

# AIR GUITARISTS STRUT THEIR STUFF ON THE WORLD STAGE

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Air guitar isn't just silly fun. It can save lives.

Just ask the three Mexican fishermen who said last month that air guitar helped them survive — or at least keep their spirits up — for nine months as they drifted helplessly across the Pacific Ocean.

Most people aren't in such dire straits when they resort to playing air guitar, but the stakes still can be high.

The world of competitive air guitar has upped the ante in recent years, drawing increasing numbers of wannabe rock stars to stages across the nation. Fans these days will pay real money to watch people with names like "Count Rockula" prance around with invisible instruments.

The world's best will be on display today in Oulu, Finland, during the Air Guitar World Championships.

A major driver behind the mainstreaming of air guitar in America has been U.S. Air Guitar, an association whose self-proclaimed duty is "taking our nation's unofficial pastime out of the bedroom and putting it up on the world stage."

It joined with VH1 on "Air to the Throne," an online air guitar competition whose winner performed on the VH1 Rock Honors in May and qualified for the U.S. championships.

U.S. Air Guitar organized about a dozen regional competitions across the country last year, with contestants vying for shots at the national title, a chance to strut their stuff in Finland, and (maybe) everlasting fame.

The competitions were so popular, plans already are in the works for a national tour next year with 25 stops. While the closest site this past year was in Columbus, the expanded version will include Detroit, said co-founder Kriston Rucker.

"That was a gaping chasm in our schedule" he said. "I know there are good air guitarists in Detroit. There have to be."

Other ideas are in the works, too, including putting together a dream team of air guitarists that include former national champs for special events. A documentary, *Air Guitar Nation*, is expected to be released next year.

It's a good time to be an air guitarist.

"It definitely feels like the time is right," said Mr. Rucker, of New York City.

Maybe, just maybe, the time is right for a little more respect, too.

"People have this preconceived notion of the air guitarist as this stoner dude with a mullet who just crawled out of bed and drank a 40. I think people are surprised at how smart and funny and clever some of the competitors are," said Dan Crane (a.k.a. Bjorn Turoque — pronounced "b-yorn too-RAWK"), a past competitor in the world championships from New York.



Dan Crane (a.k.a. Bjorn Turoque — pronounced 'b-yorn too-RAWK') of New York, is a past competitor in the Air Guitar World Championships. (ALEXANDRA LIPSITZ)

## TOP 10 SONGS

These are the top 10 songs for competitive air guitar, according to Dan Crane (a.k.a. Bjorn Turoque), author and past participant in the world championships.

- 1. "Ace of Spades," Motorhead
- 2. "Set Me Free," Sweet
- 3. "Kickstart My Heart," Motley Crue
- 4. "Crazy Train," Ozzy Osbourne
- 5. "California Uber Alles," Dead Kennedys
- 6. "The Mole," The Bags
- 7. Van Halen: best bets are "Eruption," "Hot for Teacher," "Ice Cream Man," or "Unchained."
- 8. "You Shook Me All Night Long," AC/DC
- 9. Led Zeppelin medley
- 10. "Get Your Hands Off My Woman," The Darkness

Forget about an impromptu rock session at the local bar or in your bathroom. These competitions — though always fun — are serious stuff.

"The minute you get on stage and you have hundreds or thousands of people waiting for you to deliver, that's no joke. People who do stupid things get booed. You have to rise to the challenge," said Mr. Crane, who is author of *To Air is Human: One Man's Quest to Become the World's Greatest Air Guitarist* (Riverhead Books, 2006).

This year, the hopes and dreams of the United States will be carried to Finland by national champ Craig "Hot Lixx Hulahan" Billmeier of San Francisco.

Describing the champ's act, Mr. Rucker said: "He comes out and starts with a kind of flamenco song wearing a giant Mexican hat and it suddenly turns into Metallica."

Brian Shapiro, a 21-year-old senior at the University of Toledo from Bay Village, Ohio, didn't make the big show this year. Competing under the name "Duke Thrashington," he finished second at both the Chicago and Columbus regionals.

He vows he'll be back, though, and already has started getting ready, collecting a lightning rod for a prop and mulling over building a casket.

"I've gotten a couple more props and stuff for it," he said. "It's gonna be a whole big thing."

Jeff Williams, 53, of South Toledo, teaches real guitar at Peeler Music and isn't inclined to pick up an invisible six-string anytime soon. But even he acknowledges the entertainment value of the art form.

"I look at air guitar contests as another way to have fun with music and guitar," he said. "It's like karaoke for nonsingers."

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