

AIR GUITARISTS TELL THEIR STORIES

Originally published in *The Blade* on Thursday, August 30, 2007

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There aren't a lot of great movie roles out there for mimes. Marcel Marceau had a nice (speaking) part in the sci-fi flick *Barbarella*, and I think a mime got in a fight in *Eurotrip*, but other than that it's slim pickings.

Which is why I was so happy to see a documentary that focused its efforts on the art of pantomime. Specifically, the popular subgenre of air guitar.

Air Guitar Nation, which was released Tuesday on DVD (\$26.95, Docurama) after a limited theatrical run brought it no closer to Toledo than Detroit, chronicles the birth of the U.S. Air Guitar Championships in 2003 and the drama that unfolds as the first Americans take on all comers at the World Championships in Finland. (There actually is such a thing. It's been around for more than a decade, as a means of promoting peace. The Finns say that if everyone held an air guitar in their hands, no one could hold a gun. Gotta love the Finns.)

It is the story of man named C-Diddy (David Jung), a young actor who brings "Asian fury" to the sport, along with a Hello Kitty breastplate and red kimono. It is the tale of Dan Crane, a software developer from New York with an alter ego, Bjorn Turoque (pronounced b-YORN too-RAWK) who won't let his dream of air supremacy die despite numerous defeats.

But really, it is the story of anyone who has ever cranked up Van Halen in a bar or bedroom as loud as it would go and started strumming along. In that way, especially, it is inspiring. Just try to listen to the radio after watching this film and not wonder whether the music would be a great air guitar song. I can't.

The documentary follows competitors through regional contests, through all the funny names (my personal favorite was the Airtight Messiah) and even funnier costumes.

Before the world championships, it even shows the inner workings of an air guitar boot camp with sessions on technique, nutrition, and how to deal with groupies.

The competition scenes are so absurd, the characters so lively, they don't need anything else to make them entertaining. But director Alexandra Lipsitz insists on using air guitar to probe deeper questions, and that's where things slow down. Subjects call the sport performance art and instant meditation. One even says that it will save your life.

The problem is that so much of *Air Guitar Nation* comes off as tongue-in-cheek. That's probably to be expected when you make a sport out of something like air guitar, but it falls flat in comparison to the earnest performances that competitors give on stage.

Yes, it's funny when the guys start trash talking. The Austrian competitor who suggests that Bjorn Turoque pretend he's from France and change his name to "Bjorn To Lose" is a riot. But the subjects can't seem to give up their air guitar personas, and the schtick quickly wears thin. (To be fair, when *Air Guitar Nation* provides the requisite scenes of C-Diddy poring over old newspaper clippings and photos with his family, I'm not much interested either.)

There are a few times the interviews come across as genuine, and those are illuminating. Like the deflated sound in Crane's voice when he compares his quest for success in air guitar with the fact that the real band he's in hasn't taken off.



C-Diddy shows off his technique in a scene from 'Air Guitar Nation.'

Maybe the best is when a competitor who works in a government office talks about the rush of finally being a somebody when he gets a chance to be a bad-to-the-bone glam rocker at the famous Roxy in California. It proves what all of us always hoped for: You don't have to be a rock star to be a rock star.

Air Guitar Nation is at its best when it just lets the rock do the talking. Early scenes only provide brief snippets of performances, but when you finally get to see C-Diddy's entire tongue-wagging routine, it's chill-inducing. Watching other contestants leap around the stage and take giant windmill strums of their guitars - even if they're nonexistent ones - is equally thrilling.

An even better peek into life on the air guitar championships circuit, though, comes from Crane's memoir, *To Air is Human: One Man's Quest to Become the World's Greatest Air Guitarist* (Riverhead Books, 2006). His descriptions of the other competitors and his reactions to them are absolutely hilarious.

These are the scenes you wish there were more of in *Air Guitar Nation*, and to some extent the extras fulfill your wishes. Finally, you can see the performance by the Airtight Messiah in a Spandex onesie (not a very flattering article of clothing, it turns out).

And it is here that you finally get the deep, philosophical truth the filmmakers promise. It comes when you least expect it, after a performance by a man in a wheelchair who falls to the ground during his routine, then rises to his feet - healed by rock - to play some more.

As the scene fades to black, you hear someone say, deadpan: "The handicapped can rock like nobody." And then: "They can. They really can."

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