

VARIANCE
FILMS
presents

AMERICAN THE BILL HICKS STORY



*The amazing life story of the outlaw comic
who wanted to save the world.*

A film by Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas

Running Time 101 mins

Screening Format Digital

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Stills/Materials: www.variancefilms.com/americanpress.html

Distributor Contact: Dylan Marchetti - Variance Films - dylan@variancefilms.com / 212.537.6769 x1

NY Publicity Contact: Emma Griffiths - EG-PR - emma@eg-pr.com / 917.438.5074

L.A. Publicity Contact: Rene Ridinger - mPRm - rridinger@mprm.com / 323.933.3399

“I don’t want butts on seats, I want minds in the room.”

-Bill Hicks (1961-1994)

SYNOPSIS (SHORT FORM)

Seventeen years after his death, Bill Hicks has taken a permanent place in the cultural landscape and is widely recognized as one of the greatest American comedians of the modern era. Described as many things – philosopher, social satirist, even preacher – Hicks was ultimately a performer who, for many, changed what comedy could be. He believed that comedy played a vital role in any free and just society, and that the comedian, a free spirit detached from political or corporate agendas, was able to voice what others wouldn't, challenging convention and presenting ideas that would stimulate the minds of the audiences. Hicks had no difficulty making people laugh- but what he really wanted to do was make them think. His life tragically cut short at the age of 32, Hicks' timeless material lives on, revered today by both comedians (many who cite him as an influence) and fans alike.

Bill Hicks' remarkable journey is brought to life in the documentary feature AMERICAN: THE BILL HICKS STORY. Combining revealing new interviews from those who knew him best with a bold new photographic animation technique, AMERICAN takes the audience inside Hicks' unfolding life story using archival footage and animated photographs, many from Hicks' personal collection and previously unseen. It's a film that innovates, inspires, and outrages- while being funny as hell in the process.

SYNOPSIS (LONG FORM)

Seventeen years after his death, Bill Hicks has taken a permanent place in the cultural landscape and is widely recognized as one of the greatest American comedians of the modern era. Described as many things – philosopher, social satirist, even preacher – Hicks was ultimately a performer who, for many, changed what comedy could be. He believed that comedy played a vital role in any free and just society, and that the comedian, a free spirit detached from political or corporate agendas, was able to voice what others wouldn't, challenging convention and presenting ideas that would stimulate the minds of the audiences. Hicks had no difficulty making people laugh- but what he really wanted to do was make them think.

His comedy savaged the injustices of life in the late eighties/early nineties hangover that was post-Reagan America. But his uncompromising approach was met with controversy and resistance at home, and he found fame on the international stage instead. In 1993, on the verge of finally breaking through to the elusive mainstream American audience, Hicks was diagnosed with aggressive terminal cancer, and his life and career were cut short at the age of 32. But his timeless material lives on, revered today by both comedians (who frequently cite him as an influence) and fans alike.

Bill Hicks' remarkable journey is brought to life in the documentary feature AMERICAN: THE BILL HICKS STORY. Combining revealing new interviews from those who knew him best with a bold new photographic animation technique, AMERICAN eschews “talking heads” and takes the audience inside Hicks' unfolding life story using archival footage and animated photographs, many from Hicks' personal collection and previously unseen. It's a film that innovates, inspires, and outrages- while being funny as hell in the process.

ABOUT BILL HICKS (12/16/61 – 2/26/94)

Houston in the 1970s epitomized the realization of the American Dream – with its leafy suburbs and luxurious homes for the prosperous new families of the rising middle class. For a young Bill Hicks, however, this prescribed conformity lacked substance, and he began to question the ideals he was being raised to fulfil. Entranced by the late-night comedians he saw on his bedroom TV, Bill discovered a world of creative rebellion and a satirical observation on American life that opened a new window on his teenage world. An 'A' student, but born with a strident non-conformist streak that was quickly emerging, Hicks could see the cracks in the dream around him, and realized he had an alternative destiny. He was going to be a comedian.

