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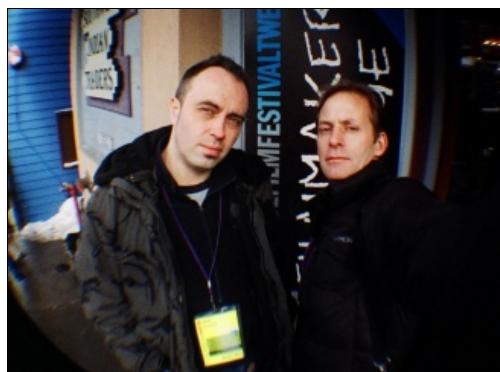
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Audience Baiting

British filmmakers capture 'American' comedian Bill Hicks
By Anna Sanders



Matt Harlock (left) and Paul Thomas, the filmmakers behind 'American: The Bill Hicks Story'

In the documentary *American: The Bill Hicks Story*, a sound-bite of the late and great “outlaw comedian” quips to the audience, “By the way, if anyone in here is in advertising or marketing, kill yourself.”

The long-overdue film by Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas, which opens April 8 at [Cinema Village](#), is far from mainstream. Taking into consideration Hicks’ own beliefs against commercialism—he once said, “Do a commercial, you’re off the artistic roll call, every word you say is suspect, you’re a corporate whore and, eh, end of story”—it’s understandable. But that doesn’t mean that the filmmakers don’t want to reach a wider audience of a younger generation. “For some

people in their teens, they’ve only ever heard what their parents’ have said, or what the school tells them or what’s on the news,” Thomas explains. “They haven’t been exposed to these other alternative ways of looking at the world and that’s why Bill is quite popular with that age group.”

In addition to interviews from the 10 people who knew him best, Harlock and Thomas use archival footage from Hicks’ personal collection and original “photographic animation” to re-create previously unknown scenes in the comedian’s life. Now 17 years after his death, the two English filmmakers hope to capture Hicks’ journey after his death from pancreatic cancer—possibly revolutionizing the documentary genre in the process.

New York Press: Why did you originally decide to do a documentary on Bill Hicks?

Matt Harlock: I think he was always someone that, for a certain generation of people in the U.K.—which is where we’re from—and Australia and Canada, Bill Hicks has always been seen as a real cultural icon. He appeared at a time in stand-up when there seemed to be a hole that he very readily filled. He just came on with a whole new attitude, a whole new way of looking at the world.

He’d been honing his acts in clubs in the Midwest for, like, 15 years, so he really did appear in the U.K. fully formed and basically came over there, won the Critics Award at the at the Edinburgh Comedy Festival and then went on to broadcast a show called *Just for Laughs* in Montreal on Channel Four. And that led to him do a number of tours that he did over the next two years over there in the U.K. I think we’ve always been aware that he was somebody that was really culturally significant. When he died in ‘94, there’d been one smaller, shorter documentary, but his full life story had never really been told. I think that we felt that not only was he someone who was fascinating in terms of a performer, but his life story was also interesting, but he never really quite got as famous over here as he did in other parts of the world, and that seemed to be kind of interesting.

Paul Thomas: What’s interesting as well is that, in the U.K. at that time, he was very popular amongst the student audience. I mean he toured a lot of college towns. And that’s something we do see reflected here is that...the way the Internet now works and the “word of mouth” is that a lot of college kids are discovering him. And what Bill does is, of course, it encapsulate these very complex ideas about the world and about the way governments work and how the media works and presents them in a very accessible and understandable way...Here, suddenly, is an entirely different worldview, but you can get it and a lot of it sounds like it’s horribly true.

MH: A close friend said that, when he discovered Bill—which I think it was about the age of sort-of 16 to 17—he was just young and hungry to explore for himself. And suddenly, he found this guy who seemed to be a fantastic teacher, and I thought that was a really nice way of describing Bill. At the age where your brain is

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hungry for new experiences and maybe thinking, "Well, do I agree with my parents? Or do I not agree with my parents?" and suddenly this other guy goes, "You don't have to agree with anybody you can just do what you think and you don't have to take the opinions of all these other bodies that are attempting to try to get your thoughts."...So yeah, a very intoxicating experience when you hear him at the right age. I think that's why he has so many fans around that age—students.

PT: We see a lot of people on the way and say, "Bill Hicks changed my life." I've got a friend—late thirties now—and he said it's almost embarrassing, the decisions I've made, I can trace back to when I heard Bill when I was in my twenties...I think Bill was really powerful in that sense, in that he can really articulate how things are. But one of his key messages is that it's up to everybody to each think for themselves, and we all have a joint responsibility in making sure things are done the right way.

