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PRESENT

*"At last, the true life story of the outlaw comic who tried to save the world. He still might..."*



Running Time: 103 minutes, Cert: TBC, Cinema Release Date: May 2010,

2 Entertain DVD Release Date: Sept 2010

A film by Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas

*"A deeply perceptive, fittingly honest celebration..."* **London Film Festival**

*"Inventive and daring...one of the few great docs for 2010 that has balls"*  
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**For further information and all interview requests please contact: Sarah Wilby Creative Publicity**

**T: 020 7580 0222**

[sarahwilby@swcp.co.uk](mailto:sarahwilby@swcp.co.uk) / [sarahbemand@swcp.co.uk](mailto:sarahbemand@swcp.co.uk) /  
[suhan@swcp.co.uk](mailto:suhan@swcp.co.uk)

## Introduction

15 years after his death (16/12/61 – 26/2/94), Bill Hicks is now more popular than ever, and is widely seen as one of the best comedian of the modern era. However, in America, where he challenged institutions and accepted ways of thinking, he suffered censorship and was never truly recognised by a wide audience. In the country which enshrines freedom of speech in its constitution his story is truly about what it means to be an American.

Now Bill's remarkable story is brought to life in ***AMERICAN: THE BILL HICKS STORY***, a feature-length documentary which combines live action with a stunning new animation technique manipulating 1,000s of photographs to uniquely immerse the audiences in his world, which is re-told from the point-of-view of the people who shared it with him.

## Synopsis

Houston, Texas in the 1970s was one of many cities in Middle America fulfilling the American Dream epitomised by the luxurious homes of prosperous families which populated its leafy suburbs. For a young Bill Hicks, however, there was just no soul to it. Entranced by the first comedians he saw on TV late at night, he realised that the comic's job was to question society and keep it in check. He could see the cracks in this dream – and he was going to make fun of it. He was going to be a comedian.

Nor was Bill alone in his point of view, so 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. He was quickly spotted and made appearances on the nascent David Letterman Show but he still felt his comedy wasn't doing enough. Seeking inspiration from the hard-partying, politically aware group of Houston comics he had fallen in with, he began experimenting with drugs and alcohol as a way to 'break through'. The hallucinogenic mushrooms he took opened his eyes and fundamentally shaped his view of comedy, the world and himself forever.

As his work progressed his comedy took on wider themes, and he began hitting out at the targets of the day – fundamentalist religion, the Reagan administration and 80s pop culture. He divided audiences as his comedic reputation grew, but his choice of material and his increasingly drunken, drug fuelled antics saw him kicked off television shows and heading towards a potential overdose – he was just one party away from dying.

Realising that he had lost sight of his comedy dream he struggled to remove alcohol and drug use from his life; when he did he quickly connected with new international audiences in Canada, and then the UK, where his sold-out tours mesmerized crowds as he skewered the US media and his own government's war mongering with material few other comics dared to touch.

He was poised to become a major voice in America when in June 1993 Bill was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. With the clock ticking as his health deteriorated, he redoubled his efforts to record new material, attempting to reach audiences by confronting them with the truth that the American Dream had turned sour. Although his righteous anger often flared, he was actually offering a new alternative – the preaching of peace and acceptance, and that the responsibility of human evolution now lay in our own hands. In a stark reminder that society needs to be scrutinized as much as ever, Bill's message gains more fans every year, confirming that he is a timeless voice, still needed and yet to be replaced.

## About the film

Three years in the making, ***AMERICAN: THE BILL HICKS STORY*** brings the life-story of one of modern culture's most iconic heroes to the big screen.

Much more than a comedian, Bill Hicks was and still is an inspiration to millions. His timeless comedy tackled the contradictions of America and modern life head on. But his unique gift was to tease apart the essence of religion, the dangers of unbridled government power and the double standards inherent in much of modern society, using nothing but his hilarious ideas and the uncompromising observational style that continues to resonate with successive generations.

Like many who have a strong sense of their place in history, Hicks left a large unseen legacy; his collection of video recordings and hundreds of photographs and these became the starting point for this feature-length animated documentary.

But why animation? Bill Hick's complex story had never been adequately told and this demanded pushing documentary storytelling in a new direction to boldly recreate the key unseen scenes of Bill's life and, for the first time fully reveal the worlds that shaped his character and his comedy. 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 theatre 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 faces and a real sense of what his journey was like.

Bill's story is told by the 10 people who knew him best; his family and closest friends who recount the twists & turns of his life with a freshness that hasn't faded in 15 years. From Kevin Booth, Bill's talented lifelong friend to the Outlaw Comics who introduced Bill into their heady world of drugs & alcohol, to photographer David Johndrow who perceptively captures some of the most revelatory moments of Bill's life, each speaker is a compelling narrator who still carries a piece of Bill with them and, woven together, they bring a palpable sense of Bill's presence to the screen.