Luckily, Bill was not alone in his point of view. With the help of his like-minded friends - and much to the annoyance of his Southern Baptist parents - the 15-year-old began sneaking out to perform at the newly opened Comix Annex in Houston, and found himself right in the middle of an exploding comedy scene. Bill was quickly spotted and began to make regular appearances on the nascent David Letterman Show but, although instantly popular, he felt his comedy wasn't evolving quickly enough and he struggled to find a unique voice. Hicks was a fiercely intelligent and revolutionary thinker, but the mission to connect his esoteric ideas with mainstream southern audiences was generally hit and miss- with a lot more misses, at least at first.

Seeking inspiration from the hard-partying, politically aware group of Houston 'outlaw' comics he had fallen in with, Bill began experimenting with drugs and alcohol as a way to expand his creativity and view of the world. In particular, hallucinogenics opened up radical new ways of thinking for Hicks, and his confidence grew- along with a reputation for raising hell.

Bill's comedy began to take on broader themes, and he began battering the pillars of what he saw as society's flaws – fundamentalist religion, the Reagan administration and Eighties pop culture. His reputation for fierce live performances began to grow, but his choice of material and increasingly drunken, drug-fuelled antics saw him kicked off television shows and banned from clubs. Heading toward a potential overdose, Hicks' friends worried that he was just one party away from death.

For Hicks, it was the fading sight of his comedy dream that finally sparked a change, and he left Houston for New York to begin the lonely struggle of removing alcohol and drug use from his life. One year later, a clean and focused Hicks emerged, along with an explosion in the pace and output of his comedy shows. In addition to returning to television for guest appearances, the newly-sober Hicks undertook a touring schedule that saw him playing 200 nights a year.

Despite his material being very American in nature, it was Bill's breakout performance at the prestigious Just For Laughs comedy festival in Canada that saw him suddenly connect with the mainstream audience he had sought in the US. Following this exposure, sold out tours were booked in the UK, and Bill mesmerized these new crowds as he skewered the US media and his own government's warmongering with a raw honesty that few other comics, American or not, dared to try on stage.

Though still dividing audiences at home, Bill's American following was also starting to reach critical mass, and he was repeatedly nominated as best male comic in America's Annual Comedy Awards. It looked as if Hicks was finally poised to become a major voice in American culture when, in June 1993, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Rather than hang up his gloves and retire, Bill instinctively saw an urgency to drive his comedy to new heights. Telling only his close family about his illness, he continued touring and redoubled his efforts to record new material in a bid to leave a lasting message about the

decline in American society and his hopes for a rapid realization by mankind that our evolution and destiny now lies entirely in our own hands.

In a final twist, Bill's twelfth appearance on Letterman - and his last chance to reach out to the American people - was censored in its entirety, his material considered too 'dangerous' for mainstream audiences. He died four months later, at only 32 years old.

As one of today's rising comedy stars says:

"There are probably a lot of comics who were content talking about their ex girlfriends on stage, or why white people can't dance, etc., and then they saw Bill and were like...fuck.

I know when I first saw him I was a shitty comic and a shitty human being. I wanted to learn about politics but every time I turned on the news I either felt stupid or like I was being lied to. Bill's stand-up was the first time that these issues became digestible. It was a comic who I first believed when I saw him talking about the war- not a newsmen, a comic who taught me about hypocrisy- not a teacher, and it was because of him that I stopped trying to get an agent or a TV deal and started speaking from my heart."

-Jamie Kilstein, New York comic

*"An inspired and inspiring truth teller,
dangerous and brave and scary, all at once."*

-Richard Pryor

*"Bill Hicks - blowtorch, excavator, truthsayer, and brain specialist.
He will correct your vision. Others will drive on the road he built."*

-Tom Waits

OFFICIAL ALBUMS

- * Dangerous (1990)
- * Relentless (1992)
- * Arizona Bay (1997)
- * Rant in E-Minor (1997)
- * Philosophy: The Best of Bill Hicks (2001)
- * Love, Laughter and Truth (2002)
- * Flying Saucer Tour Vol. 1 (2002)
- * Shock and Awe (2003)
- * Salvation (2005)

LIVE PERFORMANCE DVDS

- * Sane Man (1989)
- * One Night Stand (1991)
- * Relentless (1991)
- * Revelations (1992)

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Three years in the making, ***AMERICAN: THE BILL HICKS STORY***, combines the best of Bill's comedy together with intimate new interviews and an innovative animation technique which recreates the scenes of Bill's life, seamlessly merging his offstage world to reveal the real man behind the incendiary performer.

