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Bill Hicks: A Study in National Character

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Bill Hicks: A Study in National Character

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

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by

Adam Gardner Osborn

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Approved, June 2002

Arthur Knight

Richard Lowry

Lynn Weiss
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This thesis aims to better understand the role and purpose of stand up comedy in American society, and how the work of Bill Hicks exemplifies the importance of such an art form. Hicks attempted to change popular opinion and bridge ideological gaps through his words. This paper places Hicks alongside humorists such as Will Rogers and Lenny Bruce, and credits him with advancing the form of stand up comedy further than those who proceeded him.

The evolution of American stand up comedy parallels the evolution of American self-classification into character types. Humorists utilize these character types to help them express their social philosophies. Through this expression, previously unacceptable ideas become focal points for observation and critique. This observation creates humorous ideas, and attracts the attention of an audience, who are exposed to new types of ideological interpretation. The stand up comedian, infusing this new understanding with satire, attempts to make the previously unacceptable humorous and irresistible. In this way he exposes the crevices of contrasting ideologies.

The art of Bill Hicks exemplifies the latest manifestation in the ongoing evolution of stand up comedy. His unrelenting challenge to established social order attempted to empower the individual to take the promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to their logical conclusions. Transcending the role of the comedian, he protected, empowered, and challenged. With influences extending to comedians, artists, musicians, and academics, Bill Hicks is a cornerstone of American satire. Through an examination of the evolution of American stand up comedy, and its creation of American character types, the words of Bill Hicks reach a new level of importance.
BILL HICKS: A STUDY IN NATIONAL CHARACTER
CHAPTER I

Humor is one of those conceits which give form and flavor to an entire character.... There is scarcely an aspect of the American character to which humor is not related, few which in some sense it has not governed.... It sustains its own appeal, yet its vigorous power invites absorption in that character of which it is a part.¹

Throughout American history, individuals have attempted to bridge the ideological gap in American culture through humorous words. By breaking down social thought into basic arguments, American humorists have been able to juxtapose conflicting beliefs and ideologies into comic illustrations. These individuals, in their roles as humorous lecturers, stump speakers, comic orators, and stand up comedians, used their talent for insight to criticize, satirize, and critique established conceptions. The freedom to create humor that at once satirizes and attracts popular understanding has allowed many great raconteurs to be heard. Though the nature of their thoughts change and evolve, certain wits, like Ambrose Bierce, Will Rogers, Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks, stand above the rest. Utilizing humor, these men challenged popular opinion and used their intellects and voices to further social understanding. To create understanding between belief systems, the comic presents conflicting ideas in a humorous way so that once unacceptable ideas become comical.

With the growth of the American nation, in both area and population, and the ever-present influx of new nationalities and belief systems, the theatrical and artistic styles of social commentary evolved to represent the ever-increasing multitude of American faces. With diversity comes the need to understand different ideologies, and stand up comedy became a way to filter contrasting opinions through humor, making what were once objectionable ideas to certain groups humorous. By presenting undesirable opinion in humorous form, a social philosopher is able to bridge gaps between opposing clusters of

American ideology.

Comedians use a stage personality, based on theatrical characters or original creations, to satirize and critique contemporary social thought. Bierce utilized the Yankee, Josh Billings had the Backwoodsman, and for Rogers the Cowboy was the character used to deliver the message. Bill Hicks also utilized the classic idea of an American type to help him reach his audience. On stage, running around, gyrating and gesticulating to the music of Elvis and Jimi Hendrix he embodied the Outlaw Comic, a black-clad, chain-smoking spout of left wing fervor and accusatory indignation. He endeavored to break through to a different audience every night, wanting to expose lies that hindered personal freedom, to challenge hypocrisy that threatened intellectual growth, and to make the world a better place by helping people to think for themselves.

Bill Hicks' message sought to enlighten national consciousness through the pursuit of personal freedom and communal understanding. His evolution as an artist is important in the understanding of America because those voices that choose to lampoon and parody American beliefs and culture hold up a mirror, allowing Americans to laugh at themselves, their rituals, and their institutions. Through laughter an individual can feel comfortable enough with a subject to analyze and question it, to think about it in new ways. The freedom of speech grants Americans the freedom to question. Hicks attempted to make people realize they possessed such freedoms, as well as the responsibility to use them. An individual with a vital message, a maniac who wished to enlighten and a prophet whose total righteousness propelled him to the forefront of the fruition of stand up comedy, Bill Hicks is an artist of surpassing importance. He employed the art of stand up comedy to reinforce the idea of free thought, and, through his words, he reinforced the importance of his art form. The importance of the art form lies not only with those who utilize it, but also within the form itself. The maturation of stand up comedy through distinct American
theatrical traditions must be understood in order to fully comprehend the satire that emerges from it.

This evolution of creating bonds of laughter between opposing collectives within the whole of the American nation began with the first stereotyping of Colonial culture by European theatricals. During the growth of the American colonies, European theatrical productions began stereotyping the early colonials in the form of the 'Stage Yankee,' who evolved as a good-natured and honest, if not bright, individual. To compensate for his lack of intellect, he possessed luck and determination to pull him through any crisis. He would be the first in a line of characters based on aspects of American ideology. As this 'national character' evolved, "its objective - the unconscious objective of a disunited people - has seemed to be that of creating fresh bonds, a new unity, the semblance of a society and the rounded completion of an American type."2

Specific types evolved and changed along with the ideology of the day. The Yankee who "ridiculed old values...a symbol of triumph, of adaptability, of irrepressible life,"3 became the Backwoodsman. This character, embodied by Davy Crockett, had luck and honesty like the Stage Yankee, and superb physical attributes to help him conquer the frontier. His language evolved from proper dialect into rough colloquialisms; he drank, fought, and rode everything from bear to bulls to flatboats down the Mississippi. As the new American nation grew, so did the character of the Backwoodsman. He personified the spirit of manifest destiny, and paralleled, rather than replaced, his predecessor. Both figures' styles of oratory and humor developed alongside their personae. While the Yankee's humor was subtle and enveloping, the Backwoodsman's was crude, blusterous,

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2 Ibid., 297.
3 Ibid., 31.
and drew from a broad range of colloquial topics. These styles became the two veins with which Americans viewed their humor and comic oratory for many years.

Two journalists and orators, Ambrose Bierce and Josh Billings, utilized these veins of thought to produce newspaper articles, novels, and lectures. Billings, the pen name for Henry Wheeler Shaw, was born in Massachusetts in 1818. Specializing in rural philosophy, one-liners, and dialect spelling in his articles, he employed the voice of the Backwoodsman. The style of dialect spelling infuses his words with rustic candor. A comic lecturer, the predecessor of a stand-up comedian, his humor touched on many aspects of society, especially the volatile topic of religion: “Too much religion iz wuss than none at all. Yu kant sho me a kuntry that haz existed yet, where the people, all ov them, professed one religion and persekuted all other kinds, but what the religion ruined the country. (I paws for a repli.)”4 In addition to commentary on ideals and ideologies, Billings commented on the nature of man, his vices, his passions, and his characteristics: “The most sublime courage I hav ever witnessed, hav been among that klass who waz too poor to know that they possessed it, and too humble for the world ever to diskover it.”5

By stepping forward to comment on national thought and ideology, Billings inspired many writers and humorists, including Bierce. Born in Ohio in 1842, Ambrose Bierce employed the voice of the Yankee, understated and cerebral, to write short stories, essays, and parables in forms ranging from horror to mystery, fiction and non-fiction. Unlike the ‘normal’ writings of the day, Bierce’s works transcend overt jokes and shift to analysis of a hypocritical or ironic situation, displaying a thought process that is more associated with a modern, liberal understanding and critique of American history:

4 Ibid., 283.
5 Ibid., 81.
Columbus was not a learned man, but an ignorant. He was not an honorable man, but a professional pirate. He was, in the most hateful sense of the word, an adventurer. His voyage was undertaken with a view solely to his own advantage, the gratification of an incredible avarice. In the lust of gold he committed deeds of cruelty, treachery and oppression for which no fitting names are found in the vocabulary of any modern tongue.\(^6\)

With this style of subjective and analytical reasoning, he attacked, satirized, lampooned, and lambasted contemporaries, heads of state and industry, and perceptions of American history. Bierce's voice was original and influential because it examined new aspects of established history and social norms. His conclusions were unacceptable to many, but through the use of humor, those who might not have listened in the first place would contemplate these ideas. His essay *George the Made-Over* questions American's interpretation of the 'father of the country':

> No benign personage in the calendar of secular saints is really less loved than Washington. The romancing historians and biographers have adorned him with a thousand impossible virtues, naturally, and in so dehumanizing him have set him beyond and above the longest reach of human sympathies. His character, as it pleased them to create it, is like nothing that we know about and care for. He is a monster of goodness and wisdom...\(^7\)

The proliferation of material by Billings and Bierce, and the vast array of subjects included, point to a communal need for satire and humorous observation. The public attached itself to the evolving voices of the Yankee and Backwoodsman, and were willing to listen to their humorous critiques of popular culture and ideology.

