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FAKE, RATTLE AND ROLL

MOCK ROCKERS HIT THE BIG TIME IN THE AIR GUITAR CHAMPIONSHIPS

BY ROBERT DOMINGUEZ
DAILY NEWS FEATURE WRITER

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Björn Türoque is a rock 'n' roll star who enjoys all the trappings of being a guitar god - fame, money, adulation, trashed hotel rooms and the requisite groupies.

Never mind that no one has ever actually heard Türoque strum a single chord during any of his performances.

For the past four years, he has been living the rock-star life thanks to his being a virtuoso at ... air guitar.

The 36-year-old Manhattan man, a former software producer who left his day job to become a full-time, er, musician, has developed a cult following by performing with an invisible instrument.

"I am surprised air rockers have gotten this much [attention]," says Türoque, whose onstage costume consists of a headband, skinny tie and tight pants.

"But it does take b-s to get up there and play with nothing to hide behind," he adds. "Real rock guitarists have this great big phallic symbol to hide behind. Our [guitars] happen to be invisible, but our shows are much more energetic that way."

What may seem like a joke at first glance - a grown man jumping around on stage like a hyped-up Hendrix fingering an imaginary ax - is serious business to some.

Türoque is just one of many accomplished air guitarists across the country who regularly compete in the U.S. Air Guitar Championships.

Since 2003, scores of pseudo-rockers have been showing off their talent at "airness" before adoring audiences, including yearly qualifying events in New York, for the chance to be crowned world champ at the annual international air-off in Oulu, Finland.

The sheer competitiveness, naked ambition and intense rivalries between some of the better-known air guitarists, such as Türoque and perennial U.S. champ C. Diddy, is also the subject of "Air Guitar Nation," a documentary that opened Friday.

The film attempts to explain how the simple and silly act of pretending to be a rock star turned into an unlikely international movement. It may not be quite an art form, but it is a decidedly unique form of artistic expression.

"Entering a competition like this gives you the opportunity to be a rock star," says Cedric Devitt, a former competitive air guitarist who co-founded the U.S. championship tour.

"It's all about you when you're up on that stage," adds Devitt. "It's like you become this rock god, even if it's for a very brief moment."

Air guitarists usually perform under colorful stage names - such as Björn Türoque, which is pronounced "bee-yorn to rock" (his real name is Dan Crane).

During competitions, they "play" along to a song for one minute. Judges score their performances on a scale of 4.0 to 6.0.

You don't have to be an actual guitar player to be a good air guitarist. Judges look for originality, showmanship, technique "and the ability to rock," says Türoque.

"When it's a really good performance," he adds, "the audience forgets a guitar isn't there.



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Björn Türoque demonstrates the key moves: The windmill: Strum your 'guitar' in a wide, circular motion. Impress the crowd by doing it backward, too.



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The jump: Punctuate the end of a guitar solo by leaping into the air as high as you can. Don't forget to snarl.



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"Part of what makes this fun is that the people participating are in on the joke," he adds. The knee-thrust: A two-part move: Drop to your knees while playing a riff, then thrust your pelvis repeatedly. Tongue wagging, a la Gene Simmons, is optional.

"Yet there's nothing wrong with wanting to be the best at something, no matter how inherently ridiculous it may be."

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