Their story provides the platform for Bill's own voice and for the first time, his 17 years of material are combined in a powerful chronology with his offstage journey. With each of his routines now bedded in the context of his life, a fascinating insight into the growth and development of an artist is revealed, as Bill's early character work found first a comedic aim and then a truly powerful voice when he beat addiction to enthrall and challenge audiences, often touring 300 nights a year.

Recreating Bill Hick's story has been a journey all of it's 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 a full sense of Bill's life, ambitions and achievements and a lasting testament as to why he will remain one of the enduring cultural icons of our age.

Paul Thomas & Matt Harlock

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

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

### **Bill Hicks biography**

Bill Hicks is considered by many to be the best comedian of the modern era – ironic given his anonymity in his native America. He was described by many names – philosopher, social satirist, even preacher, but he was ultimately a comic who believed that he could save his audience by confronting them with the truth.

His short career was a rollercoaster – from sneaking out aged 15 to start performing against the wishes of his parents, through early experiments with drink and drugs to expand his consciousness, falling in with the Texas Outlaw Comics who helped him nurture and grow his comedy, but also helped him grow a massive alcohol and drug problem, which on several occasions looked like it might end his life.

Finally succeeding in his long battle to get clean opened up new audiences for him in Canada, and then to the UK, where things exploded with sell-out tours, mesmerising audiences as he skewered organised religion, the US media and his government's hypocrisies.

Though considered 'criminally unpatriotic' at home, it looked like he was finally about to achieve wider recognition when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. His last chance at getting his message out to the American people was taken from him when his 12th and final performance on the Letterman show was famously censored in its entirety, his material considered too 'dangerous' for mainstream audiences. He died 4 months later. Bill was 32 years old.

15 years after his death, Bill Hicks' popularity continues to grow. Regularly appearing on best of lists, and with tributes held yearly around the world, his CD sales increase each year as more and more people discover the words of the outlaw comic who tried to save the world. He still might...

### **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
- \* One Night Stand
- \* Relentless
- \* Revelations

*'When Bill was sick and had to come back home in his final months, he wanted me to help him file all of his photographs and he was showing me videos and he even showed me a Jimmy Hendrix documentary, and I said "Bill why are you showing me all of this?" and he said "in case someone comes mum, and they want to make one about me.."  
I said "Bill, make your own documentary!"* **Mary Hicks**

### **About the production**

Despite considerable international success it is ironic that Bill Hicks was never able to gain the momentum or exposure required to break out in America, because the free thinking nature of his material challenged institutions and accepted ways of thinking. A talent, sadly gone too soon, for many that could have been the end of the story.

Curiously though after his death, Bill's burgeoning success continued. Bootleg tapes of his performances were being traded in the US, Australia and the UK, and his record company reported that Bill's CD's were selling more year on year – with no advertising. This only increased with the advent of the internet, where Bill's work began spreading on YouTube, generating millions of views and a whole new legion of fans. Articles began appearing regularly stating that Bill's work qualified as genius, a biography sold well, and Bill's celebrity fans dedicated albums or cited him as the best stand up of the modern era.

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, realised there was enough unseen footage of Bill to put together a longer story of his life. Paul Thomas a BBC and Channel 4 television comedy producer became involved and together they developed a radical new documentary approach which would create a vibrant new telling of Bill's story.

### **A new telling of Bill's story.**

Following BBC and theatrical interest in a new photographic approach to telling Bill Hicks story, 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 talk and lay bare their memories of their son, brother and friend. From the outset, the aim was to move beyond a film for the Hicks fan base and bring the story to a wide audience and reveal a strong personal sense of who Bill Hicks was directly from the people who knew him.

Each interview lasted several days and to make the interviews as comfortable as possible, the cast were interviewed in their own homes and filmed with minimal lighting set ups and no additional crew. This gave a flexibility and a relaxed intimacy in taking each interviewee back through often emotional memories at their own pace. What emerged was a vivid new telling of Bill's story, as the interviewees recalled his life's journey with an astonishingly vivid recall and clarity. Over 2 months 120 hours of interviews were recorded and nearly 1300 photographs were uncovered, most unseen. It was clear the same process wouldn't happen again and that this would be the last chance to create a definitive historical record of Bill's life and story.

### **Shooting - preserving history, an emotional chronicle**

The interview trips to the US in October 2006 were a revelation for the filmmakers. The principal characters in Bill's life had never spoken at one time before and never at such length. They were a diverse group of individuals who shared one thing in common – a collective memory and record of Bill's personality, humanity and humour

which shone from every one of them.