Bill's family had been regularly contacted about documentary projects over the years, but were very protective about Bill and his story- and wary of releasing new material. Many of Bill's friends were also reluctant to talk on camera and share their personal memories.

Instead, it was a new animated photographic approach, aiming to recreate a true sense of Bill's life, which was to capture everyone's interest. Matt Harlock, already an established film director who was in regular contact with the Hicks family from putting on London's "Bill Hicks Tribute Nights", realized there was enough unseen footage of Bill to put together a longer story of his life. Paul Thomas, a television comedy producer with additional animation experience, became involved and together they developed a radical new documentary approach which would create a vibrant new telling of Bill's story.

Following interest from both the BBC and theatrical distributors in the UK, the Hicks estate granted full access to their archive of Bill's video performances and photographs, and along with Bill's friends and colleagues, agreed to go on camera and lay bare their memories of their son, brother, and friend.

From the outset, the aim was to move beyond the dedicated Bill Hicks fan base in order to preserve and present this timeless and pivotal American story for a wider audience. Feature documentaries had been evolving in a more immersive narrative direction for some time, and the idea of doing full animation over real interviews pointed toward an exciting new audience experience.

RECORDING BILL'S STORY

Filmmakers Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas' trip to the US to record interviews in October 2006 was a revelation for everyone. The people in Bill's life had never spoken at one time before, and never at such length. Each interview lasted several days, in the comfort of the interviewees own home, and was filmed with minimal lighting set ups and no additional crew. This gave both flexibility and a relaxed intimacy in taking each interviewee back, often through difficult and emotional memories, at their own pace – something all would eventually describe to be a deeply cathartic experience.

The interviewees were a highly diverse group of individuals who shared just one thing in common – that Bill had left a deep impression on each of their lives.

This journey took the filmmakers from Portland, Oregon, where Bill's first comedy partner Dwight Slade acted out their earliest teenage routines, to the edge of a Texas ranch pond where Kevin Booth, Bill's lifelong friend and producer, recalled their mushroom-inspired UFO experience. They tracked down the Houston comics who performed with Bill at the beginning of his career, who told hilarious stories of Bill's formative comedic years, as well as the descent into drink and drugs which almost killed him. They spent time in the family home in Little Rock, Arkansas, where Bill's mother Mary served her toasted pound cake as siblings Steve and Lynn discussed the impact that Bill's more extreme routines had on his traditional Southern Baptist family.

After spending time with the Hicks family, the “holy grail” was uncovered. Stored unassumingly in Mary Hicks’ antique glass fronted cabinet was Bill’s own collection of VHS tapes of his performances. Dating back to the start of his career in 1980, these tapes were priceless- many of which had never been played before, even by Hicks himself. Filmed by friends, comedy clubs, and then, later on, by Bill’s brother Steve, these tapes essentially represented Bill’s life’s work.

There were some heart-stopping moments as the tapes, some over 25 years old, made high-pitched squeals as they rewound through the VHS player – a snapped tape would be a punchline lost forever (thankfully, all the tapes have now been safely digitized, to ensure the longevity and historical record of Hicks’ career).

When all was said and done, in addition to the “lost tapes”, over 100 hours of interviews were shot with the ten people who knew Bill best, and over 1,300 previously unseen photographs were uncovered and scanned. It was quickly made clear that this process wouldn’t happen again, and this would be the last chance to create a definitive historical record of Bill’s life and story- and the filmmakers were determined not to waste it. What emerged was a vivid new telling of Bill’s story, as the interviewees, combined with the footage and photographs, recalled Bill’s life with an astonishing clarity.

Comments filmmaker Matt Harlock, “These were not the only challenges we faced. From using our best English accents to talk our way in to Bill’s real childhood home (long since sold) to take photographs of the real roof he used to sneak out on, to exploring the dry cleaning warehouse in Houston where Bill and Dwight performed their first gigs, to locating the actual room in the apartment building Bill and Dwight shared during their two years in Los Angeles – we had decided early on that authenticity was key to telling Bill’s story, but we didn’t realize how difficult it would be to do correctly.”