However, the Yankee and the Backwoodsman were not the only American characters emerging. In the early Nineteenth century, others developed, usually playing

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\(^7\) Ibid., 179-180.
one regional or social type against another. Characters based on stereotypes of nations and foreign cultures, such as Dutch, French, and Irish, emerged.

Though foreign characters were not immediately popular, racial stereotypes, especially that of the slave, gained immediate success. In the 1820’s ‘Ethiopian delineators’ performed at circuses or between the acts of theatrical shows. The delineators were white men who used burnt cork to blacken their hands and faces, and performed what they claimed were the authentic dances and music of the slaves. Their product would come to be known as Minstrelsy.

The first act of the Minstrel Show featured jokes and popular musical numbers, ending with a ‘stump speech.’ A comic performance, it was delivered in exaggerated language meant to be African American dialect. The speech was a type of fanciful oratory satirizing anything from a local politician to temperance movements to women’s rights. The ‘stump speech’ paralleled the comic lecture and influenced the evolution of stand-up comedy.

As the popularity of the Minstrel show waned in the late Nineteenth century, other types of theatricals emerged, such as Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Extravaganza, featuring trick roping, bull riding, horsemanship, and trick shooting. Through these theatricals, Easterners and urbanites ‘experienced’ the Wild West, which was quickly becoming tame due to railroads, telegraphs, and increased land speculation.

These Wild West shows gave rise to a new orator, a comic lecturer that changed the way Americans saw their satire: Will Rogers. A skilled horseman, Rogers joined a touring Wild West show as a trick roping expert. For many of the shows Rogers mounted the stage, performed his tricks, and exited. It was not until a fellow actor suggested he announce what his intentions were to the audience that Rogers interacted with them:

I didn’t think up my speech beforehand, I just stopped the
orchestra and said: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to call your sho nuff [sic] attention to this next little stunt I am going to pull on you, as I am going to throw about two o' these ropes at once, catching the horse with one and the rider with the other. I don't have any idea I'll get it, but here goes." Well they laughed and believe me, I was mad when I came off. I thought I hadn't said anything for them to laugh at, and I told my manager I was through.8

Through memorization of ad-libs, Rogers eventually had enough material to focus his act on the jokes and wry down-to-earth humor with roping thrown in for fun. His performance was relaxed, and his easy going attitude drew the audience to what he had to say. "He was a comic trickster who used humor to address the issues of psychic fear and social disorder affecting his audience."9 By creating a complete persona, one that was trusted and believed by his audience, Rogers used humor to analyze and present issues that an audience might find improper. Social and political thought from differing veins of society was brought forth and analyzed through humorous methods, allowing the audience to interpret inappropriate views and ideologies in new ways. The style of topical satire, easygoing attitude, and casual familiarity with the audience would become his trademark.

With the death of the Wild West craze at the turn of the century, Vaudeville, an entrenched theatrical form since the 1870's, became the primary theatrical form of the nation. With acts ranging from singers to dog acts to comedy duos, Vaudeville created opportunity for anyone to break into show business. Many comedians got their start in Vaudeville as 'dumb acts,' such as magicians or contortionists. These performers either developed jokes to go along with their act, or found themselves unemployed. It was vital to keep an act fresh, and humor provided a way to be topical. Two men who exemplified the evolution and success of Vaudeville, as well as its contribution to the growth of media,

were Jack Benny and Fred Allen. Both began in Vaudeville as ‘dumb acts;’ Benny started as a violinist and Allen as a juggler. Both evolved monologues, first as a supplement to their acts, then as the primary focus. They took different approaches to their comedy; Benny preferred slightly topical material, usually contrasting stereotypic ethnic differences. Allen preferred impersonations, puns, and gags. In one of his most popular impressions he read a letter from home while pretending to be Will Rogers: “The man next door has bought pigs; we got wind of it this morning. Your father had a terrible fight with him about it, but the man hit your father with a rock in the left ear. It didn’t bother your father; he is stone deaf in that ear.”

Booking agencies and theater circuits linked both coasts, creating a vehicle for the popular culture and comedy of the day.

The Vaudeville craze introduced new stage characters to the American public. The Jew, Italian, Russian, and the Asian were introduced and combined with the Irish and French stereotyped characters. The more immigrants that came into the United States, the more types of characters appeared on the stage. “This contained the essence of egalitarian and utopian thought by challenging the legitimacy of static identities inherited from the past, but it also threatened a sense of authentic self-knowledge and created the psychic preconditions for the needy narcissism of consumer desire.”

At the turn of the century, Burlesque shows began to compete with Vaudeville as popular entertainment. Featuring comedians, chorus girls, and exotic dancers, Burlesque ranged from classy to risque and bawdy. Burlesque featured a new approach to comedy, one that allowed adult, or ‘blue’ humor and sensationalism. Divisions within the medium became classified by the amount of such humor. Honky-tonks, beer halls that hired

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performers to entertain drunken patrons, were considered the lowest level of Burlesque. Turkey Troupes, or 'Scratch' Burlesque were at a higher artistic level than the honky-tonks, but their brand of fly-by-night strip shows and low humor kept them from achieving any great success. At the height of the form were the large company, classic Burlesque featuring songs, dances, and comic emcees. Burlesque comics were often held in higher regard by the public than Vaudeville comics, possibly for their ability to ad-lib and occupy the audience. Burlesque held on as a national theatrical industry until the early 1930's, when increased censorship laws closed most urban Burlesque theaters. Those theaters left open devolved into little more than strip clubs with comic emcees.

Vaudeville’s success continued until the emergence of two new forms of mass entertainment: film and radio. In the period of time from 1915 to 1940, electronic mass media would replace the theater and burlesque house as national popular entertainment. Their ability to manipulate images and sound, combined with convenience and low cost, would change the entertainment needs of Americans. Film became established with the formation of large studios in Hollywood, and achieved a higher technical and artistic level with the advent of sound in film in 1927. The next year, RKO Pictures was formed, turning the largest Vaudeville circuit over to motion picture producers. This closed theaters and other venues, forcing performers to evolve with the times in a new medium, or become unemployed. Many performers, such as Allen and Benny, went to radio. By 1930, the National Broadcasting Company and Columbia Broadcasting System were reaching over thirteen million people. In 1932 the first television systems were tested, and by 1939 three networks, NBC, CBS, and Dumont had begun television programming.

By the end of the 1930's, Congress had killed the Federal Theater Project, ending Vaudeville, and censorship laws had ended Burlesque. The characters found on the Vaudeville stage shifted to radio, TV, and Hollywood. Performers making the change in
 mediums brought their jokes with them, and many of these played off stereotyping. The American character grew from a wide variety of stereotypes to an amalgamation of faces, with media now in a position of power to manipulate it.

As Vaudeville waned in the national conscious, other theatrical venues emerged, characterized by their quality of entertainment and humor. The lowest level of comedy venue was the Borscht Belt, a string of Catskill Mountain resorts catering to urban, working-class patrons. Entertainers such as Mel Brooks and Sid Caesar performed to a largely Jewish audience with more crude, physical humor. “The hotels were regarded by those in the entertainment industry as places where a comic paid his or her dues, doing work disagreeable enough to be abandoned as soon as something better came along.”

Urban nightclubs were a better venue than the Catskills resorts, and booked only the most polished of acts. “Their entertainment was, among other things, quick paced, to the point, and pure fun (no messages). In stand-up comedy, this meant short jokes, wisecracks, and one-liners.” However the early night club trend discouraged messages and the type of personal, free form association that stand-up later became in the late 1950’s when comics like Lenny Bruce and Dick Gregory became popular.

Entertainment reviews and radio performances were the best possible venues. These were the benchmark for comedians of the day. Performers could only achieve this level through mastery of their craft, and, if successful, could ensure the performer a lucrative vocation. Failure meant a return to the last vestiges of Burlesque or the end of their career.

The American public now had a variety of choices concerning entertainment

13 Ibid., 8.
possibilities, all clamoring for patronage. Entertainers had numerous venues to display their talents. Popular entertainment and leisure activities became "commodities sold to strangers for an agreed-upon price rather than collective creations by communities enacting rituals essential to group identity and solidarity." Culture had become a valuable commodity to the American public. This commodity needed to be broad-based and appealing to the largest possible denominator to ensure commercial success. "Culture itself contributed to retraining and reshaping the masses to serve the interests of capital, but also to articulating unfilled desires and expressing disconnection from the past."

As popular entertainment evolved, so did mentality of the American public. Children born in the 1920's grew up in a very different world then their parents. New benefits and advantages were given to them, and just as quickly stripped away with the Dust Bowl, Great Depression, and World War Two. "In the 1930's, cultural ideals based on mutuality and collectivity eclipsed the previous decade's individualism, and helped propel massive union organizing drives, anti-eviction movements, and general strikes."