From Portland, Oregon, where Bill's first comedy partner Dwight Slade acted out their earliest teenage routines, to Kevin Booth, Bill's lifelong friend and producer, standing at the edge of the Texas ranch pond recalling their mushroom-inspired UFO experience. The filmmakers tracked down the Houston comics, who told their hilarious stories of Bill's formative comedic years, the descent into drink and drugs which almost killed him, to 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 which Bill's more extreme routines had on his Southern Baptist family.

And finally to the footage which Hicks' fans always knew in their hearts existed, but until now had never seen – stored in Mary's antique glass fronted cabinet was Bill's own collection of VHS tapes of his performances dating back to 1980, some of which had never been played before. Filmed by the clubs, and then later on by his brother Steve – they 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 punch-line lost forever. Thankfully Bill's work is now all safely digitised to ensure its longevity.

Comments 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 to take photographs of the real roof he used to sneak out on, to exploring the dry cleaning warehouse that had once been Houston hotspot the Comix Annex, where Bill and Dwight performed their first gigs, to locating the actual room in the apartment building they shared during their 2 years in LA – authenticity was always key to telling Bill's story."

### **Bill's story grows**

Matt and Paul returned from their trip across America with over 100 hours of detailed, personal and intimate recollections from the 10 people who knew Bill the best and the photographs and video material which would tell Bill's story. However adds Paul Thomas, "It quickly became clear that the story was simply larger and more powerful than we had expected. His family and friends had given us a vibrant 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 had realised that there was an important job to do in preserving Bill's 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."

Thankfully they didn't know it then, but for Matt and Paul, this was just the start of 3 year production process.

### **Photos, interviews & performances - putting it all together**

Matt and Paul have been asked if much of the film was scripted, but it's all original interviews, which were then edited in an extended 7 month process, to create a seamless narrative track. Each scene is a first hand accounts told by the people who were there, and with the animated picture information filling in, in place of long descriptions.

The strength of the story is down to the interviewees being such good storytellers. You would expect his fellow comedians to be good with the recollections, but his

family too carry a great sense of Bill himself in their family story telling and close friends like Kevin Booth, David Johndrow and Dwight Slade are remarkable people in their own right. There's also a direct openness and honesty, in the way that Bill left such a strong impression on everyone who knew him, and from this a real sense of Bill comes across when anyone talks about him.

### **The animated approach**

The visual approach for the film was to stay away from showing the filmed interviewees, now so much older than when the events they're describing took place, and instead take the viewer back into visual world that Bill lived in and recreate each time and place on screen. To achieve this the photographs are split and animated to take the audience more fully into and through each scene, and allowing the full gamut of editing and film techniques to be used to create more dynamic storytelling than is usually achievable for a documentary.

Bill was lucky in that so many photographs were taken of him, including many by his close friend David Johndrow, who captured Bill with a relaxed intimacy that gave us such a great starting point with so many of the scenes. We began with the existing photographs, but very quickly realised that much of the important incidents in Bill's life were the ones that hadn't been photographed and a month into the animation production we began constructing new scenes and new photographs of Bill that had never originally been taken.

The look is a kind of 4D photography where we rebuild the spatial dimension to each shot and then move the camera and objects through time. It's very cinematic and, although it has been tried before, in films like *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, we've pushed the cinematic possibilities much further by creating much fuller multi-angle scenes, and reconstructed things in full 3D to really try and immerse the viewer in the time and feel of each place, and allow them the opportunity to enter into the story and know the characters in a much more personal, emotional way.

### **Rare archive – selecting the right clips to reveal Bill**

The film includes Bill's major performances along with many rare clips. These are often just handheld at the back of a club by a friend on that night, or in the later stages of Bill's career, by his brother Steve. It may disappoint some fans but the choice of clips is never about showing rare footage, and is instead about selecting the clips that reveal the most about Bill's journey and which move the story forward at each point in his life.

The animated story telling works hardest in the first half, doing the work of establishing Bill's character before Bill then moves on stage and begins to carry most of the story himself. The story time then reduces between clips but still works very hard in explaining Bill's evolving journey and linking his developing performances together.

We found out early on in the edit that many of Bill's most famous clips don't work to assist moving the story forwards. Some are too long and you start to get lost in the comedy and fall out of the story. Others are off subject relative to where Bill is in his life and again the viewer becomes disconnected. When the clips work to best effect, Bill walks from the story straight onto the stage and the comedy follows effortlessly from the story arc.

Another plan from the start was to select clips with an energy that follows the arc of a single performance, so that even though Bill ages from a teenager to his final years, there's a strong sense of a performance arc as if it's a single show. The selected routines have to build in intensity and purpose as if they were part of the same

performance. It's like one continuous Hicks show and yet he's getting 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 seige, giving an strong sense of his deeper convictions.