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Matt and Paul returned from their trip across America with over 100 hours of intimate interview footage, 1,300 photographs, and a large stash of newly uncovered video material which would tell Bill’s story. However, notes Paul Thomas, “It quickly became clear that the story was more detailed and epic than we had expected. Bill’s family and friends had given us a vivid emotional chronicle that lived and breathed with Bill’s presence. Although some of the interviewees had not been particularly keen to talk about their private memories of Bill, everyone involved had realized at some point that there was an important job to do in preserving Bill’s story for history. It was a tough and emotional process, but everyone instinctively grasped that such comprehensive interviews and the chance to record Bill’s story in this way would never happen again. The responsibility of handling Bill’s story on behalf of him, his work, his family, friends and fans, in a thorough and definitive way, had now transferred to us.”

Although the filmmakers didn’t know it then, this was just the start of a three year production process (far beyond the original six month production schedule).

Over seven months, the long, unscripted interviews were layered together into a seamless narrative track, with the feel of a story being told ‘in the round’- each scene a firsthand account told by the people who were there. Because of this, some storylines - such as those of Bill’s love life - refused to bed down into the structure of the film, usually due to the absence of firsthand accounts (for example, two of Bill’s former girlfriends are now remarried and a third died shortly after Bill). Between an unwillingness from the interviewees to talk anecdotally on Bill’s or the girlfriends’ behalf and the filmmakers’ unwillingness to “fake it” by chopping up footage, it was decided to drop these storylines altogether, rather than risk getting it wrong.

THE ANIMATED APPROACH

The animated approach began with some tests on existing photographs, which quickly revealed some exciting possibilities in store. However, following the comprehensive story captured in the interviews, it was clear that the technique would have to go much further if it was to truly immerse a wide audience in a fast moving and involved story that played as a film, not a “special”.

For some scenes, such as Bill’s journey down to Houston’s Comedy Workshop, there were, of course, no photos- and so the filmmakers began to recreate a new photo narrative from scratch, revisiting real locations and incorporating the vivid witness descriptions of places and events. This technique largely leaves the (now much older) interviewees off-screen, and instead catapults the audience back to the time and place that the events actually happened, so they can experience what the young Bill would have been experiencing- and best of all, Bill is there at the center of every scene.

Real locations, such as the bedroom window he snuck out of to perform with comedy partner Dwight Slade, the dark alleys of Houston where he nearly met his end, and the spellbinding auditoriums where he played his most famous concerts are all meticulously recreated in stunning three dimensional photorealism to provide a fresh new sense of the challenges the lone comedian faced as he toured the towns and cities of America two hundred nights per year.

The fact that there had been so many photographs taken throughout Bill's life (including many by his close friend & now professional photographer David Johndrow, who had captured Bill with a relaxed intimacy) kickstarted both the narrative structure and the visual look of the film. The photos provide a great starting point to so many of the scenes, as Bill's presence shines out of the world via photographs in a story that essentially, and sadly, must be told without him.

VIDEO ARCHIVES - THE SELECTION PROCESS

The film includes footage from all of Bill’s major performances, along with an abundance of rare clips gleaned from the “lost tapes”. These clips are often just handheld VHS camcorder shoots taken from the back of a club by a friend, or, in the later stages of Bill’s career, by his brother Steve, but all capture Bill's enduring passion and authenticity, no matter what size stage he was playing.

The selection of clips was often as tortuous as the animation itself, as each clip had multiple roles to perform. The plan from the start was to capture the feel of a single performance arc, but as throughout the film Bill evolves onstage as both a performer and person, so must the clips. This was achieved with subtle editing choices, which work to bring the personal side of Bill into many of his touchstone performances.

The animated storytelling is particularly critical in the first half of the film, establishing Bill's character before the clips allow Bill to enter and flourish onstage and then begin to carry the story himself. It catches the energy of one continuous Hicks show, but one where he grows older and more accomplished throughout. And by the end of the film, Bill is moving off stage, putting his beliefs into action as he tackles the Waco siege, giving a strong sense of his deeper convictions as a person.