This trend toward individual empowerment, social responsibility, and opposition to corporate greed and manipulation effected this generation's ideology. A socialistic vein of thought was established, and there was a need for an orator to reflect this shift. One man who spent his life observing and contemplating these cultural mutations and societal changes emerged out of this need for an edifying mouthpiece: Lenny Bruce. During an era when characters reverted to established stereotypes, Bruce manipulated language to demonstrate how all of these scattered types were changing and modernizing. "Those symbols of my childhood are gone - what a shame! - the country doctor, the town whore,

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14 Lipsitz, Time Passages, 7.
15 Ibid., 12.
16 Ibid., 42-42.
the village idiot, and the drunken family from the other side of the tracks have been replaced by the Communist, the junkie, the faggot, and the beatnik.” Bruce eventually united these marginalized voices in himself to bring a new art out of an old tradition.

The life and death of Lenny Bruce are important to the study of national character, as well as the evolution of stand-up comedy. He attempted to imbue the American consciousness with a new sense of subjectivity, so that the individual would be able to analyze and consider opposing thoughts and ideologies, previously offensive, and attempt to understand why they are important to others. Through humor, Bruce attempted to make the unacceptable plausible, tangible, and by addressing it in a funny way, enticing.

Born Leonard Alfred Schneider, Bruce was a delinquent child with no interest in education, and dropped out of school after the fifth grade. In 1942, at seventeen, he volunteered for the Navy, serving the duration of World War Two as a gunner’s mate aboard the U.S.S. Brooklyn. He witnessed the invasions of Anzio, Salerno, Sicily, and Southern France. The war changed him, and the way he saw the world. After an honorable discharge he returned home to New York where he became an emcee, making the rounds of clubs doing clean material.

He soon realized, however, that the audiences were changing and that his traditional material wouldn’t do: “the other comedy performers of their generation grew up in our culture at a time when the discussion of sex was seductive and chic, so that the double-entendre comedian was considered quite daring. It delighted the customer to be ‘in’ - ‘Ha, Ha, you know what that means don’t you?’ My generation knows - and accepts - what that means, so there is no need for humor in that whoopee-cushion vein.”

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18 Ibid., 49.
Lenny Bruce spoke from his heart about the problems of the nation: racial, social, economic, and political. He did not want ovations, he wanted to make people aware of social conflict, and present a different ideology from that of the newspapers or television. He created humor by juxtaposing the ideologies of the status quo with his own. Bruce became more than a stand-up comedian, he was a stand-up philosopher, a social commentator, and brought a need for social change to the stage.

Targeting organized religion, corporations, and the government, Bruce acted as a filter for the marginalized voices of America, and sought to end homophobia, sexism, and racially biased thought. Treating the audience as a close friend he incorporated African American, Yiddish, Beat, and hippie language and slang into his act. Bruce was the subject of attacks from every angle, as many criticized his approach, language, and lifestyle, but he didn’t care:

I spent four battle years in the Mediterranean and saw starving priests, doctors and judges. I saw ethics erode, again, according to the law of supply and demand.... War spells out my philosophy of 'No right or wrong' - just 'Your right, my wrong' - everything is subjective.¹⁹

This subjectivity allowed Bruce to perform to a standing-room-only crowd at Carnegie Hall in 1961 and yell at them for applauding his observations. He hoped that his observations would help people address the problems the nation was facing. In San Francisco that same year he was arrested for the first time on obscenity charges, specifically for using the word 'cocksucker.' For the next five years police followed him, arresting him when he cursed onstage, and intimidating him on the street. Hounded, persecuted, and prosecuted at every turn, he became paranoid, manically depressed, and obsessed with the continual series of arrests, court dates, appeals, and sentences. Bruce

¹⁹ Ibid., 64-65.
challenged the system, and it destroyed him. He died on his bathroom floor, August 3, 1966. The police allowed newspaper photographers to enter the bathroom where his naked corpse lay and photograph the body for their front pages.

Lenny Bruce was a comedian, a stand-up comic, and an orator. He took up an American tradition of satire, puns, mimicry, and observation and melded it together. His style has become the norm for contemporary performers, and those who stand up in smoke-filled rooms and attempt cultural understanding are judged by his standards. He is responsible for stand-up comedy in its contemporary manifestation. The legal battles he fought over the right to say what he wished have ensured the freedom of stand up performers to say what they want. No stand up performer has been arrested for obscenity since he was. A hero of an outraged counter-culture, a voice for marginalized people and ideas, he was also just a man with a point of view and the desire for his first amendment rights.

While Bruce was fighting in the Mediterranean, the youths in the United States, those classified as 'bohemians,' were gathering in the coffeehouses of urban America. Folk and jazz musicians, Beat poets, comics and others played here to small, informal rooms of patrons. Comics entering this venue were inexperienced and willing to experiment with new forms and styles. "Self-revelation and self-deprecation gave the audience a sense of intimacy and involvement with the performer unknown in the days of wisecracking, line-buying (or -stealing) comics. The conversational element was now becoming more prominent in stand-up comedy."20

By the late 1950's, the focal center of the American bohemian movement, New York's Greenwich Village, featured several coffeehouses, including the Gaslight and Cafe

Wha? which had comedy nights once a week. However, material was edited by managers for obscenity and the performers received little to no pay. Bill Cosby got $5 per set at the Gaslight, while Joan Rivers worked for tips and a passed hat. 21

In 1963 in the Village, a coffeehouse opened that specialized in comedy. The Improvisation Cafe, later known as the Improv, started by Gerson “Budd” Friedman as an after-hours joint, quickly evolved to a room where unpaid comics could perform. Woody Allen and Rodney Dangerfield were among the amateurs who would work there. In 1972 Sammy and Mitzi Shore copied the idea by starting the Comedy Store in Los Angeles. Based on the principal of providing a place for unpaid amateurs to hone their skills, the Comedy Store helped springboard the careers of Richard Pryor and Robin Williams.

In the mid-1970’s a floodgate opened for comics. Previously, a stand up comic could only achieve national attention through talk show or radio appearances. However, these venues offered little time to perform, and conservative standards dictated the language and material deemed appropriate. In 1975, stand up comedy made two breakthroughs. First, NBC broadcast Saturday Night Live, pushing the boundaries of material content and language on television, and proving there was a national market for comedy. Second, Home Box Office broadcast the performance of Robert Klein at Harvard College, the first uncensored stand up concert performance on cable television. This new venue allowed comics with material unsuitable for public television to reach a national audience without having to curtail their creativity. Marginalized voices of objection, frustration, and accusation now had their own mass media outlet for their words. Instead of falling back on established performance patterns, as radio and television fell back on Vaudeville routines in their electronic infancy, cable television created an uncensored

21 Ibid., 10.
medium of expression. Now those individuals with ideas and thoughts from the fringe of 'acceptable' society had a platform from which they could humorously discuss their viewpoints, making their once unacceptable ideas enticing to mainstream America.

At the same time, comedy clubs began springing up all over the country. Between 1980 and 1987 the number of non-showcase rooms increased from ten to three hundred. These new clubs created a new kind of professional comic: the 'road warrior.' These comics travel on circuits of clubs and bars for months at a time. Some promoters can send a comic on a tour of seventy-five cities in nineteen states for twenty-five weeks and the performer will never play the same club twice. Like the Vaudevillian or Minstrel of old, these performers perfect their act on the road, and go where the money is. 22

The professional comic is now an accepted part of society. This profession is important to our national ideology, regardless if the comedian is Andrew "Dice" Clay or Whoopie Goldberg. If the words and actions are shock-value only, or an evocative monologue, they are still individual assumptions concerning our nature. There is no right or wrong, only different viewpoints and opinions, some of which are amusing, some not, but all are important.

By taking the actions they do, professional comics reveal the assumptions, premises, and taken-for-granted formulations by which people interact and take each other into account. Some are laughable, petty, and unworthy of support as far as they are concerned. On the other hand, some of the assumptions are useful, and without them, the social order becomes a shambles. Professional comics demonstrate what can ensue when there is no consensus about what is appropriate and what is not. 23

Since the death of Lenny Bruce, few comedians have outwardly challenged the

status quo and societal norms. It is easier to play to the status quo than challenge it, and many performers are content to make jokes about relationships, dogs against cats, and airplane antics. This type of material is safe, clean, and plays to a wide audience; however, it does nothing to impact the way an audience member perceives their surroundings, situations, or ideology. It is rare to find performers who look to the unacceptable for material. They do not appear to want to bridge ideological gaps, or bring resolution from conflict, instead, the majority play it safe with inoffensive material and cautious jokes. Contemporary comedians are the products of our society, so they reflect the nature of our society. “The overall level of comedy... largely reflects the widespread anti-intellectualism and mean-spiritedness in our society. Too many comedians want to be glib rather than profound; they avoid confronting the controversial issues of the day and aren’t even concerned with dealing seriously with the human condition.”