You mentioned that Hicks was more popular in the U.K. than in America. Why do you think that is? And why are two British filmmakers interested in making a movie about an American comedian?

MH: I think that it's partially because Bill had a really, really strong impact in the U.K. because he was seen unedited. He was shown on TV doing a full hour and 10 minutes, whereas in the U.S. he was playing, in terms of TV spots, *Letterman* shows, he did 11 appearances, but they were five minutes, and they're clean...Bill always described himself as not really being an ideal five-minute comic: He wasn't really geared up to go across as well as he could in that way. And because of the way England is such a small country compared to the states...and in America you really have to be on TV to make an impact, he just wasn't really able to get that kind of traction that maybe other comedians were able to do.

I guess why the film has come from the U.K. is that Bill has such a strong track record. You know, we also had potential funding from Australia and Canada as well; he really does have fans in lots of different places. And in the U.S., he's incredibly popular within the comedy community (but also in Austin he's a rock star). We just played South by Southwest and we had two sold-out shows at the Paramount Theater... I think it's not just that people from England like him more, it's just that maybe he just hasn't been exposed to other people in the right way for them to capture him, and hopefully that's what the film will give people a chance to do.

Did you have any difficulties acquiring footage or conducting interviews?

PT: We were lucky in that the family had most of the key footage because Bill collected himself through his life, and he collected a lot of photographs along the way. We didn't really know what to expect with the interviews because it was 12 years later and, you know, I couldn't remember things in a lot of detail that I did 12 years ago. But I think because of who Bill was, people's recollections were astonishing. And that's the key thing about the film: Every scene is told in this firsthand kind of way by the people that were really there.

We had a scene about Sam Kinison in the film, but because it was kind of told in this secondhand way, without Sam being present, it didn't hold its own within the structure of the film. So the film is really told in this first-hand sense of who Bill really was. Those interviews were really tough.

Often it was things people hadn't thought about, they'd kind-of buried things because it's emotional. All of the interviewees said that they had a kind of cathartic experience to go through this, and it's something that they then started dreaming about afterwards for a few weeks and it brought it out again, and for his family, especially his mom. I mean, the first time she had to sit through the film must have been incredibly tough for her, to see the life of her son and then his death again.

What is 'photographic animation' and why did you decide to use this technique?

MH: Essentially, the archive material that Bill and his family and friends had just kind of told its own story. And what we felt might be a really interesting way of helping to get the audience immersed in Bill's story was to rebuild these worlds. So, for example, the back garden with the roof that he actually snuck out on and went off on this comedic raid with his friend to the comedy store, or the club that they were playing at in Houston, The Annex, so it's a way of helping the audience feel the time and place. It's almost like you're in a period film, which is going through different years as you're immersed in Bill's story. So that was something we felt was useful to help the audience go with it.

But also it had a very beneficial and important ramification, which was that Bill—because we had these photos and we're taking different photographs—putting them into new backgrounds, that Bill is actually back in the story. You've actually got a time and place being given to the audience, as opposed to just someone remembering something that happened and you not being given any help. So it seemed that really was useful as an immersive technique for bringing the audience with you on Bill's journey on his story.

What do you think Hicks would say about a documentary being made about him, since he was pretty anti-establishment?

PT: Our focus was to speak to the people who really knew him, and to capture their story. It'd been these 12 years, but I think they were originally in the stage of realizing if we don't record this story for history, then it's never going to happen. Our memories will fade and we might not all be around...It's hard to know what he would think, because it's an unusual approach, but it's really commercial. I mean, we haven't been paid in four years, and there's no big studio here. It's just the two of us wanting to make sure this story and Bill's legacy is preserved, while it still can be.

MH: I guess I think we'd hope he would approve of more people getting to see his work, because what his job was going around to comedy clubs 300 nights a year, attempting to convince people that this is how he saw the world. The reason that he had to do that was that he wasn't on television. If you're on TV, you can reach 100 million people in a night if you happen to be the right person at the right time...I think that we think that the film is hopefully part of what's also been happening on YouTube. Bill's clips—his most well-known clips—have 2 to 3 million views. He must have 100 million views on YouTube now. I think that what we're hoping to be able to do is, along with the new methods of people broadcasting material including Bill's stuff, that the film is another way that people can come and find his work in a recognized format, which is the story of telling his life.

You're right, he was anti-commercialization. And if we were sitting here, rich and laughing about having knocked it out in six months, then I suspect he probably wouldn't approve. But then, at the same time, we haven't gone about it in that way. What we are hopefully doing is giving more people a chance to him, which is

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Review of Coppelita 207, a Nuevo-Latin style diner in Chelsea

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