

December 16, 1961 - February 26, 1994

Hicks on Hicks

Comedian's third eye wide open in CD afterlife

CLIFF HICKS is a senior news-editorial and English major and the Daily Nebraskan opinion editor.

It was five years ago today that the greatest comedian you've probably never heard of passed away from pancreatic cancer at the age of 32.

His name was Bill Hicks (I'm not lucky enough to be related, except maybe in spirit) and not only could he have changed the world, but in his own subtle way, he did.

Like Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, Bill was a comedian whose blisteringly dark humor was ahead of his time, and often caused audiences to be offended. Like any of the other greats, though, Bill never let that fact stop him. It was him against the world.

The world is like a ride at an amusement park, and when you choose to go on it, you think it's real because that's how powerful our minds are, and the ride goes up and down and round and round - it has thrills and chills and it's very brightly colorful and it's fun for a while.

Some people have been on the ride for a long time, and they begin to question, "Is this real or is it just a ride?" Other people have remembered and they come back to us and say, "Hey, don't worry, don't be afraid ever because this is just a ride," and we kill those people.

I never had the privilege of seeing Bill Hicks in person, but that's never lessened his impact on me. His very words have always helped me picture the image of him taking the stage:

It's a club, any club. The room is small, yet fairly packed. A lingering aroma of cigarettes and spilled beer haunts the place like a ghost. There's a spotlight on the stage, but the glass covering the light is filmed over with a thin layer of smoke dust, so that the light isn't bright and shining, but faded and tired. People in the audience murmur and whisper, growing restless for their speaker, their prophet, their sermon from the mount, or the stage, if you will.

There's probably a heckler or two readying himself or herself (and Bill got both kinds) to take him on after he got rolling, but Bill was aware of that. He could pick them out of the crowd and he knew what to do with them once he got the spotlight on them.

Bill snaps the Zippo open and flicks his thumb downward. The small waft of flame brushes across the end of his cigarette, which glows and flares with a quiet light in the wings of the stage, lurking in the shadows. He takes a long drag from the cigarette, holds it in for a moment, then lets it slip out, a cloud rising before him.

The emcee introduces Bill and then scurries off the stage, knowing no one should get between Bill and his congregation. A weary smile crosses Bill's lips, then he steps onto the stage under the cover of darkness before the light appears on him.

His words loft over the speakers, the microphone held close to his face. His very voice is chalky and bitter.

Bill wouldn't have it any other way.

People suck, that's my contention, and I can prove it on an Etch-A-Sketch.

Bill wasn't out to offend everyone - his way of thinking just wasn't commonplace in the world, and thus he was a veritable treasure trove of arguments that offended everyone anyway. Maybe that's what I liked best about him. He

didn't pull his punches.

I know it's not a very popular opinion but ... I had a great time on drugs.

My friends and I took what Terrance McKenna calls a "heroic dose" of five grams of dried mushrooms, and let me tell you, our third eyes were squeegeed quite cleanly.

And I'm glad they're against the law, you know why? Because I sat in a field of grass for four hours thinking "I love ... everything."

This isn't to say Bill was pro-drugs entirely, though. He thought drugs should be legal; idiots should be outlawed.

Same LSD story every time: "Young man on LSD thought he could fly jumped out of a window and died. What a tragedy." Don't blame acid on this guy. If he thought he could fly why didn't he try and take off from the ground first? Just to check it out. He's an idiot, he's dead. Good.

Why don't we ever hear a positive story? "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."

He loved to push things over the edge, and keep on pushing. Nothing was sacred to Bill.

Bill thought about a lot of things, and he

"You want your grandmother to die like a little bird in some hospital room? Her skin so thin you can see her last heartbeat work its way down her blue veins. ...

Or do you want her to meet Chuck Norris?"

had all sorts of ideas about the government.

You can actually go to the sixth floor of the Schoolbook Depository. It's a museum called ... The Assassination Museum. I think they named it that after the assassination. I can't be too sure of the chronology but ... Anyway they have the window set up to look exactly like it did on that day. And it's really accurate, you know, 'cause Oswald's not in it. I don't know who did their research, but we're talking painstaking detail.

Every so often, people would complain he dwelled on the JFK assassination too much, as it was a recurring theme in his act. He was perfectly ready with the retort, though, as he always was.