Bill Hicks was concerned with the human condition. He cared about what happened to his culture and his nation. However, while others waited, he acted. He looked inside himself and saw the ability to scrutinize and analyze the machinations of the post-modern world. Like Bruce, Bill Hicks saw a need to speak out against the growing conflicts within society. He addressed unacceptable issues in a humorous way, attempting to use comedy to bring differing ideologies to a mutual understanding of each other. However, he understood how stand up philosophers are treated by society: “America does not take comedy seriously, social criticism seriously. If you look at the careers of Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, you’ll notice that one was basically run out of the business and the

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other killed himself due to lack of work. This is how America supports social criticism.\textsuperscript{25}

Like his historic predecessors, Hicks utilized an American stage type to identify divergences within contemporary social thought and, by opposing them, sought to create new social philosophies through humorous observation.

\textsuperscript{25} Bill Hicks, \textit{United States of Advertising}, Capzeyez Live!, Austin Public Access, Austin, 24 Oct, 1993.
CHAPTER II

I don't look outside myself for answers. I feel like everyone has a voice of reason inside them. I believe that's been quelled to a large degree by our multi-media society that we live in. Anything that defies my voice of reason comes out, and you hold it up to the light of reason. That's the premise. Then you start nailing it, those are the jokes, until what's left is a laughter of recognition, of a truth.¹

Bill Hicks used his voice of reason to educate, enlighten, and amuse. Through his satire and social observations, he attempted to reveal the better part of human nature to his audience. His goal was truth and reason was his impetus. He sought to empower the individual to make their own decisions and access their voice of reason. By drawing material from social conflict and individual thought, he attempted to bridge the gaps of ideological notions by making the unacceptable plausible and enticing.

William Melvin Hicks was born in Valdosta, Georgia on December 16, 1961. His family moved around while he was young, from Georgia to Florida, Alabama and New Jersey, finally settling in Houston when he was seven. Suburban life had an effect on the young man: "We were living the American dream. This was the best life had to offer. But there was no life, no creativity. My dad for instance plays the piano. The same song for thirty years... He can't improvise. That, to me, is the suburbs. You get to a point, and that's it - it's over."²

Hicks found his escape in jokes. At twelve he formed a comedy duo with friend and neighbor Dwight Slade. The two wrote jokes about God, sex, and their parents. "Our father's very lazy. He once worked in a mortuary, measuring bodies for tuxedos. But then he was fired. He was accused of having an intimate affair with a corpse. The family was

¹ Hicks, United States of Advertising.
shocked. We all knew it was purely platonic.”

Hicks became obsessed with humor. Locking himself in his room with a typewriter, always coming to the dinner table buried in a book, he would study comedians and write jokes with all his spare time. He bought Woody Allen records, and sat up at night watching Johnny Carson. Taking some material from the professionals, Hicks used their jokes to create his own, performing the two styles together at school. “I knew which one was me and which one I’d seen on TV the night before. I learned how to mesh these things. How to get into character... I’d always have to have material, constantly, all day.” His antics became so disruptive that his English teacher began giving him five minutes to do his act before class to get it out of his system. Many times he would take the whole session, amusing his classmates and grooming his skills.

In 1978, worried about their son’s mental health, Jim and Mary Hicks took him to a psychotherapist. After meeting separately with the family and Bill, the therapist pulled him aside: “‘You can continue to come if you feel like it,’ Hicks recalled him saying. ‘But it’s them, not you.’” Validated, he was ready to meet a new challenge: beginning his career. The Comedy Workshop opened in Houston, and manager Steve Epstein, impressed with Hicks’ confidence and wit, put him in the lineup.

Building early routines out of his limited life experiences, Hicks began to improvise onstage, using free form association and playing off of the audience. At seventeen, he was finding his voice, establishing connections, and developing routines. The youngest comic at the Workshop, he quickly became one of the most popular. He soon encountered a comic that would take him to the next level: Sam Kinison. They met

29 Ibid., 118.
30 Ibid., 119.
when, in mid-set, the former-preacher-turned-screaming-anarchist jumped offstage with a pair of red panties on his head, threw audience member Hicks to the floor, and proceeded to hump him. "Kinison was to prove an inspiration to Bill as they became friends, Hicks taking Kinison's anger and some of his political ideology and shaping it into something more metaphysical."  

The next year, Hicks' senior year at Stratford High School, his parents moved to Little Rock, Arkansas. Convincing his parents he should remain to finish high school, he was left with the house, the car, and a new job: a nightly gig at the Comix Annex, a new room affixed to the Workshop. Things progressed smoothly until Kinison was banned from the Annex for starting a brawl, at which point he decided to move to Los Angeles to play the Comedy Store. To make money for the trip he set up 'Comics on the Lam.' Kinison rented a theater, hired several friends, including Hicks, and dubbed the group 'the Texas Outlaw Comics.' Hicks was so good he made an impression on the 'special guest,' comic Argus Hamilton, a regular on The Tonight Show. Hamilton informed Hicks of an HBO comedy special he was casting, and told him to go to L.A. with Kinison. An apartment in Burbank and a car were arranged, and, in the spring of 1980, Hicks moved to Los Angeles. 

Soon in the rotation on open-mike nights at the Comedy Store on Sunset, Hicks worked regularly at the club's Westwood site with Jerry Seinfeld and Jay Leno. Though HBO did not work out, he was cast in a TV pilot, Bulba, and signed by William Morris. The pilot was not picked up. Hicks moved from Burbank to the Valley, and Slade arrived to share the apartment. The two worked on screenplays, treatments, auditions, and

transcendental meditation, but no prospects emerged. He returned to Houston in the winter of 1982 because of a growing dislike of L.A. and, at nineteen, was incapable of attracting serious attention to his work.

To free his spirits from this imposed unhappiness, Hicks tried sensory-deprivation, meditation, astrology, and telepathy. Friend and producer Kevin Booth would later say, "Bill was the first person I ever met whose goal was to become enlightened." Together with Booth and friend David Johndrow, Hicks formed Absolute Creative Entertainment (ACE) as a label for their punk band Stress, and began writing and filming Ninja Bachelor Party, a goofy film spoof that would achieve huge cult status.

By 1983, Hicks was living in Houston, had reunited the Outlaws, was playing the Annex and touring the South, sometimes opening for Leno. However, he was not happy with his act or his mental state. He never smoked, drank or did drugs, but he was beginning to wonder why so many great comedians - Bruce, Pryor, Carlin - did. One night at the Annex he drank a dozen shots of tequila and went onstage in a drunken rage. The set ran ninety minutes in which he ranted about politics, religion, and Gary Coleman. At the end, he lay on his back decrying the violent and hateful parts of human nature, screaming into the mike: "You people, you're the reason for war! You stupid fucking old people, what the fuck do you care, man, just building up your fucking pensions!" His frustration with conservative thought combined with an apparent desire to create opposition between the young and old, juxtaposed the established thought process between the two. The old continue the established ways, and the young are responsible for rebelling against the established order. However, his lack of humor in presenting this situation

33 Outhwaite, "Bill Hicks Biography."
34 Sager, "The Gospel According to Hicks."
resulted in the loss of trust he established so well with his audiences. That lack of trust manifested itself after the show as well, when two Vietnam veterans confronted Hicks, beat him, and broke his leg.

Following that show Hicks began drinking onstage and ranting continuously for hours on end, as if attempting to exorcize the demons of society from a smoky pulpit.

"For all the unchecked anger there was an insightful perceptiveness which simultaneously made audiences think and made them laugh at the absurdity of the situation. Hicks was in touch with aliens, he’d seen Jesus riding a unicorn, and he didn’t have time for petty politics."35 He began to experiment with narcotics: mushrooms, LSD, cocaine, ecstasy, Quaaludes, and amphetamines. He tried whatever drug was available. In his mind, it was easily excused through rational thinking, as drugs had apparently made his comedic and musical heroes creative. To challenge those who objected to that line of thinking, he argued:

If you don’t believe drugs have done anything good for us do me a favor. Go home tonight, take all your albums, all your tapes, and all your CD’s and burn ‘em. Cause you know what? The musicians who made all that great music that’s enhanced your lives throughout the years? REAL fucking high on drugs. Man the Beatles were so high they let Ringo sing a couple of tunes. Tell me they weren’t partying.... They were real high, they wrote great music, drugs did have a positive effect. I’ll tell you what else, I’m gonna extend the theory to our generation now so it’s more applicable. The musicians today who don’t do drugs, and in fact speak out against it: ‘we’re rock against drugs.’ Boy they suck. SUCK! Ballless, soulless, spiritless corporate little bitches, suckers of Satan’s cock every one of them!36

At the outset of this rant, Hicks barks an order pertaining to topics important to
him. The topics of music and drug use engage everyone, as it is something everyone has an opinion on. This draws the audience further in, and, with his point of continual musical enhancement, he has planted a seed of recognition. This recognition lingers as the mood switches from an intense affirmation to a comedic insult. The humor brings recognition to his basic reasoning, allowing him to take the created model and apply it to contemporary music. With the creation and application of this formula, Hicks has not only engaged and amused his audience, but also addressed a serious issue of concern for him, the state of modern music. He split the audience with his declaration, brought them together with the punch line, and held them focused as he delivered his message.

