

Kinison's Death in the Fast Lane

BY CAREN WEINER

The caustic comic lost his life in a head-on collision five years ago

SAM KINISON died in the desert, talking to God. The high-decibel comic and former Pentecostal preacher was driving U.S. Highway 95 to a sold-out run in Laughlin, Nev., on the evening of April 10, 1992, when his Trans-Am collided head-on with a pickup truck. After the impact, as the other driver, a 17-year-old boy, reportedly exclaimed, "Look at my truck!" Kinison stumbled from his car and collapsed, asking God why he had to die, why now. "Okay," he finally whispered. "Okay...okay."

The calm acceptance was literally a far cry from the howl of outrage Kinison, 38, had made his onstage trademark. His fury thrust itself up out of his past as the outcast, twice-divorced son of two evangelical preachers in Peoria, Ill., driving him from the ministry he had served for six years onto the stage to rant about women, the homeless, and, yes, televangelists. "The ministry's a hard thing to live up to," he would later say. "It was probably why I got into the vulgarity so much, because it was just such a trip to be able to live it out."

So he lived it out hard and fast, rocketing from his national debut on the 1985 *Young Comedians* HBO special to two gold albums, spots on late-night TV, and concert appearances that paid up to \$50,000 per. But given his gonzo gluttony for cocaine, Kinison played chicken with his own success. He blew off what would have been his first vehicle, the never-filmed comedy *Atuk*. Lack-

luster stage gigs resulted from his drug-induced stupor; he had to revive himself with backstage oxygen tanks. In 1990, as his third album languished, both MTV and HBO backed away from him.

By April 1992, though, Kinison claimed to have cut back on his alcohol and drug use. He had a two-



picture deal cooking with New Line Cinema and a variety show in the works with Fox. And he had just married Malika Souiri, 27, who was in the passenger seat during the crash. (She suffered a concussion.)

Like Elvis, to whom he compared himself, Kinison remained a brand name after his death. Comedians still talk about how he "pushed the envelope." "Sam was a forerunner of Howard Stern's kind of raunch humor," says his friend, comic Richard Belzer. "If he hadn't gotten killed, he'd be huge now."

Meanwhile, the boy who ushered Sam Kinison back to God was charged with vehicular manslaughter with gross negligence and sentenced to 300 hours of community service and a year's probation; he was released to the custody of his parents. ♦

TIME CAPSULE

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Moviegoers ran to see *Sleepwalkers*, while TV viewers spent their time with *60 Minutes*. Fiction fans made a case for John Grisham's *The Pelican Brief*, and Vanessa Williams' "Save the Best for Last" was first among music lovers.



HIGHWAY TO HELL: The irreverent Kinison tried to exorcise his demons through comedy; (inset) wife Malika after the wreck