

AIR-GUITAR HEROES

For many regional hopefuls, the plan is simple: Strap on your ax and rock out

Originally published in *The Blade* on Friday, May 26, 2006

By RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

COLUMBUS - Jordan "Airoin Junkie" Cook walked on stage with a guitar case and a mohawk.

He opened the case, went through the motions of strapping on his instrument, and took a few sips from a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

Then he began to rock.

Did it matter that he was strumming an invisible six-string as he did the moonwalk? That at one point he was playing air guitar with his teeth?

Not to the screaming fans in the audience, who were more than happy to cheer him on as he ripped off his T-shirt and then his leather pants, revealing a Speedo with the U.S. flag on it.

After all, the 21-year-old Indianapolis man was competing in the U.S. Air Guitar Regional Championships here last weekend, and rules are rules.

"The guitar must be invisible," announced the event's emcee at the Metro Bar & Grill.

Which was just fine with contestants like Brian Shapiro (aka "Duke Thrashington"), a senior at the University of Toledo from Bay Village, Ohio.

"I have no idea how to play a guitar," he admitted.

So he kept his plan very basic.

MULTIMEDIA

[Brian "Duke Thrashington" Shapiro shares his tips for great air guitar.](#)



Brian Shapiro (aka 'Duke Thrashington'), a University of Toledo senior, finished second in the U.S. Air Guitar Regional Championships in Columbus. (ASSOCIATED PRESS)

"Pretty much just rock out, you know? Just wail."

That's what air guitar is all about, though it is a real event with established rules. It consists of two rounds: first, competitors play to a 60-second song of their choosing, then finalists must perform to a surprise song.

Kriston Rucker helped start the U.S. competitions three years ago after noticing that the birthplace of rock and roll was not represented at the world championships in Finland.

"Our feeling was that air guitar was the one human endeavor that Americans truly deserved to dominate," he said.

It worked. Americans won the following two titles, including David "C-Diddy" Jung, the first U.S. champ.

"He has 'airness' more than anybody has ever had," Mr. Rucker said.

Airness is an indefinable - but essential - quality of great air guitar, and one of three areas in which contestants are judged. The others are technical ability (you don't have to mimic note for note, but it should at least look like you're playing a real guitar) and stage presence.

That takes practice. Yes, practice.

"I turn [up] the music super, super loud and I listen to the riff and the main parts ... What I've been doing is practicing multiple songs every day," Mr. Shapiro said.

He saw something about the Air Guitar Championships on a late-night talk show and was hooked. Last year, he finished second in the Chicago regional.

This year he upped the ante, putting together a wild outfit of tight pink corduroy pants (a girls size 7) overlaid with homemade black sequin thunderbolts, stars, and other designs. He also brought his signature move, the helicopter - he violently swings his head in circles, throwing around his shoulder-length ringlets of brown hair like a wild man with whiplash.

"I'm gonna have a cloak on, and walk out really slowly, throw off the cloak and start rocking and melting people's faces off," he said.

And that's exactly what Mr. Shapiro did with two high-octane performances that had the crowd going nuts (and giving him another second-place finish out of 12 contestants; only the winner qualified for next month's finals in New York, though).

At one point, he fell to his knees and played as he leaned his head all the way back to the floor. Then - mouth wide open, head shaking - he slowly rocked his way back up. His fingers moved like lightning as he thrashed about the stage during the fast parts, then strutted through the calm ones.

But the climax was yet to come: the stage dive. He turned his back to the crowd, took a confident step off the stage, and rode a wave of hands and adrenaline. When the crowd returned him, it was rewarded with one helicopter, then another, and another.

"I think we just saw airness defined," the emcee shouted.

Historically, the enthusiasm of some air guitarists has gotten the better of them. Mr. Rucker remembers one guy who tried to set his arms on fire and others who tried stage dives but weren't caught by the crowd.

While most perform to hard rock songs - think AC/DC, Guns N' Roses, Van Halen - there has been "Dueling Banjos" and even some flamenco.

On this night, it was as much about costumes as jump splits and fake fingerwork. Consider the guy named "Beaverface," who was covered in weird pieces of fur, a stuffed frog, and whose pants only had one leg intact.

That didn't intimidate Dave "The Roctopuss" Ayling, of Columbus, who blew the crowd away with his rendition of "Get Your Hands Off My Woman" by the Darkness in a trucker cap, flannel shirt, and torn jeans.

"I don't need magic clothes to win," he said. "All you need is American pride and a sweet mustache."

And his Fu Manchu was pretty sweet.

"I cannot play guitar to save my life," he said afterward.

But The Rocktopuss does sing in the Toledo band OnceOver and knows lots of guitarists. "I'm here tonight to prove to them that I'm worth something."

It worked.

He used the entire stage, running furiously from end to end while his fingers played mercilessly over the air guitar strings. He played the guitar in almost every position imaginable: behind his head, pointed at the crowd like a gun, doing a split, even hopping backward on one leg while totally rocking out.

His gyrating performances won a close battle with Mr. Shapiro, who afterward was convinced by his friends to try again in Chicago, and meant the top two finishers had connections to Toledo.

Contestants found themselves drawn to the competition for varying reasons. For Katie Jones (aka "Cleopatra Jones"), 25, it was a reminder that girls can rock too.

"Every weekend I bring out the air guitar. I thought I should put it to use," the Westerville, Ohio, woman said. "I feel like I was breaking a glass ceiling."

Some waxed philosophical about the art of air guitar.

"It just comes naturally. Just sit in your room, turn on a song, and it just comes ... That's when it's airness, when it's not an imitation but an art form," explained Josh "Fender Gibson" Dolen, 18, of Zanesville.

He performed Pantera's "Cowboys from Hell" while wearing a long blond wig, headband, tank top, and leather pants (or, wait, were those pleather?).

Jamie Russell came all the way from Kentucky - and another generation. At age 39, the real estate agent in the Led Zeppelin T-shirt has more experience air guitaring (25 years) than most of the contestants have been alive.

When it was all over, few had hard feelings. In fact, it was kind of a lovefest as all of the competitors were invited on stage for one final jam to Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World." That's when things got really crazy.

Beaverface was playing his stuffed frog as a guitar.

Cleopatra Jones was playing her outstretched leg.

And Airoin Junky? He was spinning in circles on the ground while he played air guitar - still pantsless.

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)