Though drugs gave him good material, the lifestyle started to affect his job. He began to get a bad reputation as a drug user on the road. Though he was becoming highly recognized in Houston, had done Letterman for the first time in 1984, and made it onto HBO's *Young Comedians Special*, he was still tormented by a lack of success. By 1986 he was spending over one thousand dollars per week on drugs. He partied constantly in his apartment while he and the Outlaws became underground heroes: “They drank, did coke, smoked cigars, listened to Frank Sinatra. They had epic parties, lasting days. They hung out and let their egos dream, writing movies in their heads, envisioning a new era when Houston would be known as the Third Coast.”³⁷ They believed themselves to be invincible. At one venue, after running up a thirty-five hundred dollar bar tab, they held a concert called ‘The Texas Outlaws Pay Their Bar Tab.’

A new stage type emerged in the Houston comedy scene: the Outlaw Comic. Bill Hicks epitomized this black clad, chain-smoking, truth slinger. Later he reflected: “I think one day the Houston influence will be a chapter in the development of comedy. We believe

it has a meaning other than making money. We have a philosophy that’s very overt - you should tell the truth, expose the lies, and live the moment.”

In 1987 Hicks appeared on Rodney Dangerfield’s Young Comedians Special. Later that year Hicks and Booth changed ACE to Sacred Cow Productions in order to work on comedy albums and films. Hicks moved to New York City and began touring, playing three hundred gigs a year. Though he was enjoying some success, he was still playing small clubs in small towns and using a lot of drugs. The drug use ended in 1988 with the realization that drug users and dealers constantly surrounded him. However, unlike most addicts who quit, Hicks did not attempt to vilify or condemn the substances themselves, or their users. In fact, drug use became one of the veins he enjoyed ranting about most. “I had a great time doing drugs. Sorry. Never murdered anyone, never robbed anyone, never raped anyone, never beat anyone, never lost a job, a house, a wife or kids, laughed my ass off and went about my day. Sorry.”

Bill Hicks was not encouraging drug use, he was encouraging common sense. He wanted his audience to understand society’s double standards, the same type of double standards Bierce objected to in revisionist history, and Bruce objected to in social thought concerning race and gender. Honesty and truth became components of Hicks’ performances. The ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were basic elements in his philosophy. He became one of the outraged few who could see the devices encroaching upon humanities freedoms, and opposed them utterly.

In 1988, his message began to receive recognition: Sacred Cow produced his first stand up video, Sane Man, directed by Booth. Critics would praise the performance: “an

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39 Hicks, Relentless.
incisive young comedian seen at the top of his form, on his home turf, in a jam-packed, hour long set of his best material... a commanding young master of the wink and the scream...this is Bill naked, full of spit and vinegar and sharp as hell.”

He recorded his first comedy album, *Dangerous*, the next year and released it in 1990. His opus would be well received, but his approach was unpolished and lacked intimacy. His messages seemed fragmented and did not flow in between humorous topics with the ease exhibited in his later albums. The lack of blending between the two does not fully allow the listener to trust Hicks completely, as the knockout punch of social philosophy does not follow in its expected order, right behind the perfect set-ups. Hicks does use this vehicle to draw out and define many of the issues that deeply concerned him. He clearly demarcates what he sees as society’s problems, and how he would fix them:

I’ve got a vision. Even though this is a world where good men are murdered in their prime and mediocre hacks thrive and proliferate, I’ve got to share this with you because I love you, and you feel that. You know all the money we spend on nuclear weapons and defense each year? Trillions of dollars, correct? TRILLIONS! Instead, if we spent that money feeding and clothing the poor of the world, which it would pay for many times over, not ONE human being excluded. Not one. We could, as a race, explore outer space together, in peace, forever.

Hicks set up an improper philosophic thought: humanity can break down all barriers and reach its next evolutionary leap through peace. The thought is unacceptable because it would require the United States to set the example and end all military action worldwide. Since war and conflict have been, throughout history, tools of powerful nations to enforce doctrine, gain wealth and create suffering, it is illogical to suppose it

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could end. However, the key is the simplicity behind the statement, the humor is the realization that the suggestion is possible. Through an impassioned, anarchistic suggestion, Hicks can sermonize and continue to draw the audience in.

With the connection between performer and audience growing, Hicks moved to using the suggestion of illicit narcotics to satirize social standards and misinformation. Hicks opposed news agencies’ constant portrayal of drugs, specifically hallucinogens, as evil, horrible things. He wanted some truth: “I’d like to see a positive LSD story.... Just once, to hear what it’s all about? ‘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 is no such thing as death, life is only a dream, and we’re the imagination of ourselves. Here’s Tom with the weather.” By promoting a narcotic the American government views as treasonous, Hicks puts himself on a limb from the outset. However, his unassuming thought of personal transcendence, with its matter-of-fact declaration and quick ending, is incredibly potent and wonderfully emblematic of the way Hicks could say so much with so few words.

Hicks’ position of personal enlightenment, while humorous, was very serious. The duty lies with the individual, and their ability to access their right to enlightenment. If enlightenment were to disrupt the status quo, then those in power would find it more difficult to exert control. He felt that America’s position on drugs directly influenced domestic policy and governmental ideology. “It’s not a war on drugs, it’s a war on personal freedom is what it is. Okay? Keep that in mind at all times thank you.” By changing the names to influence perception, Hicks is able to swing support to his side.

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42 Hicks, Dangerous.
43 Ibid.
With politeness at the end, it is clear that he does not intend to alienate anyone. He wants as many people to hear him as possible. Whether or not they agree with what he says is immaterial.

For Hicks, the problems of society were not only a result of a lack of compassion, forethought, and objective rational, but a result of the state of America’s artists. He understood the need for subversive art and music, and for artists to challenge the status quo. However, when he looked around, especially at the music industry, he hated what he saw. When discussing pop stars the likes of Tiffany and George Michael, he worked himself up into a rage:

They are demons set loose on the Earth to lower the standards for the perfect and holy children of god. Which is what we are, make no mistake about it. What’s happened to us? After eight years of Ronald Reagan and yuppies we live on like the third mall from the sun now. Debbie Gibson had the number one album in this country y’all. Now if that doesn’t make your blood fucking curdle.

Hicks wanted his audience to accept that there was a growing cultural void in America. He wanted them to realize that continued support of popular and mainstream music, art, and film would lead to greater deficiencies in the American culture. Through realization and acceptance of the problem, the audience could begin to support other, less mainstream, artistic endeavors. By drawing support away from the mainstream, counter culture would influence change within established artistic forms due to the growing support of the public. Hicks wanted to deter commercialization and make his audience realize the peril it presents.

_Dangerous_ gives a clear look into the fear Hicks had for the commercialization of

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44 Hicks, _Dangerous_.
America: “It’s a CIA plot to make you think malls are good... You’re still staring at me... You just don’t feel the fire ‘cause you’ve been anesthetized right?” With this warning concerning the dangers of further commercialization, Hicks is becoming frustrated at the audience’s lack of connection to his words. They are getting the jokes, but not the message.

Hicks’ concern for his fellow humans was channeled through his manipulation of dialogue, and his message on Dangerous is important. However, the lack of balance between philosophy and humor, combined with an inability to create a solid level of intimacy and trust with the audience make the album seem rough. However, it is a fundamental stepping stone in his artistic evolution.

Dangerous was the world’s real introduction to Hicks, and he would build off its success. Following it came an HBO ‘One Night Stand’ performance, and the release of the long-awaited film farce Ninja Bachelor Party. Later that year, Bill would be one of eighteen comedians performing “Stand Up America” in London’s West End for six weeks. The British became enamored with Bill’s words, and in 1991 he won the Edinburgh Festival’s Critics’ Award. He would later say: “People in the United Kingdom and outside the United States share my bemusement with the United States that America doesn’t share with itself. They also have a sense of irony, which America doesn’t have, seeing as it’s being run by fundamentalists who take things literally.”

Two sellout tours of the UK followed, along with a column for a popular satire magazine, Scallywag. Soon Hicks could not walk down the street without being approached by fans. He had finally found an audience for his message, and they loved him.

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45 Ibid.
46 Outhwaite, “Bill Hicks Biography.”
for it. Often Americans asked him to explain the differences in performing in the US versus the UK. He responded: “In England, I play concert halls. Solely. In America, well, I’m at the Laugh Stop. Does that explain anything to you?”

Hicks realized that comedy in America was becoming a commodity to be packaged and sold to the public. Like bulk goods stores, small comedy venues were delivering wholesale relationship jokes and dog against cat material to the masses. The Laugh Stop, and venues like it, had become distribution houses for the latest clap-trap attempts at social commentary. Hicks understood that the performer must transcend the venue to convey the important philosophic realizations. Through this transcendence, a performer gains acclaim and acceptance, which leads to more respectable venues and larger audiences. Lenny Bruce emceed a large number of strip teases before he performed at Carnegie Hall, and Bill Hicks revealed the light of truth to countless intoxicated plebeians before he performed in venues that his art was deserving of.

