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Photo courtesy Dan Eckstein

air guitarhero

Forget those pesky plastic controllers. The U.S. Air Guitar Championships melt faces and save the world, one performance at a time.

by Natalie B. David

MAKE YOUR OWN GUITARIST Directions:
1. Select your favorite champion air guitarist and cut along the dotted lines.
2. Pick out some rockin' gear-- make sure to color coordinate.
3. Crank up some power ballads in iTunes and put all of his hair spray to good use.

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ATHENS BLUR MAGAZINE 59

"I Broke a rope climbing a stairwell, fell right to the floor," he says. "The ground broke my fall, which was nice, but up until the day of the show I was wearing a wrist brace so my wrist could heal before I got on stage."

The air guitar faithful are some of the most dedicated rock 'n' roll goofballs on the planet, but it's not a free trip to D.C. or Finland that keeps air guitarists coming back for more and pushing the sport to the edge. For many, the air guitar mythos is so appealing because in many ways it is the ultimate rock star fantasy: all the glory, thrill and excitement without the necessary skill, connections or expensive equipment. Except for ponying up a small registration fee, which gets paid back in free beer, and brainstorming a truly outrageous rock 'n' roll alias, there are no requirements for competition.

"I think the common misconception about air guitarists is that they're all mulletted losers who live with their mother," says Björn. "I used to have a mullet, and lived with my mother, but those days are long gone. Air guitarists, they come from all walks of life, from a hot dog vendor at Mets stadium to a British architect who is the two-time world champion from London. But I think we all have one thing in common, and that's the ability to have no shame on stage and celebrate the beauty that is rock and roll."

It's a pursuit truly open to anyone but the best air guitarists are certainly of a certain character type. It's not for the shy or self-conscious. Those that come to play need only, in the words of the world champion, "a complete and total lack of shame."

"It takes, I think, primarily cohones. It takes inebriation, or the ability to fake inebriation if you don't drink. I think it takes most of all a complete love and absurd dedication to rock 'n' roll and everything that rock 'n' roll stands for," elaborates Björn. "But to be an air guitar champ, you must be willing to surrender your dignity at the door. We don't allow guitars and we don't allow dignity."

Even real guitarists who think that knowledge of the instrument will give them an edge in air competition should think twice. Many contestants, including both Björn and Hot Lixx, have played the guitar, or "fake air guitar" in air terms, in various bands and legitimate musical endeavors. However, musical skill doesn't always translate to air genius.

"The only real advantage is that if somebody makes fun of me for playing air guitar, I can always get my real guitar and conk them over the head with it," kids Hot Lixx, who lost while defending his 2006 U.S. title in 2007 to backflip-wielding William Ocean, who wasn't a real guitarist.

"I think knowing how to play non-air guitar can be a disadvantage in that you know too much," explains Björn, whose original air guitar style was very much based in guitar reality. "You have to have a decent foundation, but it's really about getting in the crowd's faces, wagging your tongue, bulging your eyes out at them, doing whatever you need to do to get them excited, and that's not what guitarists are used to."

Because air guitar forces performers to go beyond the typical realm of modern guitarists, and relinquishes the physical limitations of real guitar playing, there's little surprise that many air fans claim that air guitar contests are some of the best concerts they've seen this decade. Far too frequently than they should, rock shows produce disinterested audiences and static performances. On the opposite end of the spectrum, air guitar encapsulates rock 'n' roll hysteria from the height of its excess. Performers routinely choose songs from the likes of Van Halen, Metallica, Tesla, Slayer and The Scorpions, even Prince, for their energy and, of course, guitar prowess.

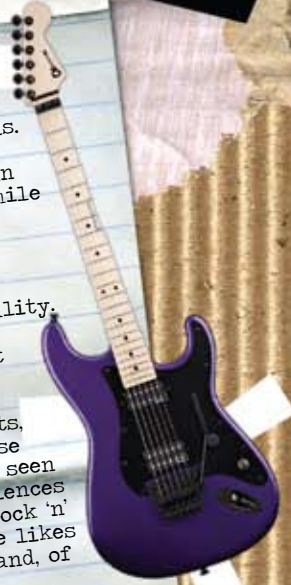
"It's better than seeing a concert in many ways because the contestants really have to distill everything they know about rock 'n' roll in a 60 second performance, so they tend to go pretty crazy. I mean, there's acrobatics. There's sometimes breasts flashed. I've seen a penis used as a guitar pick on more than one occasion," says Björn. "My face hasn't been melted at a concert in years, but yet I find that I have numerous scars from face meltings at air guitar shows."

So maybe there aren't any instruments. But by turning a silly pastime into a championship worthy pursuit, air guitarists are redefining and reviving rock 'n' roll, one performance at a time.



Photo courtesy Nick Robles

c. ditty



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