

Rock is in the air

An air guitar competition has several locals dreaming of playing the ultimate unplugged set

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In her debut television appearance on "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," MiRi "Sonyk Rok" Park had 60 seconds to unleash the guitar god within. Hair and fingers and miniskirt flying, Park careened through the solo on Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher." Her fretwork and her sneers were mighty, and her eye-popping backbend while executing a difficult technical passage was masterful.

Never mind that Park doesn't know how to play an instrument. She's the World Air Guitar champion, at least for the next two months. Locals hoping to dethrone Park at the 10th annual World Air Guitar Championships in Finland this August are tuning their invisible strings in preparation for the Boston regionals tomorrow at Harpers Ferry.

Frank Morris -- who names "moxie, crotch, and abandon" as the three tenets of air guitar -- declines to reveal which song he'll pretend to play for the judges. One imagines, however, that the 34-year-old North End resident will eschew suburban metal and barroom rockers for something a bit more archetypal.

"I'm not afraid to pull out the Jimmy Page horizontal hand sweep after a particularly wicked riff," says Morris. "My hand may only be two feet from my body, but I'm marking infinity."

Tomorrow will be Jaime Stern's second air guitar competition. Stern, a sales rep for an MRI center who lives in North Andover and goes by the stage name "Jaime Is Air Guitar," doesn't expect to advance after tomorrow's regionals.

"It's all politics," he notes.

Stern, 25, nonetheless spent 10 minutes polishing his chops at an open mike at the Middle East last weekend with a medley of AC/DC, Grand Funk Railroad, Marvin Gaye, Van Halen, the Rolling Stones, Reverend Horton Heat, Dr. Dre (strategically timed so he can take a few swigs of beer), Weezer, and Ten Years After.

"It takes a bit of prodding for them to let me go on," says Stern, who figures he's played his air guitar at every open mike in the city. "They say 'This is for real musicians, for people who practice.' I tell them I practice too."

Generally speaking, imaginary rock stars wailing on make-believe axes are underage and spend lots of time in messy bedrooms with full-length mirrors. But for some the dream doesn't die with the passing of adolescence. For John "Mink Rockmoore" Roser, the rush he got back in 1983 -- when, upon hearing The Kinks' "You Really Got Me," he picked up an air guitar for the first time -- still rules his world.

"It's simple, easy, fun, and looks really good," says Roser, 37, an event coordinator and audio engineer at WBOS. "The girls like it. I used to play classical air guitar, but it's just not that interesting to watch." Roser, who lives in Boston, reports that he will be playing a custom-built instrument with 64 frets and a cup holder for beer at the Boston regionals.

Park, who is similarly immersed in her imaginary world, has decided to upgrade her gear as well.

"I've been playing a white Fender Stratocaster, but I recently decided to pick up Eddie Van Halen's red and black Frankenstein," says Park. "That's what I'll be playing when I defend my title in Finland this summer."

Remarkably, the United States -- birthplace of rock 'n' roll and Tom Cruise, who became a box-office superstar after playing air guitar in his underwear in 1983's "Risky Business" -- didn't participate in the first seven World Air Guitar championships. This struck Kriston Rucker, who cofounded the US competition three years ago with Cedric Devitt, as very wrong. When Rucker, a branding executive, and Devitt, an advertising copywriter, stumbled across a 2002 Wall Street Journal article about the Finnish festivities, the pair of New Yorkers were compelled to take action.

"If there's any event the USA should be represented in it's this," says Rucker. "It's such an ingrained part of the culture."

The initial plan was to pitch a TV show, basically a satire of "American Idol," to VH1. The pair went to Finland in the summer of 2002 and arranged for the rights to hold an official competition in the States. The show never materialized, but in 2003 Rucker and Devitt held the first US regionals in two cities, New York and Los Angeles. The next year five cities participated, and this year there are eight, and possibly nine, cities holding regional air guitar competitions. Each group of contestants is evaluated by a panel of three judges, who award points based on three criteria: technical merit, stage presence, and "airness." The winner of the Boston regionals will advance to the national finals, held July 14 in LA.

"Technical merit doesn't mean you have to be playing notes fret for fret or the right chords," Rucker explains. "It means you should be convincing people that the music is coming from your invented instrument. Second, you have to rock people. Not many people can make the move from the bedroom to the stage. Airness is hard to explain. It's the extent to which a performance transcends imitation and becomes an art form. It's when you forget you're there because air guitar is funny."

But air guitar *is* funny. The sight of a grown man who calls himself C-Diddy, in a red kimono and codpiece, shredding, empty-handed, through the furious solo from Smashing Pumpkins' "Bullet With Butterfly Wings" -- a title-winning performance, by the way -- makes people laugh, in an amazed sort of way. Sadly, not everyone is amused. Stern's last girlfriend left him for a real guitarist. Morris, who doesn't blame air guitar entirely for the breakup of his marriage, concedes that his ex-wife found the sight of him windmilling to the New York Dolls revolting.

So what's the payoff?

"You get a trip to Finland, where you'd never go otherwise," says Rucker, who's finishing work on a documentary film about air guitar. "You get a handmade electric guitar, which I always felt is a little inappropriate. And it's a bizarre 15 minutes of fame. The English guy who won in 2001 and 2002 was recognized by a beekeeper in El Salvador."

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Hands solo

In the three years since he cofounded the US Air Guitar Championships, Kriston Rucker has heard hundreds of tracks that inspire unskilled musicians to pick up invisible instruments -- from an all-feedback section of Lou Reed's "Metal Machine Music" to "Dueling Banjos." Following is Rucker's list, in no particular order, of the most frequently used songs in the annals of air-guitarism.

"Ace of Spades," Motorhead

"Crazy Train," Ozzy Osbourne

"Eruption," Van Halen

"Back in Black," AC/DC

"Bohemian Rhapsody," Queen ("[It's] sometimes simply called the 'Bo Rap' in air guitar circles," Rucker says.)

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