



Bill Hicks performing in London in 1991, as seen on the video recording Bill Hicks Live.

It's Just a Ride

by NICK MEADOR

The wisdom of late comedian and satirist Bill Hicks (1961-1994) is experiencing a massive resurgence and serving as a philosophical jumping point for many teenagers and young adults.

Something is compelling me to write about Bill Hicks, and yet something about the task seems extremely difficult. I tried once already, got to about 1,000 words, and then totally stopped writing. Perhaps I feel that I haven't sufficiently studied the late comedian and his live recordings. Or it could be that, no matter how many times I listen to or watch his stage performances, the greater meaning of his presence on earth is still elusive. But I know deep within me that the world would be better off if he was still alive today. I know this because the world is better off since he lived at all.

This is not intended to be a history of the great controversial comedian, or even a comprehensive summary of the effects that Bill Hicks had on the world during his life. I was only 11 years old when he died on February 26, 1994, so there is no way that I could pretend to have a first hand experience of what he meant at that time. On the other hand, my goal is to examine what Hicks means to us today. What he can teach us 14 years after his death? What were his greatest strengths, and what were the weaknesses that held him back? I suppose his first weakness was being

human; he died of pancreatic cancer just as his fame was reaching an international scope.

From a certain perspective, Hicks has become the Tupac Shakur of comedy. While only two albums were released before 1994, six albums and two compilations have been issued under his name since then – not to mention the numerous bootlegs available on the Internet. All are worth hearing, despite the inevitable repetition across many of the recordings (I would imagine that a comedian operates somewhat like a musician when choosing his or her arsenal on tour, employing a variety of “tracks” with a certain amount of improvisation). I didn't hear most of these recordings until 2008, because – for some strange reason – Hicks escaped my conscious memory for the past ten years.

I became acquainted with Bill Hicks the same way as most people who were born after the '70s; his face and a brief requiem that read “another dead hero” were embedded in the album artwork for Tool's 1996 masterpiece *Aenima*. The cover plastic was the type that, when tilted back and forth, would make the specially designed images behind it appear to move. I tilted the plastic, and, depending on the page I had inserted, a dozen alien eyes winked at me, or a naked man with his head between his legs performed self-fellatio. On yet another page, a large chunk of southern California broke free from mainland America, and parts sank into the Pacific Ocean. I would not learn for another 12 years that this was Hicks' vision, as immortalized on his album *Arizona Bay*, a combination of live comedy and original music not released until 1997.

After referencing Timothy Leary's concept of *futants* (i.e. – those who are genetically inclined to facilitate the progress of mankind), *Aenima's* liner notes read:

“Unless we provide a proper environment of freedom in which this positive genetic type can be recognized, operate in, and the dross be separated from the valuable information, we will be depriving the race of a vital resource. Every time a scientist, philosopher, artist, or athlete pushes our thresholds to new ground the entire race evolves. [...Regressive] behavior is left to the psychotic, dogmatic, fundamentalist



believers you see on your T.V. everyday letting off bombs and killing people in the name of God. Beliefs are dangerous. Beliefs allow the mind to stop functioning. A non-functioning mind is clinically dead. Believe in nothing...”

Tool’s members had Hicks to thank for some of those ideas. I would also come to learn that he had an enormous influence on other musicians, especially edgy alternative and metal bands who dominated the 1990s, like Rage Against The Machine and Radiohead. In fact, clips from Hicks’ live performances even appeared on *Aenima*. Throughout my transition to adulthood, I’ve never forgotten the words he spoke at the beginning of “Third Eye,” the fifteenth track of the album.

“If you don’t believe drugs have done good things for us, do me a favor. Go home tonight, take all your albums, all your tapes, and all your CDs, and burn ‘em. ‘Cuz you know what? The musicians who made all that great music that’s enhanced your life throughout the years – real fuckin’ high on drugs.”

I was a sheltered prude, but I understood what he was saying. However, the combination of his powerful message and Tool’s foreboding music were, to a suburban 14-year-old, more terrifying than enlightening. I had a gut feeling that these people were the ones who would lead me through the frustration and alienation of high school. I knew I was on the right path, but I had no clue where it led.

The next Hicks clip in “Third Eye” turned out to be his most famous quote. In that sound bit, he suggests the type of story he’d like to see, if only once, on the evening news.