### **Audience Film**

Comedy concert films have a strong history of performing well to cinema audiences with Eddie Murphy's *RAW* grossing \$50 million in 1987 and Martin Lawrence grossing \$19 million in 2002. As Bill said himself, comedy is a group catharsis, where everyday tensions can be released through deep laughter, and where new ideas can be introduced through humour to break through entrenched ways of thinking.

Laughing together is still one of our deepest human primal experiences and, from our earliest test screenings, the audience laughed very much like a live comedy audience, with the laughter in the room merging with the original audience laughter on screen.

Much of the film's storyline is about the craft of comedy and about what Bill was trying to achieve through his comedy 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 and should be a film people can experience in an audience.

### **The choice of title**

Bill was captivated from an early age with the promise of the 'American Dream'. It seemed to him that the American people ignored or were apathic to the vice-like grip that American religion, big business and the media had on them and he wanted to do something about it. He wanted to offer them a new way of seeing their world, but many audiences and those in television in particular, just didn't want to hear it. Through all the many options for a title, there was only one word that aptly encompassed all that Bill represented and all that he stood for. And so ***AMERICAN: THE BILL HICKS STORY*** was born.

It is interesting to note that there has never been a film simply called *American* before. There was a film that used it as its working title, as bestowed upon it by its writer Herb J. Mankiewicz, but the director decided to change it, and instead it became *Citizen Kane*.

### **Romance**

Although Bill had many long and involved relationships, his romantic life was difficult to adequately portray in the film, with 2 of his girlfriends now married with lives of their own and not wanting to be interviewed, and his girlfriend Pamela who was credited by many for helping Bill to get sober, now also deceased. Other interviewees were not happy talking about issues where they weren't directly present which was an underlying guideline throughout the film, where first hand accounts were vital to it's documentary structure.



## About the contributors

**Mary Hicks** Bill's mom moved to Little Rock with husband Jim in 1978, leaving the 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 apologised for cutting Bill's performance 15 years earlier. She didn't let him off the hook. [www.billhicks.com](http://www.billhicks.com)

**Steve Hicks** Bill's older brother by 5 years recently moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan with wife Marty, and 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 is a pharmacist in Dallas Fort Worth, and recently attended her first Bill tribute night in London, where the family were mobbed like rockstars. 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, 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 called American Drug War and is working on the sequel from his LA base, helped 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 ranch pond. [www.americandrugwar.com](http://www.americandrugwar.com)

**Dwight Slade** Bill's first comedy partner, Dwight met Bill in 8th Grade and they started making up routines together, leading to their first nerve-wracked performances at the Comix Annex in Houston 1975. Later, they spent two years living together in a one room apartment in LA while working at the Comedy Store. Dwight has become a successful comedian in his own right, starring at Just For Laughs 3 times -he has also recently toured Afghanistan. [www.dwightslade.com](http://www.dwightslade.com)

**David Johndrow** Bill's friend and photographer, David first connected with Bill aged 16 over their shared religious background, and spent much time exploring the spiritual side of life. David's intimate, iconic images of Bill, many never seen before, record both David and Bill's development as artists, culminating in his inspiring current photo series of nature 'seen through new eyes' which have graced magazine covers and exhibit all over the States. He didn't really want to go on camera for us -he did it for Bill. [www.davidjohndrow.com](http://www.davidjohndrow.com)

**James Ladmiraault** was known by Bill and everyone on the circuit as Jimmy Pineapple, Esquire. He was one of the Houston comics who took Bill under their wing and watched him grow as an artist, putting on group shows as the Texas Outlaw Comics and gaining 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, John, the oldest of the comics was also a full-time husband, father and lawyer (Twenty four hours is a long 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 80s. Now too old and too busy to chase ambulances, he merely shoots out their tires.

**Andy Huggins** was dragged from LA back to Houston by Jimmy and the gang -'he 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 also works at the Laff Spot in Houston.

**Steve Epstein (aka Epicstein)** was the founder of the Texas Outlaw Comics and 'flopped around like an unattended firehose' but got everything going. He was at Bill Hicks' very first performance at the Annex, and 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.

### **The filmmakers**

Matt Harlock is a director whose drama 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 suggested 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 3 years making ***AMERICAN: THE BILL HICKS STORY***.

## Credits

PRODUCED & DIRECTED BY	Matt Harlock & Paul Thomas
FEATURING IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE	Bill Hicks Dwight Slade James Admirault 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 Admirault John Farneti Andy Huggins Steve Epstein Graham Haber Photography Dave Hogerty Photography Duncan Strauss Jay Lee iStock Photo

COMMISSIONING EDITOR BBC

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS RDF

PRESS CONSULTANTS

POST PRODUCTION

Shutterstock

Suzanne Gilfillan

Rachel Barke

Mark Lesbirel

Sarah Wilby Creative Publicity

Sarah Wilby

Sarah Bemand

Suhan Razzaque

Preditors