A TRUE “3-D” FILM

Bill often said that comedy is a group catharsis, where everyday tensions can be released through deep laughter, and where new ideas can be introduced through humor to break through entrenched ways of thinking. In our earliest test screenings, the laughter in the room merged with the original audience laughter on screen, which was incredible to see- and an important part of the theatrical experience.

Much of the film’s story is about the craft of comedy and what Bill was trying to achieve through his performances- and having the live effect of this directly demonstrated to you, as the audience laughs around you, adds a whole other dimension to watching the film. It’s a true immersive experience in that sense- like what a 3-D film aspires to be, only instead of things randomly popping off the screen AT you, the audience is brought INTO the world of the film itself.

A NOTE FROM THE FILMMAKERS

“Recreating Bill Hicks’ story has been a journey all of its own - traveling all across America to record extensive new interviews, watching hundreds of performances and developing the animation technique over thousands of hours to fully realize the cinematic vision required. With a little help and a few orbits of the sun, these raw materials – video clips, photographs & personal recollections – have now been put together to recreate what we believe is a full sense of Bill’s life, ambitions and achievements- and a lasting testament to why he will remain one of the enduring cultural icons of our age.”

-Paul Thomas & Matt Harlock

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Mary Hicks

Bill's mother, Mary, moved to Little Rock with husband Jim in 1978, leaving then 17-year-old Bill to attend his final school year in Houston, and resides there still. She is president of the Arizona Bay Production Company, which looks after the copyright on Bill's material. In January 2009, she made an unprecedented appearance on the Late Night with Letterman show, where Dave apologized for cutting Bill's performance fifteen years earlier. She didn't let him off the hook.

Steve Hicks

Bill's older brother by 5 years, Steve recently moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan with wife Marty. They have two grown-up kids, Ryan and Rachel. He recently fulfilled a lifelong ambition by visiting Abbey Road Studios to remaster some of Bill's acoustic guitar music for the forthcoming album, *Lo-Fi Troubadour*. He currently lists his job description as 'another capitalist at the corporate gang bang'.

Lynn Hicks

Bill's big sister Lynn is a pharmacist in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and recently attended her first Bill Hicks Tribute Night in London, where she and the Hicks family were mobbed like rock stars. She now spends much of her time in Europe, and is currently attending to her expanding property interests while browsing the flea markets of Paris.

Kevin Booth

Bill's lifelong friend and producer, Kevin Booth, was responsible for much of Bill's audio output, including posthumously completing *Arizona Bay* and *Rant in E Minor* to Bill's specifications. He has just completed a major documentary entitled AMERICAN DRUG WAR, and is working on the sequel from his LA base, assisted by wife Trae and their three Alaskan wolves. His family still owns the ranch in Fredericksburg, Texas where he and Bill had their famous UFO encounter by the pond. More information can be found at www.americandrugwar.com

Dwight Slade

Bill's first comedy partner, Dwight Slade, met Bill in eighth grade, and they started making up routines together- leading to their first nerve-wracked performances at the Comix Annex in Houston in 1975. Later, they spent two years living together in a one-room apartment in Los Angeles, while working at the Comedy Store. Dwight has become a successful comedian in his own right, performing multiple times at the Just For Laughs comedy festival, as well as performing for US troops on a USO tour of Afghanistan. More information can be found at www.dwightslade.com

David Johndrow

Bill's friend and photographer David Johndrow first connected with Bill at age sixteen over their shared religious background, and they spent much time together exploring the spiritual side of life. David's intimate, iconic images of Bill - many never seen before this film - record both Bill and David's development as artists. Recently, David has received much attention for his macro images of nature, which have graced magazine covers and exhibitions all over the States. He didn't really want to go on camera for us- but he did it for Bill. More information can be found at www.davidjohndrow.com

James Ladmirault

Known by Bill and everyone on the circuit as Jimmy Pineapple, Esquire, James Ladmirault was one of the Houston comics who took Bill under his wing and watched him grow as an artist, putting on group shows with him and other comedians as the "Texas Outlaw Comics", who quickly gained notoriety as a hard partying bunch of politically-aware performers. As his

sponsor, he credits Bill with helping him get sober. He now combines comedy and directing theatre in Houston with his fervent support of New Orleans football- go Saints!