“Today a young man on acid realized that all matter is merely energy condensed to a slow vibration, that we are all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively. There’s no such thing as death. Life is only a dream, and we’re the imagination of ourselves. Here’s Tom with the weather.”

For all of his yelling and abrasion and pessimism, this remains the core of all that Hicks stood for.

It’s also extremely bewildering to an unsuspecting comedy club patron. It is no wonder then why most people – even the people who paid to enter the audience at Hicks’ show – never understood him. It’s for the same reason that he would often tell the audience they looked “like a dog that’s just been shown a card trick” – confused by their ignorance, even if they were smiling and laughing. After all, even college students who have passed Philosophy 101 have trouble fully digesting this message. Hicks was proud to be a walking paradox, seeming to despise our entire society, but still harboring a keen optimism for the human race. So how did he end up so far *out there*? Was there a purpose to his pessimism? Why has his message endured, and even strengthened, since his death?

First of all, Hicks was never a regular comedian. He was fully capable of assuming that role, and he even passed into prurient topics on occasion, but it seems that he never let an audience off the hook without first testing their brains and their spirits. On some recordings, he repeatedly told the crowd not to worry because the philosophical arguments would soon be done. He would then ensure the audience that the “dick jokes” were coming, but even though that simple mention elicited laughs from the fans, he would leave them hanging – at times never providing the dumb humor.

What he did provide pretty much every show was a dissection of politics, religion, sex, drugs, alcohol, smoking, pop culture, abortion, the military, and on and on through every other controversial topic that existed in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. But the way he dove into a controversial point was usually by cleverly diverging from a more comfortable one. For example, he’d first tell the crowd that he was horribly addicted to the show *Cops*. Then after a few minutes of stirring up laughter with little real effort, he’d shift into his analysis of what that show actually stood for – basically that the government is in control, and if you try to test them they will destroy you. People watch *Cops* for entertainment, because they want to see folks (whether criminals or not) get chased and busted. But the real message is, “We are in control. Do not fuck with us.” Hicks forced the crowd to confront the truth without giving them a chance to ignore or



deflect. That's not to say that the crowd never missed the point, which they likely often did. And that could explain Hicks' repetition from show to show.

He paid particular attention to the ways that the public is manipulated and taken advantage of, as with the Cops segment. Another was the abovementioned "acid news story" joke, which was intended to point out the constant and unnecessary negativity of TV news. In fact, Hicks told many personal stories about his own drug use, emphasizing that – while he had generally stopped experimenting – he had had some amazing times on drugs, especially hallucinogenics. He talked about marijuana and psilocybin mushrooms as if they were gifts from God, placed on the planet to accelerate human evolution. He claimed that America's war on drugs was actually no more than "a war on personal freedom." Hicks' theory was, if we open up our third eye – that is, our mind's eye, or the interface between consciousness and the outer world – then we will begin to recognize the one loving truth at the core of humanity. Obviously I'm skipping some points in the connect-the-dot picture, but it's an extremely complicated philosophy.

The fact that Hicks' believed in a God at all was incredible, given his general pessimistic nature. He was extremely critical of Christianity, especially the evangelicals he had grown up with in the American South. He insisted that Christianity and southern politics were both founded on ignorance and immoral behavior. This ranged from calling George H. W. Bush the anti-Christ, to pointing out that Creationists usually look very un-evolved. He'd tell of a Christian's claim that God put dinosaur bones on earth to test our faith, to which he replied, "I think God put *you* here to test *my* faith." Hicks' God reflected the argument that existing religions are no longer relevant, that the only path to a God (if there is such a being or presence) lies within.

Hicks would consistently pick out the strongest examples of American dull-mindedness and turn them into humorous anecdotes. To the "man" who said, "My daddy died for our flag," he'd say, "Really? Wow. I bought mine." The man returned with, "Yeah, he died in the Korean War for that flag," which Hicks followed with, "Oh, what a coincidence. Mine was made in Korea." The goal was not to undervalue American death, but to point out that most patriotism is really the result of brainwash

propaganda intended to win approval for a war. And that topic would lead to jabs at American foreign policy and militarism, especially a statement of the fact that no country in the world will ever be a threat to the U.S. But again and again he would return to the core subjects. He believed that we were carrying an enormous load of negative psychic energy, fed by the "fevered egos" of the world: the politicians, priests, media pundits, pop stars, and more. His target was anyone with the power to affect or control human beliefs and behavior, but who did so without adhering to a moral code or rational thought process; in other words, anyone who did much more harm than good in the world, especially those ignorant of their own destructive nature.