Hicks soon returned to America to record his second album, Relentless. It would be the last album released during his lifetime. The miscues found in Dangerous were gone. His mind flowed, connected, and related in a seamless course of anger and passion. Here he vented about the Gulf War, a favorite topic, as it allowed him to not only decry American foreign policy, but the use of the military conflict to detract from domestic issues:

It was so scary watching the news, how they built it all out of proportion like Iraq was ever or could ever possibly, under any stretch of the imagination, be a threat to us whatsoever. But, watching the news you would never have gotten that idea. Remember how it started? They kept talking about the elite Republican Guard in these hushed tones like these guys were the boogey men

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47 Hicks, United States of Advertising.
or something. ‘Yeah we’re doing well now but we have yet to face the elite Republican Guard.’ Like these guys were twelve-foot tall desert warriors: ‘Never lost a battle. We shit bullets.’ Yeah, well, after two months of continuous carpet-bombing and not one reaction at all from them, they became simply the Republican Guard. Not nearly as elite as we may have led you to believe. And after another month of bombing they went from the elite Republican Guard to the Republican Guard to the Republicans made this shit up about there being guards out there! ‘We hope you enjoyed your fireworks show.’ ‘It was so pretty and it took our minds off of domestic issues.’ The Persian Gulf Distraction.48

This statement is a challenge to the propaganda put forth by the American press, acting as a tool of the American war machine, to promote international conflict over oil prices. It is uncomfortable because it conflicts with the party line that Desert Storm had the backing of all Americans and was totally successful. The individual who endeavors to dig deeper will see the example of the Republican Guard as a microcosm of American foreign policy since the Cold War. Every enemy has to be imposing and frightening for the public to support action against them. The threat of the Republican Guard, though easily disproved, gave the government enough time to jump start the war machine and reclaim their oil interests.

Hicks’ drive to make people aware of their freedom to choose coalesces with his challenges to social definitions that result in a double standard, such as the case of pornography: “That’s the problem with this country, one of the many. This whole issue of sexuality and pornography, which I don’t understand what pornography is. I really don’t. To me, pornography’s spending all your money on not educating the people of America but spending it instead on weapons. That’s pornographic to me. That’s totally filthy.”49

48 Hicks, Relentless.
49 Hicks, Relentless.
The anger is palpable on this album. Hicks put his head down and pushed forward with his truths regardless of audience interaction. He does not attempt to play off of them, though they are supporting him. Like Bruce, he is prophesying, but the message seems to be above the audience. They are drinking, smoking, and laughing, but it is difficult to know if they realized what he was saying, the importance of his words. His argument for individual freedom is basic and direct, but those are the reasons that it is dangerous. He can explain things simply, so the first time they are heard, they might be dismissed, but the more they are seen and listened to, the more powerful they become:

Here’s my final point. About drugs, about alcohol, about pornography, whatever that is... What business is it of yours what I do, read, buy, see, or take into my body as long as I do not harm another human being on this planet? And for those of you out there who are having a little moral dilemma how to answer that question, I’ll answer it for you: NONE of your fucking business.\(^\text{50}\)

Hicks begins by playing off the established trust. He draws his audience in with a common opinion of personal freedom in the pursuit of happiness. Then, he switches emotion rapidly to confront anyone that would disagree, and shuts down his detractor’s ability to respond by answering his own question. Free-flowing thought combines with comedic formula to create a declarative statement of personal philosophy.

In November of 1992, Hicks filmed the concert video Revelations for Channel 4 in England at the two thousand seat Dominion Theater. In 1993 Rolling Stone voted him ‘Hot Stand Up Comic,’ strange because since its inception as a radical counter-culture magazine, Rolling Stone had become a shill for the perpetuation of two-dimensional, transparent fad culture. This vote of confidence from a keystone of the establishment’s well-controlled media is ironic at best.

\(^{50}\) Hicks, Relentless.
In May Hicks began working on a television pilot for Channel 4, *The Counts of the Netherworld*, which featured himself and Kansas City comic Fallon Woodland as Victorian aristocrats who debated and waxed poetic with guests. He was offered a column in *The Nation*. He finally began to receive the recognition he had worked so hard for.

Hicks had become a media personality. With ownership of Sacred Cow, numerous television and cable appearances, and maneuverings in the realm of television and film, Hicks had used media outlets to further his career and message. This conflicts with his words decrying mass media’s manipulation of social thought through propaganda and double standards. He knowingly used media to influencing popular thought with his messages and philosophies. However, while he decried mainstream media, Hicks’ influence was to help counter-culture media through Sacred Cow, allowing for previously unknown performers to access a vehicle for the perpetuation of their ideas and energies. Hicks understood the importance of utilizing the best available methods for the perpetuation of social criticism. Though he used media to disparage media, his voice does not become one of hypocrisy; rather he is a man who understood what he had at his disposal, and his responsibility to manipulate his resources to the best of his ability.

In mid-June of 1993 Hicks was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. After a few days he told only his immediate family and Colleen McGarr, his fiancee. He went back on the road, recording shows filled with anger and objection to everything. He lambasted the American political system inexorably, and decried their tactic of influencing public opinion and manipulating information so that Americans would be forced to draw their conclusions based on erroneous information:

I’ll show you politics in America, here it is right here: ‘I think the puppet on the right shares my beliefs.’ ‘I think the puppet on the left is more to my liking.’ Hey, wait a minute! There’s one guy holding up both puppets. ‘Shut up!’ Go back to bed America, your government is in
control. Here's Love Connection, watch this and get fat and stupid. By the way, keep drinking beer you fucking morons.\textsuperscript{51}

By beginning with a polite suggestion, Hicks draws the audience to him, then manipulates into a simple observation of government: the two-party system is a ruse to occupy public attention while the government does what it wants. Though it begins amicably, it is filled with accusatory indignation as he reaches the climax. He challenges the audience to prove him wrong while simultaneously indicting them with the crime of collaboration. He would scream obscenities, put them down, insult them, anything to get a rise out of them, then just as quick he would be back to communing with them, drawing them together against the oppressive force of government:

They don't want the voice of reason spoken, folks. 'Cause otherwise we'd be free and otherwise we wouldn't believe their fucking horseshit lies nor the fucking propaganda machine, the mainstream media and buy their horseshit products that we don't fucking need and become a Third World consumer fucking plantation, which is what we're becoming. Fuck them! They are liars and murderers. All governments are liars and murderers.\textsuperscript{52}

With the full attention of the audience, Hicks draws them back in by stoking the furnace of his fervor. He reveals the dirty secrets which he is privy to. By claiming to be the voice of reason, Hicks puts himself in direct opposition to the established order. At once unacceptable and compelling, this stance allows him to utterly condemn the machinations he sees destroying American society. He has ascended his soapbox and is now preaching to his congregation without fear of reprisal or condemnation. Kevin Booth explained: "It was like Bill to the tenth power. He couldn’t be involved in any kind of mundane situation

\textsuperscript{52} Hicks, \textit{Rant in E-Minor}.
even for a second.”

The new attitude was having an effect on audiences and critics, as his incensed, enraged shows began bringing rave reviews, like this from The San Francisco Chronicle: “Hicks may be the freshest - surely the most daring - voice in stand up in years... Midway through his act, I realized just how banal and predictable comedy has grown.” These performances were compiled posthumously by Kevin Booth, and released as Hicks’ final albums, Arizona Bay and Rant in E-Minor in 1997. These albums epitomized the transition he had made as a performer. Using a background of original music, performed by Hicks and Booth, these albums took Hicks to the next level of social criticism and observation. Booth explained: “The music is like the sugar that helps the medicine go down. It gives insight into who he is; it shows a very vulnerable side of Bill that you don’t see in his comedy.”

The music was insightful, and his words were sharp accusations that blasted his favorite targets: American government, drug policy, belief systems, and the condition of artists within society. His voice is that of a condemned man, and, knowing of his disease, he had the freedom to challenge and accuse that few others do.

His lifelong search to expand his consciousness and overcome social programming is understood in his argument against belief systems. “I just think it’s interesting how people act on their beliefs. You know what I mean? Your beliefs are just that. They’re nothing. They’re how you were taught and raised. That doesn’t make them real. That’s why I always recommend a psychedelic experience, ‘cause it does make you realize

53 Lewis, “Prophet of Rage.”
54 Quoted in Outhwaite, “Bill Hicks Biography.”
everything you learned, is in fact, just learned and not necessarily true." Hicks wanted people to understand that the knowledge and light of the heavens were inside each and every one of them. They did not have to subscribe to a learned belief system that was manipulating them. They were gods, if only they looked into their souls for the truth and peace that lay within. The frustration at trying to show them a new path was evident:

While I appreciate your quaint traditions, superstitions, and you know. I, on the other hand, am an evolved being who deals solely with the source of light which exists in all of us in our own minds, no middle man required. But anyway I appreciate your little games and shit, your putting on a tie and going to church yadda da da da. But you know there's a living god who will talk DIRECTLY FUCKING TO YOU! Sorry, not through the pages of the Bible that forgot to mention dinosaurs.

