

Why is there air? Dude! For guitar!

Rockin' doc plugs in to competitive world of musical pantomime

By Alison Gillmor

TO err is human," says one of the subjects in this highly watchable documentary. "To air guitar is divine."

And to watch a movie about air guitar is, if not divine, then at least weird, wonderful and kind of unexpected.

First-time filmmaker Alexandra Lipsitz seems to realize that when you take people pretending to play invisible guitars — which is kind of a goof-off, teenage-bedroom sort of thing to do — and put them on the world stage, several interesting things can happen.

Neither a spoof nor a manifesto, *Air Guitar Nation* is able to see air guitar from all sides — as self-indulgent wanking, as "the last pure art form," as a kooky but valiant protest against the ordinary and everyday.

Lipsitz's film is accepting, engaging, even suspenseful, since she ends up getting a heckuva real-life narrative, in the form of an epic mock-rock rivalry between C-Diddy, the super-confident American air guitar champ, and Bjorn Turoque, a classic number-two-so-we-try-harder type.

In classic melodrama fashion, C-Diddy is a spectacular showman: He has every wind-milling, power-sliding, fret-licking trick in the headbanger's bag. He even does that hand-to-the-ear/"I can't hear you" gesture to get the audience all riled up.

Bjorn, on the other hand, is old school — tight, grounded, minimalist, technically immaculate.

Lipsitz follows these two very different imaginary-axemen as they navigate the 2003 New York and L.A. showdowns, before going all the way to the world championships in Oulu, Finland — "Because when you think air guitar, you think Finland," cracks one commentator.

In fact, it was a gang of zany Finnish idealists who turned air guitar into an official competition back in 1996, in

MovieReview

Air Guitar Nation

- Directed by Alexandra Lipsitz
- Cinematheque
- To May 31

★★★ 1/2 out of five

the interests of world peace. (The reasoning being that if you're holding an air guitar, you can't hold a rifle.)

Americans are johnny-come-latelies on the international scene, and the Yanks making their first appearance in Oulu in the middle of the Iraq War makes for some interesting encounters.

Even more fraught than world politics, however, are air guitar politics.

The insanely intense members of the Austrian team — who bear a passing resemblance to the nihilists in *The Big Lebowski*, BTW — take their art very, very seriously. Brit Zac Monroe, the two-time world champ, is like the Yoda of air guitar, given to making oracular comments. ("It can't be commercialized," he likes to intone. "Because it's invisible.")

On the other hand, some air guitarists seem to recognize the possibilities for absurdity in an activity that involves publicly miming rock-stardom. The Oulu high-altitude boot camp includes sessions on "Caring for your Instrument." (I'm pretty sure that's a joke.)

There are lots of opportunities for humour here, but somewhere between the performance-art preeners and the zonked-out devil-horn lunatics, Lipsitz manages to capture that elusive quality known as "airness." For ardent practitioners, airness is invested with a kind of "if you have to ask, you'll never know" mystique, so I'm not even going to try to explain it.

Just go to *Air Guitar Nation*, and check it out for yourself.



ALEXANDRA LIPSITZ

Turn it up!: C-Diddy (left) and Bjorn fire up their, uh... instruments in the engaging *Air Guitar Nation*.

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