

Blu-Ray Review: 'American: The Bill Hicks Story' Sheds Light on a Landmark Comic

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on June 8, 2011 - 8:34am

- [American: The Bill Hicks Story](#) [2]
- [BBC America](#) [3]
- [Bill Hicks](#) [4]
- [Blu-ray Review](#) [5]
- [Dwight Slade](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [Kevin Booth](#) [8]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [9]
- [Matt Harlock](#) [10]
- [Paul Thomas](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – The funniest jokes are the ones that ring true. They aren't merely punch-lines. Cathartic laughs are earned not through formulaic quips but through candid observations both startling and relatable. I often find myself feeling awestruck in the presence of a great comic, simply because of their willingness to say what we've all thought but never dared to mention in public.

"Awe-inspiring" is certainly a phrase that applies to the life of Bill Hicks, a phenomenally gifted comedian who used his satire as a vehicle for enlightenment. His strict Southern Baptist upbringing provided him with a wealth of early material, while his hatred of hypocrisy led him to be openly critical of religion, media and the U.S. government, which may have played a key role in garnering him a large fan base in the U.K. No wonder this 2009 documentary was directed by British filmmakers Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas, and given a regal home video release by the BBC.



Blu-Ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

The film's tagline sets expectations staggeringly high by labeling Hicks as "the greatest comic of his generation," but "American" actually ends up building a convincing case. With a fearlessness to match that of George Carlin, Hicks brilliantly ridiculed everything from the sex blatantly sold in commercials to the U.S. army's bullying conduct overseas. His material has acquired a timelessness that is truly remarkable, losing not a shred of its relevance in the years following Hicks' untimely death in 1994. The comedy giant was only 32 when he succumbed to cancer, but even a death sentence couldn't kill off his drive to perform. Interviews with Hicks' close friends and family indicate that the comic's tireless work consumed every aspect of his life.



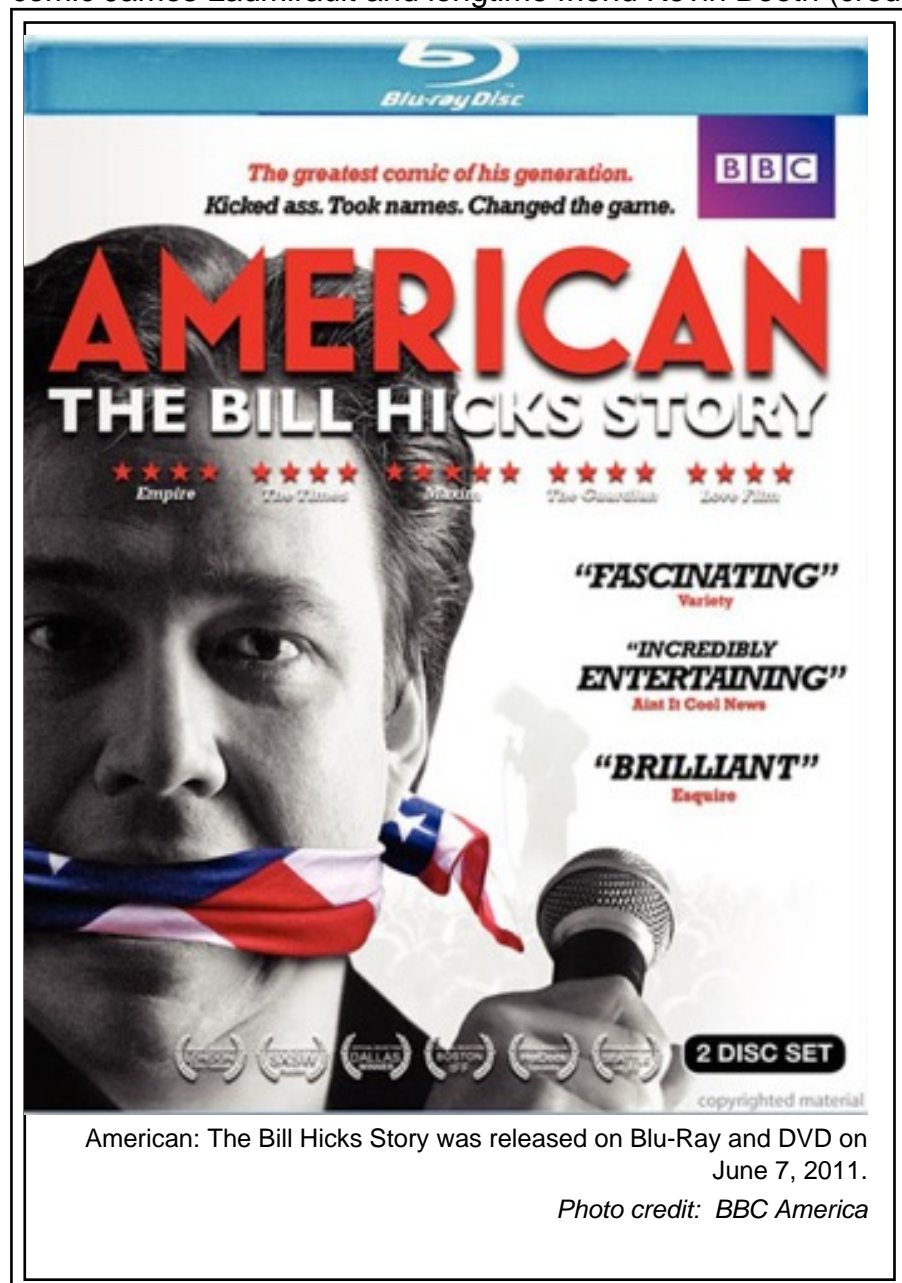
Bill Hicks stars in Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas' *American: The Bill Hicks Story*.