Throughout the history of stand up comedy, the challenge to religion has been as prolific as the challenge to government and politics. As a common point of tension between individuals, comedians can address many ideological conflicts by focusing on religious dogma. Given the importance of religion to individuals, humor at the expense of metaphysical belief systems is unacceptable to many. Those orators who can use comedy to break down the essence of these belief systems into points of humorous common reference for individuals gain a greater respect from their audiences and peers. Bruce, George Carlin, and Hicks made significant contributions to social thought by not retreating from the challenge of satirizing religion and organized belief systems.

Hicks confronted belief systems by challenging the individual to experience transcendence through their third eye. The third eye is a metaphysical concept that relies on the use of psychedelics. The resulting experience unites an individual's soul with a

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56 Hicks, Rant in E-Minor.
cosmic consciousness, allowing for freedom of thought and expression. Hicks found this a better way to arouse the individual spirit than attempting to process the dogmatic logic and possessive nature of organized religion. To transcend into the spiritual realm, he used psychedelic mushrooms. Often he would discuss the events that surrounded these experiences. Relaxing onstage, he would describe visions from his psychedelic practice:

I laid in a field of green grass for four hours going 'my god, I love everything.' The heavens parted, god looked down and rained gifts of forgiveness onto my being, healing me on every level: psychically, physically, and emotionally. And I realized our true nature is spirit not body, that we are eternal beings and god's love is unconditional and there's nothing we could do to change that. It's only an illusion that we are separate from god or that we are alone. In fact, the reality is that we are one with god and he loves us.58

By drawing the audience in with this calm, serene description, he elevates individual spirit and paints a verbal landscape of tranquility and peace. In the next breath, he explains the problem with the experience and its social repercussions:

Now if that isn't a hazard to this country. You see my point. How are we gonna keep building nuclear weapons? What's gonna happen to the arms industry when we realize we're all one? It's gonna fuck up the economy, the economy that's false anyway. Which would be a real bummer, you know. I can see why the government's cracking down on the idea of experiencing unconditional love.59

Like a mythological trickster, Hicks dances around a subject, showing part of it in his description, along with his opinion. As the story builds he infuses it with personal importance and responsibility so the audience feels its importance. Then at the climax he draws back the shade, exposing the full picture, which invariably pits his words against

58 Hicks, Rant in E-Minor.
59 Hicks, Rant in E-Minor.
those of mainstream society. The audience has been drawn to this conclusion through his imagination, and finds it easy to side with him, to take on his opinions as their own.

Hicks used this influence to again turn his attention to the state of artists in America. However, his anger was not directed at the artists for their quality of art, but rather those who chose to accept corporate sponsorship: "Here’s the deal folks: You do a commercial, you’re off the artistic role call forever. End of story, okay? You’re another corporate fucking shill, you’re another whore at the capitalist gang-bang, and if you do a commercial there’s a price on your head. Everything you say is suspect and every word that comes out of your mouth is now like a turd falling into my drink."  

He needed to take the vein of thought to the logical conclusion, drawing it to extremity for the purpose of making an individual think. "That’s like the highest thing you can achieve now, isn’t it? Become some barker? Sinatra hocks beer, he doesn’t have enough money, does he? No. Nothing’s sacred to these fucks. I’m waiting to see: ‘It’s Jesus for Miller!’ ‘I was crucified, dead for three days, resurrected and waited two thousand years to return to earth. It’s Miller time.’"  

By citing the character of Jesus Christ, Hicks establishes just how insulting he finds corporate America. It is the logical extreme situation to be utilized for comic purposes because of the utter ridiculousness it represents. Religion and advertising, two of Hicks’ favorite topics, now combine to satirize the condition of American artists.

Audiences were empowered through his words. Hicks intended to change things, and to give others the courage to do so as well. There were people, however, those who control wealth and information, who used the organizations of the government, religion,

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60 Hicks, *Rant in E-Minor.*
61 Hicks, *Dangerous.*
and industry to keep the masses distracted, fat and lazy. It was his responsibility to grab
the American people by the shoulders and shake them awake:

I’ll tell you who the threat to the status quo in this
country is: US! That’s why they show you shows like
COPS, so you know that state power will win and we’ll
bust your house down and we’ll fucking bust you any
time we want. That’s the message. Why don’t they have
a show called Stormtroopers?... That’s the message they
want to leave you with, to keep you afraid and keep you
fucking impotent.62

By directly referencing an aspect of media, Hicks establishes an immediate connection with
audience members who are familiar with the media form. He uses their own familiarity to
guide them to his conclusions. With his ideology firmly in place he can draw back the
curtains and reveal the machinations of the establishment and their manipulation of media
and public thought for the purpose of control.

The words he used to construct his verse were simple and direct. He did not have
time to be anything less than direct. It was vital he challenge everything he saw as
intrusive or destructive to social freedoms. Traditional humor is replaced by defiant
indignation and passionate oratory. Arizona Bay and Rant In E-Minor are examples of the
plateau Hicks raised stand up comedy to. Shtick and superfluous fluff were replaced with
philosophical vignettes, anarchistic rants, and a solid concern for the state of the American
soul.

Many media sources gave posthumous praise to Hicks’ work. One reviewer said
of Arizona Bay: “Every serious topic comes with a full array of not only righteous
indignation but also wickedly hilarious zingers.... His targets are usually people or groups
in positions of power, and his rants aim at stemming the blanding of America and forcing

62 Ibid.
people to think, all the while enjoying the irony and stupidity of modern culture.”

Stereophile Magazine called Rant: “completely over the top - cathartic acid baths of divine rage in which comedy and music intersect to raise the consciousness and afflict the comfortable... With each successive recording, Hick’s mixture of music and outrage achieved new levels of aural sophistication, moral intensity and spiritual clarity - like a good squeegee for your third eye.” The reviews were honest, favorable, and supportive, but they were too little, too late.

Hicks had one last fight. It was one he did not expect, but one that would exemplify his struggles throughout his career. October 1, 1993 would be one of his strangest days. He would make his Twelfth appearance on “Late Night with David Letterman,” now on CBS, taped at the Ed Sullivan Theater. He presented his material to the censors and producers, as he had done before, and it was approved. The jokes were censored for language, but the truth of the words and the striking delivery were still present on stage. Avoiding angry tirades, Hicks joked with good-natured ribaldry, dressed not in his typical all black, but in a bright, fall-colored outfit.

You know who’s really bugging me these days? These pro-lifers...You ever look at their faces? ‘I’m pro-life!’ ‘I’m pro-life!’ Boy they look it don’t they? They just exude joie de vivre. You just want to hang with them and play Trivial Pursuit all night long. You know what bugs me about them? If you’re so pro-life, do me a favor - 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 - ‘Get out!’ Then I’d be impressed by their mission.

Hicks simply attempted to dissect and understand a group’s apparent double

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standard. He presented nothing obscene, and utilized rational logic, though his conclusion is intended to make light of deep-seated belief systems. Later in the performance, he addressed the strange practices of other groups:

I was over in Australia during Easter. It was interesting to note they celebrate Easter the same way we do - commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus by telling our children a giant bunny rabbit... left chocolate eggs in the night. Gee I wonder why we’re so messed up as a race. You know, I’ve read the Bible. Can’t find the words ‘bunny’ or ‘chocolate’ in the whole book. 66

Hicks attempted to find humor in the dogmatic practices of organized religion. By presenting his argument in a cooperative and inquisitive manner Hicks pulls the audience to his point of view. Both participants share a neutral space to view a given situation. Hicks is not attacking, accusing, or deriding, rather he is attempting to get individuals to laugh at their own actions. To be on his side forces an audience to accept that their everyday beliefs can be foolish at times. The goal is to make the audience laugh at themselves.

The performance engaged the audience, who were tentative to join Hicks’ fun but warmed quickly and bestowed their approval. Letterman shook his hand afterwards, and made a gift of a Cuban cigar. Later, as he was soaking in a bath in his hotel with the cigar, Hicks received a phone call. Executive producer Robert Morton informed Hicks that he would be cut from the broadcast, the first stand up performer to be censored in the theater. He now shared something with his idol, Elvis Presley, as the Ed Sullivan Theater was the same theater that forbid Elvis’s 1956 broadcast to show him from the waist down. Claiming the Standards and Practices Office felt the material was unsuitable for broadcast, Morton insisted the show’s audience would find Hicks’ comedy objectionable. During the

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66 Ibid., 114.
following weeks, Bill did not hear from CBS or Letterman. Fans called and wrote to object, but were given different answers: some explanations cited the show’s producers as the responsible party, others cited the network itself. Eventually Morton admitted the decision was made by the producers. One of the corporate sponsors paying for commercial time was a pro-life group. Hicks responded: “The networks are delivering an audience to their advertisers. They showed their hand. They’ll continue to pretend they’re a hip talk show. And I’ll continue to be me. As Bob Dylan said, the only way to live outside the law is to be totally honest. So I will remain lawless.” Hicks challenged the establishment’s propaganda source and returned understanding that the facade used to distract the American people was still firmly in place.

