in a show at the Dominion Theatre in London which was broadcast by Channel 4 and titled *Revelations*.

On stage Hicks was a pacing demagogue, unexpectedly shifting gear from gentle conversation to lurid, contorted characters such as the libidinous goat boy, from intimate confession to a compelling onslaught on his chosen target. Never a joke-teller, he generated humour with his distinctively frank take on life. "You know what we should have done," he said. "Instead of bombing the Iraqis, we should have embarrassed them. We should have assassinated Bush." Hicks began his comedy career at the age of 13, sneaking out to perform at all-comers' nights at the Comedy Workshop in Houston. In 1991 his controversial tour de force brought him to attention at the Just for Laughs Montreal International Comedy Festival.

He was always outspoken but never fell into the trap of being politically correct. He lambasted the hypocrisies of the Gulf war, of American gun law and of the pro-life movement but was never afraid to expose the biological details of his own sexual fantasies.

His reputation in the United States was confirmed last October when, after 11 previous appearances, his act was cut after recording from *The David Letterman Show* as it purportedly touched "too many hot spots". Although shaken by being dropped from Letterman's show, Hicks at the same time gained a new conviction in what he had to say. Apparently it was his jibes at pro-lifers that caused him to be removed from the programme: "You know what bugs me about them? If you're so pro-life, do me a favour - don't lock arms, and block medical clinics. If you're so pro-life, lock arms and block cemeteries... I want to see pro-lifers at funerals opening caskets and shouting, 'Get out!' "

Hicks had endured the rigours of the relentless one-night comedy circuit with some support from drink, drugs and cigarettes. (He reckoned that he had performed around 270 nights a year for the last five years.) He became famous for his pro-smoking humour and even after he "went clean" was fervent in his advocacy of careful use of cannabis and magic mushrooms. Hicks trademark was his all-black wardrobe which, combined with his style of humour, led to him often being affectionately referred to as "The Prince of Darkness". However, in the last year of his life, he decided to move into more autumnal colours. At the same time the range and vision of his comedy was expanding - he was increasingly concentrating on writing, screenplays and journalism; he recently wrote a column for *Scallywag* and had been offered a column on the American periodical *the Nation*.

At the time of his death he was about to start a pilot for a Channel 4 series, *The Counts of the Netherworld*, which he had devised to feature himself and another US comedian, Fallon Woodland. The two men were to appear in retreat from the modern world, philosophising and fooling in an 18th-century salon. The series was to be the fulfilment of his ambition, an attack on what he saw as a world media conspiracy to produce uncontroversial television, programmes whose only function was to soften up the viewers in preparation for the commercials.

Despite his dark, intense performance, offstage Hick's intelligence and gentleness earned him

loyalty and respect from friends and fans alike. He often referred to himself as a failed rock guitarist but he recently recorded two new comedy albums with a musical score which he composed and played.

At a meeting last November, Bill was burning with new ideas. "Why do you have to be so angry?" he was asked. "This isn't anger, this is me, this is passion." His death from pancreatic cancer, at the age of 32, has robbed comedy of a uniquely passionate talent.