People say, "Bill, quit talking about Kennedy, man. It was a long time ago, just let it go, all right? It's a long time ago, just forget about it." I'm like, all right, then don't bring up Jesus to me. As long as we're talking shelf life here, you know. "Bill, you know Jesus died for you." Yeah, well it was a long time ago. Forget about it!

The best part of Bill's delvings into the JFK assassination was that his audience went with him.

You know why I love talking about the Kennedy assassination? Because to me it's a great archetypal example of how the totalitarian government who rules this planet partitions



CHRIS CHARNLEY/DN

out information in such a way that we the masses are forced to base our conclusions on erroneous ... I'm sorry, wrong meeting. I thought this was the meeting at the docks. That's next weekend? (pause)

Everyone followed me on that, that's the frightening thing. Are we that cynical? "Yes we are, Bill. We will take anything you give us."

While Bill wasn't against religion per se, he was against organized religion, and some of the weird things that go along with it, and some of them, in retrospect, seem pretty damn strange.

I was in Australia during Easter. They celebrate 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. I wonder why we're messed up as a race.

Bill was harsh, there's no two ways about it, and he avoided compromising.

He appeared on Letterman eleven times, trying to find his groove with much of his language toned down.

(Even in the quotes you see here, I sometimes had to clip language myself, but I think Bill would've understood, though not necessarily

approved of, why I did it, in order to pass on his wisdom.)

The 12th time he performed for Letterman, he was sure he had it down pat. Then his seven minutes of fame was cut. His performance had "too many hot spots," a Letterman producer told him.

It practically broke Bill's heart.

Four nights later, he gave the same set before a small audience and caught it on tape. After his seven minutes were up, he left the stage. When they brought him back up, he had this to say about the Letterman show:

They've always been very good to - well, to be honest, every single set I've ever done they've de-balled me, okay? And I put up with it because I love Dave Letterman. I'm beginning to realize: I'm in an abusive relationship.

And do you want to know the punch line of this whole story? "Bill, we really love ya. We want you back on in a coupla weeks." I don't know if I can learn to juggle that fast.

Bill never appeared on Letterman again.

Censorship became just another one of the things in life Bill detested. Like, for example, California. He was waiting for the day an earthquake banished L.A. to the ocean.

Oh won't we party hard when L.A. goes kersplash. Leaving nothing but a cool, beautiful serenity called ... Arizona Bay.

Even though Bill was from Austin, Texas, his popularity rose faster overseas than it did here. In England, he was even offered a commercial, but Bill was above that.

Here's the deal, folks, you do a commercial, you're off the artistic roll call forever, end of story ... If you do a commercial, there's a price on your head, everything you say is suspect.

Don't think Bill didn't have sympathy, though.

You know, if you're young and struggling, OK, I'll look the other way. Still, you do a commercial and you're off the artistic roll call forever and that goes for everyone ... except Willie Nelson. With a \$30 million dollar tax debt, Willie's pockets were a little deeper than the rest of ours.

"I'm sitting here selling tacos, waiting for the woman in the rose tattoo ... my butt is so loose."

Poor Willie ... pass the hat, get him off the Taco Bell commercial! We gotta save Willie!

Nothing was taboo to Bill. That's one of the reasons why so many people had trouble with him. Like his idea to use terminally ill people as stunt doubles.

"Ahh, Bill, terminally ill stunt people?

That's cruel." You know what I think cruel is? Leaving your loved ones to die in some sterile hospital room surrounded by strangers. Put 'em in the movies. You want your grandmother to die like a little bird in some hospital room? Her skin so thin you can see her last heartbeat work its way down her blue veins. ...

Or do you want her to meet Chuck Norris?

"Hey, how come you dressed my grandmother up like a mugger?"

"Shut up and get off the set. Action! Push her towards Chuck!"

"Wow, he kicked her head right off her body? Did you see that, did you see my grammy?" She's out of her misery and you've seen the greatest film of all time. I'm still feeling some resistance to this, what's up? You and your fake sympathy. OK, not one of my more popular theories. But just do me one thing. Don't ever say you love film as much as I do. I think we've found your limit.

I've only begun to scratch Life According to Bill Hicks and I'm running out of space.

Much like mushrooms squeegeed Bill's third eye, his surreal and bleak comedic ranting squeegeed mine.

There are four full CDs of Bill: "Dangerous," "Relentless," "Arizona Bay" and "Rant In E Minor." I cannot recommend them enough.

Bill Hicks' legacy will long outlive the man himself and for every person that has their third-eye opened by Bill's wisdom, that's one more than there was before.