

HAVE you heard about “air guitar”? It is a form of dance in which the performer pretends to play the guitar to the accompaniment of rock songs. Playing an air guitar consists of a strumming body motion often coupled with rock-like loud singing. It reportedly originated from a rock concert in the 1970s when a hard rock vocalist likened a microphone stand to a guitar and pretended to play it in an attempt to keep the audience engaged during a guitar solo lead-in or interlude. Don't dismiss such a performance as nonsense. It has already become a popular performance art among people in the know, and various air guitar contests are held all over the world including an annual world championship.

The Air Guitar World Championships, held annually in Oulu, Finland, started in 1996. Winners in regional preliminaries compete in the final round. They are judged under such criteria as originality, sense of rhythm and charisma. According to news reports, Japanese entrants placed high in the finals of the championship, with Japanese comedian Ochi Yosuke finally winning last year's event, joined by air guitarists from 11 countries including Germany and Italy. Ochi, now 35, added luster to his distinction by also winning the 12th championship held this September.

Ochi is a member of a comedian group called “*Dainoji*” hired by Yoshimoto Kogyo Co., the Osaka-based entertainment production company, to which a large number of popular entertainers belong. Air guitar attracted my attention after Ochi became the world air gui-

ulation of playing the guitar. Ten songs, such as Deep Purple's “*Smoke On the Water*,” are recorded inside the instrument and the performer can play other tunes by manipulating its buttons.

Whether air guitar can pass as entertaining depends on the imaginative power of the player as well as the audience. Video footage of air guitar contests shows that not only do players imitate real guitar players, but spectators work themselves up into a frenzy as if they are watching real rock stars. Put another way, air guitar can hardly pass as entertainment if spectator passion cools down. In a sense, air guitar may be a highly sophisticated performing art because both the player and spectators can enjoy themselves only if they share the feeling of “play.”

Japanese are said to be good at pretending by nature. Take for example *fusuma*, the sliding paper screen with a wooden frame used as partitions in old Japanese houses. When *fusuma* screen doors are shut, the room becomes a private compartment, and occupants of *fusuma*-partitioned rooms pretend, in tacit understanding, not to hear what occupants of the next room utter.

In *Ningyo-Joruri* (*Bunraku* puppet show), three people manipulate one puppet, but the manipulators are supposed to be invisible and the audience pretends not to see them and follows only the puppets' moves on the stage. Japanese participants' good performances in the Air Guitar World Championships may possibly be the fruit of the tradition of Japanese art.

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Imaginative Power

By OGATA Shinichi

tar champion because I learned that his hometown was the same as mine and he attended the same junior high school.

Anybody would feel uneasy about starting air guitar without help. So, various toy-like gadgets have been marketed in Japan to help air guitar beginners. I bought and tried one of them. Marketed by WiZ Co. under the brand name of “*Rock Tamashii*” and priced at ¥1,260, it is a triangular instrument resembling a large guitar pick, about 6 cm long on each side and about 2 cm thick. Two rock songs, probably familiar to men of the baby-boomer generation, are stored inside and come out in guitar and vocal sounds when the player shakes it rhythmically.

The player can use it feeling as if he is playing “*Walk This Way*,” “*Satisfaction*,” “*Highway Star*” and the like. Vocal sounds are also recorded. You can instantly learn how to play and hardly feel shy.

I lent the instrument to a friend of mine, who is a music fan, and taught him how to use it. He is usually quiet, but as soon as he picked it up, he began shaking it as if playing the guitar in a good mood, shouting “What on earth is this?”

“*Air Guitar Pro*,” marketed by Tomy Co., is a device without strings, shaped like a guitar neck instead of a guitar pick, which emits the sound of guitar music from a built-in speaker, with radiated infra-red rays disrupted when the player shakes the body in sim-

©Air Guitar World Championships, Oulu, Finland

Photo: Pasi Lehtinen



Ochi “Dainoji” Yosuke, who won the 12th Air Guitar World Championships in 2007 for the second straight year, performs enthusiastically on stage.

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