Photo credit: BBC America

Romantic relationships are merely hinted at in passing, though it's clear that heartache provided the fuel for many of Hicks' best routines, particularly a jaw-dropping monologue that envisions the bleak life of his ex-girlfriend. Drugs and alcohol allowed him to evolve his standup from clean-cut behavioral parodies to boldly scathing indictments of sanctimonious culture. But when excessive drunkenness threatened to derail his career altogether, Hicks bowed out of the comedy scene until he could get his life back in order. Many of the film's most riveting

sequences center on Hicks' extraordinary performances in the U.K. during the early '90s. The country's uncensored approach to comedy liberated Hicks from all inhibitions, resulting in arguably his finest work.

What ultimately holds Harlock and Thomas back from achieving greatness is their distracting use of photo animation. Though the filmmakers earn points for originality, their slick assemblage of fragmented images ends up trivializing and simplifying Hicks' backstory rather than enhancing it. There's a zombified quality to these unrelated photos once they're wedged together in order to create meaning. Hicks himself probably would've found the approach too cute for his own biography. For much of the first act, the filmmakers' style overshadows the substance in their subjects' interviews, but once focus is placed on the actual footage of Hicks, the film springs to life. Some of the most memorable insights come from Hicks' high school buddy and comedy partner Dwight Slade, Hicks' photographer David Johndrow, fellow comic James Ladmirault and longtime friend Kevin Booth (credited as his "instigator").



'American: The Bill Hicks Story' is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.77:1 aspect ratio), and is a must-own not just for comedy lovers, but for anyone interested in one of the seminal voices of our time. The two-disc set includes over five hours of special features, three of which are devoted to additional interviews, which are expertly edited into subject-specific vignettes. Hicks' brother Terry recalls how their family had moved several times during their childhood, which may have contributed to Bill's ease in adapting to unfamiliar surroundings. He also mentions how moved he was to see so many people come to pay their respects at Bill's funeral, and recites the comforting line he found in his brother's handwritten will: "I left in love, in laughter and in truth, and wherever truth, love and laughter abide, I am there in spirit." There's an equally touching moment when a wistful Slade reenacts one of the characters he and Hicks created in high school. He remembers Hicks' devastation after they weren't accepted into the high school talent show, on the basis of their triumphant yet all-too-edgy audition. These interviews prove that more face time for the subjects may have resulted in a more effective movie, since their faces do speak volumes.

What's lacking here are the views of the filmmakers (available only in booklet form) and extended footage of Hicks' standup. A couple full-length shows would've been a real bonus, yet the second disc still offers an embarrassment of riches. Featurettes include a 10-minute SXSW panel, a trip to the Dominion theater where Hicks performed his HBO special (director Chris Bould envisioned the comic as a lone maverick cowboy), a 14-minute montage of film festival footage where Hicks' routines receive a rapturous response from audiences, a look at the remastering of Hicks' music at Abbey Road Studios, a brief chat with Booth about his 2007 documentary, "American Drug War: The Last White Hope," footage from a 15th anniversary celebration in London attended by Hicks' family, a sampling of Slade's own standup, a behind-the-scenes look at Hicks' posthumously released album, "Arizona Bay," an enlightening discussion with Slade and Ladmirault about the primal power of comedy, and a visit to the family ranch in Fredericksburg, Texas. Seven deleted scenes and six early/alternate scenes include more discussion about Hicks' high school band, STRESS, which had only "hype, humor and equipment" to bring to the stage. Two audio clips are featured from Hicks' audio journal, as well as an entertaining interview he gave to future standup comic Nick Doody. Yet the biggest highlight of all is the spectacular collection of 18 rare clips, many of which feature additional standup footage, along with the priceless trailer for Hicks and his friends' homemade movie, "Ninja Bachelor Party."

'American: The Bill Hicks Story' is released by BBC America and features Bill Hicks, Dwight Slade, Kevin Booth, Steve Hicks, James Ladmirault, David Johndrow, John Farneti, Lynn Hicks and Andy Huggins. It was directed by Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas. It was released on June 7, 2011. It is not rated.



[13]

By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]
Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
matt@hollywoodchicago.com [13]

Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 19 2024 - 5:50pm*):
<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/14593/blu-ray-review-american-the-bill-hicks-story-sheds-light-on-a-landmark-comic>

- Links:**
- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/mattmovieman>
 - [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/american-the-bill-hicks-story-0>
 - [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/bbc-america>
 - [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/bill-hicks>
 - [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/blu-ray-review>
 - [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/dwight-slade>
 - [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
 - [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/kevin-booth>
 - [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/matt-fagerholm>
 - [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/matt-harlock>
 - [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/paul-thomas>
 - [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/dvd-theater-tv-news>
 - [13] <mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com>
 - [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#MATT>