In Hicks' day, most of this negative psychic energy was delivered into the human mind via television. Other than Cops, one of his favorite shows to pick on was American Gladiators. When his diatribes got too heavy, he'd almost start chanting,

"Go back to bed, America. Your government is in control again. Here. Here's American Gladiators. Watch this, shut up. Go back to bed, America. Here is American Gladiators. Here is 56 channels of it! Watch these pituitary retards bang their fucking skulls together and congratulate you on living in the land of freedom."

That American Gladiators was resuscitated last spring is a commentary on the ongoing occurrence of TV mind control.

And the ones behind the scenes didn't escape Hicks' verbal stabbing either. One of his more common suggestions was that anyone in marketing or advertising should commit suicide. He'd say, "There's no rationalization for what you do, and you are Satan's little helpers." He would insist that there was no punch line, and just repeat the suggestion over and over until it sunk in. But that brings me to my first major comparison between Hicks' time and the present. Thanks to my short foray into digital marketing, I know that the marketing industry today is shifting from "interruption" to "permission" tactics. In other words, TV and radio commercials are on the way out, and specifically



targeted web banner ads are on the way in. This is but a small sign of the way that our society and economy are about to do a back flip. The investment banking collapse in October 2008 was a much more abrupt sign. These aren't signs that advertising and marketing are less despicable, but just that we all have to reach beyond our comfort zone to get by today. We don't exist within pre-cut job descriptions. In order to meet one goal that we care about, we sometimes have to make compromises. (This line of thought reminds me of *Steppenwolf*. Protagonist Harry Haller comes to realize that his self-recognition of half man/half wolf isn't appropriate at all. In reality everyone is comprised of hundreds of selves. We are all complex and multifaceted, which is the opposite of what society likes to make people believe. Society achieves efficiency by limiting people to a single role. But this is all changing. Just because one might have to do some marketing, say, to promote Supraterranean.com, that doesn't make one a marketer or any sort of trickster or conniver. It just makes one a multitasker.)

As I start to explore the changes that have occurred since 1994, I can't help but feel sad that Hicks wasn't alive from 2000 to 2008. I know that he would have been a key cultural figure during George W. Bush's complete failure of a presidency. What is even sadder is that much of what Hicks' tore to shreds during his routine only got more prevalent in years to come. He spent a good amount of time bashing the powerful few like George H.W. Bush. Now the younger Bush – a Christian Fundamentalist oil baron with a penchant for random, unwarranted military action – has been running our country for the past eight years. How could this have happened?! Did we not get the memo??!! Hicks used to follow his more biting segments by stating that he was "just planting seeds." He was sure that few would take him seriously, but regardless, he knew that his efforts were not in vain. And I know it too, as I'm sure many others do now more than ever. Even total cynics can sense a source of hope in Obama. (But I fear that his first term will be more a test of the weakened credibility of the American Presidency than a test of Obama's ability. In other words, if he tries to improve America and the world too much, will the Higher Capitalist Powers intervene?)

In retrospect, *Arizona Bay* was probably Hicks' most serene work, perhaps because it was the first released after his death. On a literal level, the 1997 album was a statement about the most soulless city America has yet produced. But on a grander scope, the release reflected the utter indifference a part of him felt towards the self-destructive nature of human beings. He had bitten the bait and tugged on the line for as long as he could, but finally had to accept – as any force of good must – that not only will evil always exist in the world, but it will always seem to have the upper hand. And given that acknowledgement, one is entitled to a life of pessimism – that is, if you can handle it. Hicks carried so much weight at all times – probably more than if he were just a writer, since he had to exude all that hate and anger with his vocals chords and body language.

Hicks was also exposed to immediate judgment and criticism. One of the most revealing segments that I've heard was on a bootleg called *I'm Sorry Folks*, which was recorded live in Chicago on an unknown date. Only three minutes into the show, he engages in a screaming fight with a woman who yells, "You suck." The slightly abridged version of his response goes something like this:

"You suck, you fuckin' cunt. Get the fuck out of here right now. You're everything in America that should be flushed down the toilet, you fuckin' turd. Go see fuckin' Madonna, you fuckin' idiot piece of shit. 'I can yell at the comedian 'cuz I'm a drunk cunt. I got a cunt and I'm drunk. I can do anything I want.' I want you to go find a fuckin' soul."