John Farneti

Often seen as a “fun uncle” figure to Bill, and the oldest of the “Houston Comics”, John Farneti was also a full-time husband, father and lawyer (“24 hours is actually a lot of time if you don’t watch television”). Having been with Bill at many key moments in his career, including the famous ‘mushroom pizza/missed phone call’ incident, he was ideally placed to recall fond memories of Bill and the Houston gang in the Eighties. Now too old and too busy to chase ambulances, he merely shoots out their tires.

Andy Huggins

Dragged from LA back to Houston by Jimmy and the gang, Andy Huggins was ‘just more of a Houston comedian.’ A great performer with a gentler side, he often house-sat for Bill when he was on the road, and they went sober at the same time. He has written for Jay Leno and Billy Crystal, still hangs out with Jimmy and John, is a theatre actor, and currently works at the Laff Spot in Houston.

Steve Epstein (aka Epicstein)

The founder of the Texas Outlaw Comics, Epicstein ‘flopped around like an unattended firehose’ but got everything going. He was at Bill Hicks’ very first performance at the Annex, as well as his last full performance at Igby’s. A co-resident of the famous Houston House with Bill and Jimmy, he still makes his living as an entertainer in Los Angeles.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Matt Harlock is a director whose dramatic short films have been screened widely at festivals and on television (C4, FilmFour, HBO, Sky), picking up awards from Film London, TCM and the Manhattan SFF. His first feature screenplay was developed with the Film Consortium. In 2004, Matt created the official Bill Hicks Tribute Nights in London, featuring a rare video footage programme, which led to a relationship with the Hicks family and the realization that the definitive documentary of Bill's life had not yet been made.

Paul Thomas trained as an architect before moving into a career in television. As a producer-director he has worked in-house at BBC Entertainment and several leading UK production companies. His work includes creating innovative entertainment & comedy series for the BBC, Channel 4 and SKY, and two years as series director for Channel 4's flagship animation season.

As director-producers, Matt and Paul secured a feature-length documentary commission, and conducted over 100 hours of new in-depth interviews with Bill's close family and friends. They have spent the last three years making AMERICAN: THE BILL HICKS STORY.

MAIN CREDITS

PRODUCED & DIRECTED BY

Matt Harlock & Paul Thomas

FEATURED (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Bill Hicks
Dwight Slade
James Ladmiraault
Mary Hicks
Steve Hicks
Lynn Hicks
Kevin Booth
John Farneti
David Johndrow
Andy Huggins
Steve Epstein

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Arizona Bay Productions
Sacred Cow Productions
David Johndrow Photography
Humour Ink

ORIGINAL MUSIC

Bill Hicks
Kevin Booth
Marblehead Johnson

ADDITIONAL MUSIC

Mark Daniels

ANIMATION

Matt Harlock
Paul Thomas

EARLY YEARS ANIMATION

Graham Smith

FILM ARCHIVE COURTESY OF

Arizona Bay Productions
Dwight Slade / Humour Ink
Kevin Booth / Sacred Cow
Steve Epstein
Houston Channel 26
HBO
Tiger Aspect Productions
Channel 4
BBC Scotland
STV
Capz Eyes / Austin Access
Duncan Strauss

PHOTO ARCHIVE COURTESY OF

Arizona Bay Productions
Dwight Slade / Humour Ink
Kevin Booth / Sacred Cow
David Johndrow Photography
James Ladmiraault
John Farneti
Andy Huggins
Steve Epstein

Graham Haber Photography
Dave Hogerty Photography
Duncan Strauss
Jay Lee
iStock Photo
Shutterstock

COMMISSIONING EDITOR BBC

Suzanne Gilfillan

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS RDF

Rachel Barke
Mark Lesbirel

UK PRESS CONSULTANTS

Sarah Wilby Creative Publicity
Sarah Wilby
Sarah Bemand
Suhan Razzaque

POST PRODUCTION

Preditors, London