By censoring Hicks’ ideas, CBS admitted their fear of him. His work was uncomfortable, not politically correct, and confronted the status quo by bringing belief systems into question and challenging their nature and their role in society. Therefore, this affront could not be shown to American households. Those words may have created argument and debate, forcing individuals to discuss their beliefs with one another. CBS was scared of what he had to say, so they censored him. Later, Hicks wrote to friend John Lahr, reflecting on the situation: “Jokes, John, this is what America now fears - one man with a point of view, speaking out unafraid of our vaunted institutions, or loathsome superstitions the CBS hierarchy feels the masses (the herd) use as their religion.”

On January 6, Bill Hicks performed his final show. He then moved into his parent’s house in Little Rock. Though nearing the end, he continued to read and listen to music. He perused old photo albums with friends, told his mother about the Tibetan Book

67 Ibid., 115.
of the Dead, and tried to convince his father to try psychedelic mushrooms. Colleen McGarr remembered: “He was getting a lot more light-hearted, because he felt really good. He was at peace with himself and the world, able to face death because he knew there was a god, not tied to any religion, just some very creative being out there. He realized that life was too goddamn weird for there not to be anything out there, perhaps a ‘prankster god.’”

On February 14, Hicks called his friends and family to say his last goodbyes. After contacting everyone he uttered his last words: “I’ve said all I have to say.”

Bill Hicks died at 11:20 pm on February 26, 1994 in Little Rock, Arkansas. He was buried in a family plot in Leakesville, Mississippi. Tributes were published in England but the press in the United States was too busy covering Kurt Cobain’s heroin overdose in Rome, Italy to mourn him. A documentary and tribute, It’s Just a Ride, was produced by BBC Channel 4.

Hicks’ truths were present in many forms, and they were created for the purpose of making people think about their place in life and personal freedoms. Laughter and honesty were the result of his comedy. He lessened tension by allowing the audience to visualize both sides of a conflict and understand its makeup. With humorous observation concerning the nature of the divergence in thought, Hicks allowed individuals to see difficulties from new angles, angles that weaken the power of the conflict. When conflict is lessened opposing sides may begin to interpret the tenements of those they disagree with. Through familiarity of viewpoint, honest dialogue may begin for the resolution of conflict, furthering trust and societal realizations: Honesty is not too much to ask from a politician or priest; true enlightenment is not dangerous to an individual, nor is it dangerous for a

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69 Outhwaite, “Bill Hicks Biography.”
nation. The supposedly objective news organizations, already established as a tool of an oppressive government, do little to pretend they are not. Realizations concerning the build-up of double standards within our culture greatly concerned Hicks. The double standard of a magazine that decries marijuana whose back page advertises Marlboros. The double standard of spending millions on commercials telling kids to ‘Just Say No,’ and following that with the latest Budweiser advertisement. Americans are so intent on worrying about Viagra, Ritalin, and Prozac that they have forgotten what the conflict is over anyway:

It's interesting that the two drugs that are legal, alcohol and cigarettes, two drugs that do absolutely nothing for you, whatsoever. And drugs that grow naturally upon this planet, drugs that open your eyes up to make you realize how you're being fucked everyday of your life? Those drugs are against the law. Wow. Coincidence? I don’t know... 71

The perpetuation of double standards by both the government and media infringe on the inherent right to the pursuit of happiness. It keeps Americans distracted and confused, lessening the chance they will challenge the status quo. Hicks attempted to grab the public by their shoulders and shake them awake to think for themselves.

Bill Hicks wanted to protect people by helping them to see the truth, and empowering them to explore what they wanted to. By drawing away the veil of the status quo, he hoped to enlighten and empower. During an era of prosperity, he spoke against the government, against the moneylenders, against those who deceived the masses. He had the personal freedoms and spirit of the individual in mind. Bill Hicks led by example. “His comedy takes an audience on a journey to places in the heart where it can’t or won’t go without him. Through laughter, Hicks makes unacceptable ideas irresistible. He is

71 Hicks, Rant in E-Minor.
particularly lethal because he persuades not with reason but with joy.”

His reasoning allowed individuals to accept new types of satirical rationale. His words allowed for honest dialogue between opponents. He made the taboo and obscene wonderful. Hicks’ influence extends to musicians, artists, academics, stand up comedians, and a continually frustrated generation, which no longer has faith in the established social order. Though he never started an outright intellectual revolution, his words continue to persuade and seduce, making the disagreeable compelling, and the obscene undeniable.

Bill Hicks has become a voice for counter culture. Like the American satirists before him he stood up for the truth, for the individual, and for freedom. He stands with the great thinkers and artists of America. John Magnusson, close friend and producer of Lenny Bruce, saw Hicks’ act: “Bill Hicks was the only performer in thirty years who has truly reminded me of Lenny. Both have the very important qualities of savage, in-your-face, straight-to-the-gut satire. Each also has the moral courage to deal with important issues of their time without fear of media, corporate, political, or quasi-religious censorship or disapproval.”

Will Kaufman, British professor and fan, wrote of Hicks’ career: “Few American comedians since George Carlin have brought any significant challenges to the most powerful and censorial medium of communication, network television; and perhaps no other recent career raises such disturbing implications about the successful taming and silencing of the satiric voice by the commercial interests in that medium.”

Of these comparisons, and similar ones during his lifetime, Hicks responded: “Lenny Bruce was Lenny Bruce onstage, and I’m Bill Hicks onstage, and in that way,

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73 Ibid.
74 Kaufman, The Comedian As Confidence Man, p114.
we’re similar. What we’re talking about is a breed of individuals who believe in their art and love it and want to evolve it. That breed includes [George] Carlin, definitely.”75

Those who hear his words view Hicks in a different way, and take something different from his works. Brett Butler, friend and fellow comedian said: “For all the talk about Bill being like Hendrix, or Dylan, or Jim Morrison, or Lenny Bruce, it was Jesus Bill wanted to be... He wanted to be Christ at his angriest.”76 Eric Bogosian, playwright and actor, said: “He [Bill] was taking fully the role of the witch-doctor in front of the audience... like a big, giant exorcism of all the evil shit that’s inside of us, that poisons us day to day.”77 Reverend Ivan Stang of the Church of the SubGenius said: “As far as I’m concerned that guy was a real hero, and it just figures that he’s dead. He probably was the Messiah. Oh well. Frankly I feel that Hicks did perfectly what I’ve only been halfway successful at - live preaching.”78

Bill Hicks inspired academics and artists alike, musicians particularly. Tool, an anti-establishment hard rock band, credits Hicks as a great inspiration, and have dedicated their album Aenima to him. Other bands such as Radiohead and Rage Against the Machine, also anti-establishment groups, have dedicated albums and songs to a man they consider a great inspiration. Tool, however, found a distinct connection with Hicks. Frontman Maynard James Keenan: “His ideas were what really resonated with us. I think that’s what he really liked about us as well - that we were resonating similar concepts. Unity is the philosophical center.”79 With permission, Tool sampled from Bill’s

75 Hicks, United States of Advertising.
76 Quoted in Kaufman, The Comedian As Confidence Man, p122.
77 Quoted in Ibid., p119.
performances to use in their songs, which has allowed for fans of the band to discover Hicks and his message. "They'll get Bill's tapes and listen to what he's talking about, listen to our album, and then hopefully have enough intellect to make the leap and say 'I see where the connection is.'" Keenan continues: "If you look at Bill's work and really understand where he's coming from, you start to realize he's not really gone, he's just going through a change... Whatever aspect of him that was, whatever part of soul was in that physical form at that time has just changed form."

Bill Hicks, the true Texas Outlaw, represents a stage in the ongoing evolution of the art of stand up comedy. Hicks followed in the footsteps of Bierce, Twain, Rogers, Bruce, and Carlin. Like them, he spoke to the heart of the individual American to open his eyes and take the promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to their logical conclusion. He tried to protect by teaching, tried to empower by laughing, and tried to reason by telling stories. He was a satirist and social commentator, but not a cynic. Bill Hicks was too much of a romantic to be cynical. He understood his role as a philosopher, prophet, and messenger. He spoke out to enlighten, to show how belief systems can have a negative effect, to embrace the freedom of will and explore the creativity of language. Bill Hicks performed to make this world a better place for everyone. For his work, he is to be commended, respected, remembered, and listened to. He was a genius, an artist, a messenger, and an advocate for a new world of honesty and faith.

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80 Ibid.  
81 Ibid.
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Adam Gardner Osborn


It is the hallmark of the truly unfunny to study the nature of comedy.