Then he apologizes to the rest of the crowd and continues with the show.

Coincidentally I just read the Lester Bangs' essay "Of Pop and Pies and Fun," in which the author argued (in no less than 6,000 words) that Iggy Pop was a superior musician because he didn't give fuck what the crowd thought. Not only that, but his performance and delivery negated any bullshit that a member of the audience might dish out. Whereas an artist like Alice Cooper was getting pies thrown in his face, nobody questioned Iggy's authority. I suppose that's why Hicks



was often called a rock star comedian. If someone mistook him for an invertebrate fool, he unleashed his wrath upon the offender without hesitation.

Personally I feel that Hicks' philosophy and life work were both left incomplete. That's not to say that he didn't live up to his potential. What I mean is, had he lived to the present time, I can only imagine the things he would have accomplished. I think his message would have continued to get more and more positive, while an even greater number of people would have realized the validity of his arguments. His premature death really only slows down this process. In fact, the most widespread use of his voice since Tool's *Aenima* was in the independent documentaries *Zeitgeist* (2007) and *Zeitgeist: Addendum* (2008). They have been viewed by thousands of people worldwide, thanks to free downloads, live streaming, and multiple translations. (This brings up a related point, which requires extensive exploration on its own – in brief, that the Internet will be another force that accelerates human evolution).

The quote used in those films was what Hicks' himself called the point of his ranting and raving. It went like this (once again, slightly abridged):

“The world is like a ride at an amusement park. Some people have been on the ride for a long time and they begin to question, ‘Is this real, or is this just a ride?’ And other people have remembered and they come back to us and they say, ‘Hey, don't worry, don't be afraid, ever, because this is just a ride.’ And we *kill those people*. We always kill those good guys who try and tell us that, and let the demons run amok. But it doesn't matter, because it's just a ride, and we can change it any time we want. It's only a choice. No effort, no work, no job, no savings of money. A choice right now between fear and love.”

Hicks said that the path of love is to recognize that human beings are all one. Then he'd suggest that all money spent of war and weapons would be more than enough to feed and shelter every human being on earth. It seems like even brushing the surface of these issues arouses criticism for being idealistic. But on the other

hand, perhaps we've spent too much time mindlessly accepting what we take for granted to be reality, when most of that “reality” actually consists of human constructions. When the veil is lifted even a little bit, anyone who can sense the problem innately will usually fight to keep lifting that veil up. Most quit before it's been raised at all, and everyone dies before the job is done. But we can all plant seeds, because even the childlike wisdom behind the Johnny Appleseed myth tells us that most planted seeds will not be dug up. Many will take root and sprout into saplings, and some will even make it to adult trees. The trouble then is to prevent Satan-worshipping Fascist rednecks from cutting down the tree, building a fire with the lumber, and burning Johnny Appleseed alive.

That never happened to Hicks. In fact, just to know that he was never arrested for his comedy routine says something spectacular about freedom of expression in America. Lenny Bruce was arrested on obscenity charges in the 1950s for saying *much less* offensive things during his comedy act. Our country has come a long way in its interpretation of free speech. That's something to be proud of, but at the same time, it's something to safeguard with all our power. While in office, Bush and his devil-horned pal Cheney took every measure possible to nullify the contents of the First Amendment. And I know very well that the Internet is scanned for “suspicious” activities and “dangerous” individuals.

Will we give up? Fuck no! At least, there will always be a steadily growing contingent of individuals who are willing to fight for the truth. Because that's what Bill Hicks stood for – the truth. Every word that came out of his mouth contained at least a sliver of truth. Most disparagements he ever let fly were meant to oppose the spreading of lies or the masking of truth. Obviously this kind of devoted lifestyle grinds against the flow of the world, and it's bound to produce pessimism and bitter hatred in the enlightened minority. When that happens, the bitterness must occasionally be purged, if only for psychic relief and mental balance.

The real enlightenment is to accept that, while our actions are honorable and worthwhile, we cannot achieve our goal. This is partly because our goal is vague and indefinable. But we know the right direction,



thanks to leaders like Hicks. There were others before him, and many will come in turn. He died too soon, but now Bill Hicks stands forever, poised to assist mankind until they no longer need the help, with his arm pointing the way like a laser beam cutting through time into eternity.

We owe it to him to follow his lead. It's time to see the ride for what it's worth. "It's only a choice." Let's make it now.

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