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Play That Funky ... Oh, Never Mind



Rahav Segev for The New York Times

At a monthly Aireoke night at Trash Bar in Brooklyn, Björn Türoque, second from left, leads an all-star "jam" on air guitar.

By **DAN CRANE**

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FOR a small but passionate group of men and women, myself included, Thursday will be the biggest night of the year.

For weeks I've been windmilling in front of mirrors and limbering up my neck in preparation for excessive head banging. I'm watching my carbs and hitting the hay early. Because in four days, at the Key Club in Los Angeles, I will be representing New York against some of the fiercest competitors ever to take the stage in one of the most important events of our lives: The U.S. Air Guitar Championships.

I know the glory of dressing up and fanatically playing an invisible instrument in front of a crowd is not something that everyone immediately grasps. When I tell people I've spent more than two years as a competitive air guitarist, they often look at me bewildered, like a dog tilting its head at an unfamiliar command. Or they just laugh at me. Following a segment about a competition, Jack Cafferty, a CNN anchor, once scoffed: "That's the dumbest thing I've ever seen. Air guitar?"

And in his book "Air Guitar," Dave Hickey, a professor of art criticism and theory at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, likens air guitar to art criticism, which he says cannot replace the original work but merely "bob after it, like a dinghy in the wake of a yacht."

But I'm here to tell you that air guitar is more than a bobbing dinghy. Up on stage you only have 60 seconds to convince the judges of your airisimilitude, and in those 60 seconds you must take everything you know about rock 'n' roll, boil it down to its essence, drink it and then spit it over the crowd like blood from the mouth of Alice Cooper.

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In the words of the two-time (2002 and '03) world air guitar champion, Zac Monro (known as the Magnet), "Air guitar is the purest art form there is left."

So what does it take to win an air guitar competition? After suffering continual losses for three seasons in eight official competitions from New York to Denver to Los Angeles to Oulu, Finland - and coming in second place four times - I found out on May 21 at the New York regional air guitar competition. To paraphrase Nietzsche (an idol to many an air guitarist) my losses only made me stronger.

Wearing a silver jumpsuit and star-spangled armbands filled with dry ice, and rocking under the moniker Björn Türoque (pronounced tu-RAWK), I froze out the other contenders with my explosive rendition of "Set Me Free" by Sweet (an obscure yet classic glam-rock anthem). Advanced airmanship to be sure.

Air guitar is not about pretending to be a rock star. You must be that rock star. You might not need to put dry ice in your armbands to create smoky contrails as you strum, but it helps. As far as other wardrobe options go, nudity is an obvious attention-getter and has become a performance staple, but so far it hasn't won any competitions. And to paraphrase Twain, clothes make the air guitarist.

Another key component is your stage name. Puns are good, like Air Lingus (an Irish-American competitor), Air-Do-Well, and Air-satz. Something simple and to the point, like the Shred, works too. And don't go with a slow song, as I mistakenly did last year with Air Supply's ballad "Making Love Out of Nothing at All," which, when up against the lightning-fast licks of "Queen in Love" by Yngwie Malmsteen, quickly deflated. You may want a track with which the audience is familiar, but avoid clichés like Van Halen's "Eruption" (the air guitar equivalent to playing "Stairway to Heaven" in a guitar store) or Jimi Hendrix's rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Finally, air guitar is an instrument, but it's an entirely different instrument from the so-called "real" guitar. So don't focus on your fingering too much as you play. Remember, if you hit a bad note only you will know. Instead, engage the crowd: make eye contact, perch yourself on the monitor and flutter your tongue; make fans get out their air lighters.

Though air guitar is probably as old as rock 'n' roll itself (Elvis surely inspired teenyboppers to imitate his swaggering strums), it didn't come out of the bedroom to gain cultural cachet until Tom Cruise, in briefs, strummed a fire poker to Bob Seger in the 1983 film "Risky Business." Six years later Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter, playing empty-headed American teenagers raised on arena rock, air-plucked their way through "Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure."

Today air guitar is everywhere: even Britney Spears, who has never performed with an actual instrument, imitates the fans who imitate rock stars when she strums the air wildly in her 2005 video "Do Somethin' "; Will Arnett of "Arrested Development" recently played air guitar to the theme of "Law & Order" on "Late Night With Conan O'Brien"; and Will Farrell plays air guitar while serenading Nicole Kidman in the current film "Bewitched."

There is also, of course, the world crown. In 1996 the first Air Guitar World Championship took place in Oulu, Finland, with just seven local competitors. This year's competition is on Aug. 26 with national champions from 13 countries, from Australia to the United Arab Emirates, as well as the additional last-minute entrants who trek to Oulu (as I did in 2003) on a whim and a prayer.

The grand prize is a handmade Finnish guitar and an amplifier signed by Brian May of the band Queen. What an air guitarist will do with an actual guitar is anybody's guess.

And though performers from the United States only started competing in 2003, we've reigned air supreme: festooned with a Hello Kitty breastplate and crimson kimono, the Brooklynite C-Diddy won the world crown in 2003, and his female protégé, Sonyk-Rok, also from Brooklyn, tied for the title with a New Zealander in 2004.

This year, as the reigning New York champ, I am confident I can do my city proud. I've certainly paid my dues. But my air guitar chops weren't always so well honed. Growing up in the hardscrabble suburbs of Denver, I always did my air guitar in private, for fear of torment by my older brother and the public at large.

I had no idea that jumping up and down on my bed, wielding an imaginary ax in imitation of my rock 'n' roll heroes, would years later become an internationally recognized pursuit, or much less that I'd be good at it. Now, I dedicate part of my life to sharing the skills I've learned with the world.

There is no air guitar school (though there is an annual training camp prior to the world championship in Finland) and no secret formula, but I have established a monthly Aireoke night (see aireoke.com for details), which recently moved to Trash Bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Think of it as a farm system for the major leagues.

With qualifying events in seven cities where thousands of fans cheer on scores of contestants, it is clear that competitive air guitar is on our shores to stay. As Kriston Rucker, an organizer of the U.S. Air Guitar Competition, put it, "If there's one thing that Americans deserve to dominate, it's competitive air guitar."

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