The Second Coming of Bill Hicks

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Fourteen years after his death, Martin wonders if The Dark Poet is back among us...

It's unearthly, at this period in history, to listen to a comedian talking about US incursion into the middle-east and how much he loathes George Bush, only to realise that the comedian in question has been dead almost exactly fourteen years.

It certainly lends credence to the cult – and very sanctification - of Bill Hicks, which bubbled steadily throughout the nineties in the wake of his untimely death. In that bittersweet aftermath, we watched Dennis Leary prove – like his namesake Timothy - that he was a 'false shepherd' who had just been following Hicks along with the rest of us; we welcomed the Clinton era and probably the most peaceful decade of the twentieth century.

In a way, it seemed that Hicks had arisen to serve a purpose, and went to peaceful rest when the crisis had passed. It seemed too – though even his most fervent fans will admit to the coincidence of it – that Hicks pulled Bush 1.0 and his credo down with him when he went over the cliff: You're coming with me, asshole!

And the fact that everyone seems to talk about Hicks a lot these days gives me an uncomfortable feeling that there is more to it than nostalgia. The more we see Hicks's work written on the walls again, the worse the ambient situation must be that those outrageous ideas are rebelling against. On the way in to work, I passed a poster for a theatrical production about the saturnine prophet of laughs; his aphorisms are creeping back onto t- shirts, and he himself into popular culture through being increasingly referenced in films, TV and music.

Before he became a revenant spirit for the noughties, Hicks did a hilarious routine about the second coming of Christ, firstly positing that the son of God might be as offended by all those crucifix-wearing followers as Jackie Kennedy would be if John. F.'s fans took to wearing miniature Carcano rifles as pendants, then suggesting that He might return in typical 80s-movie fashion, kicking ass and taking names: Jesus is back – and he's pissed! [off]

And I guess Hicks himself, who is in essence clearly 'back', has returned to haunt us in a similarly bad mood, amazed that the pacific Clinton years that he ushered in (on his way out) could have subsided to the trashy sequel Bush 2.0, which, in typical Hollywood style, was such a carbon copy of the original as to thoroughly dumbfound.

Which leads to the amazing situation whereby you can put a Hicks routine on your MP3 player and only with difficulty perceive that it was not recorded last week. Hell, even his side-splitting rant about the trailer-trash crime victims of the Cops TV show to which Hicks was addicted is still relevant, because the show is still on after nearly twenty years!

Hicks wrote dark and bitter-sweet material that stung you with tears not only of laughter but sadness too, for a post-war West that had lost its way in a blast-wave of crass materialism that consumed the consumers it depends on. Hicks drank (a lot, at one point) for kicks, but he took psychedelic drugs more sparingly and in the original spirit that they had entered popular

culture - to broaden his perception and see beyond the accepted truths and truisms of a shallow society that was running on rails into the sidings of genuine immorality.

For Hicks, immorality was represented by a trillion-dollar defence budget in a starving and desperate world – not by worrying about whether sex was dirty or not; by a cleaving to the letter and not the spirit of a bible whose New Testament message of love and tolerance was routinely eschewed for the cherry-picked, out-of-context Old Testament quotes that would validate gun culture, selfishness and murder…

He included religious material in his act and took it to the redneck venues where it would be least welcome. One famous after-gig encounter with two irate audience members made it back into Hicks's routine later.

Irate spectator: Hey buddy, we're Christians, we don't like what you said! Hicks: So forgive me.

And in this way, the comedy world's answer to Elvis Presley would 'squeegee your third eye' with effortless adroitness. Revered then, influential and certainly imitated, but perhaps the great man is back in spirit because the age in which his classic nemeses have returned has found no successor to him…

The 1980s was an experiment in Western comedy, where a lot of the material sucked because it was still learning to fly: to fly away from the domestic confines of sitcoms that derived from the post-war escapism and government/society-endorsing roots of the 1950s; to fly away from the narrow ambit of stereotype and observation of minor human foibles; to fly away from mediocrity and parochial concerns.

Frankly, most of it wasn't that funny, and a lot that seemed funny then has not endured any better than the antiquated, drawing-room gentility of Tom Lehrer.

Then came the nineties, where the strands of societal concern finally joined up to an effective comedy approach. Sometimes you could see the join - even Hicks often had to re-assure his audience that there were more 'dick-jokes' coming up if they'd just bear with him - but finally laughter had restored to it its native power to ridicule, belittle and expose society's dark side, without turning into a sermon.

And now, something has gone wrong again, as the surreal vein of humour that was re-mined from Monty Python in the nineties has transformed itself into the new conventionalist comedy, once again burying its head in the sand with satire that never looks beyond the window of the drawing- room or the office. In the age of 'surveillance entertainment', it's no surprise that we have ended up scrutinising each other's annoying or hypocritical habits once more. And in the age of fear, no wonder that we limit our satirical intentions to local matters. But out of this soil, no new Bill Hicks can rise.