

Alamedan Crowned Nat'l Air Guitar Champ

Air rocker prepares for Finland

By Dan Abbott

Craig "Hot Lixx Hulahan" Billmeier is not the sort of person you would expect to wave a flag. But the 31-year-old Alamedan, who returned victorious last week from the U.S. Air Guitar Championship in New York City, said he came away from the contest with a new sensation: pride.

"It's strange, really wanting to win this," Billmeier said in an interview Monday. "Usually I take pride in how little pride I take in things."

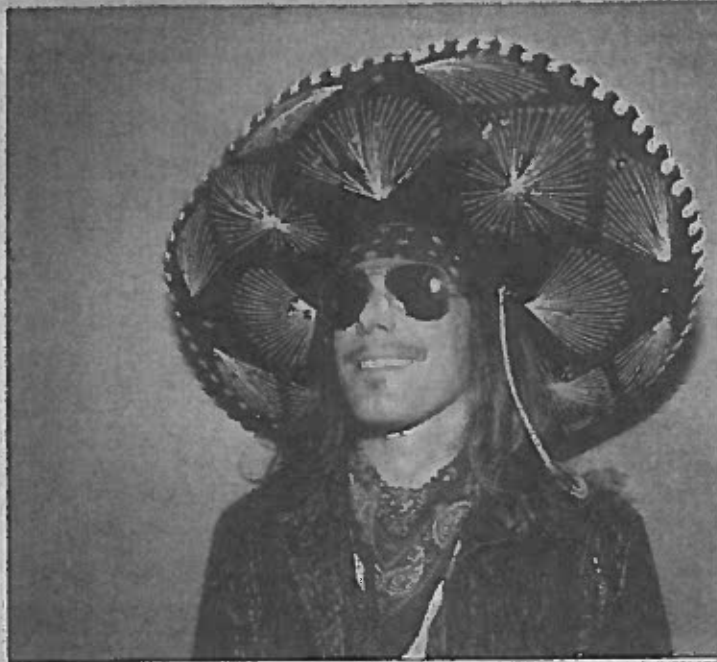
Billmeier has reason to be proud. He is officially the nation's top-ranked air guitarist, after he defeated 13 competitors from across the United States June 22 in front of a sold-out crowd at New York City's Bowery Ballroom. He will be flown to Oulu, Finland Sept. 8, where he will represent the United States against air guitarists from around the globe at the World Air Guitar Championship.

A guitarist with local punk bands Love Songs and What Happens Next?, Billmeier initially entered the regional contest May 11 in San Francisco on a whim, not realizing that playing an imaginary guitar would gain him more notoriety than the scores of punk and metal bands he has played in. While Billmeier seemed sheepish after his regional victory last month, he said the fierce competition of the national event forged bonds of camaraderie and respect among the community of air guitarists.

"There was a lot of man-crying," Billmeier said, describing tough-looking rockers who, overcome by the emotional event, began weeping on his shoulder. "I've never encountered more bro-ism."

Billmeier's raucous performance earned him a near-perfect score in the final round, which is virtually unheard of, according to U.S. Air Guitar organizer and co-founder Kriston Rucker.

Some of that may have been out of fear; Billmeier dashed off the stage and into the crowd, Rucker said, and ran upstairs to the balcony, where the judges



By Dan Eckstein

Craig "Hot Lixx Hulahan" Billmeier of Alameda is officially the nation's top air guitarist.

were seated. After knocking over several tables and dozens of beers "like a crazy hurricane," according to U.S. Air Guitar publicist Nay Hays, Billmeier finished his artificial solo while hanging over the balcony by his legs.

"It was 25 feet or so down to the audience," Rucker said. "If he had fallen it would not have been pretty."

Adding to the heightened emotions was New York regional champ Andrew "William Ocean" Litz's second-round performance, which also garnered a near-perfect score. Litz removed his shirt, revealing the word "Air" shaved into his chest hair, and then rode an audience member's shoulders into the crowd during his imaginary guitar solo.

"Ocean had the audience in the end," Billmeier said, but Billmeier's total score for both rounds made him the winner. The audience, many of whom were there to support local champ Litz, hooted for an "air-off" between the two, but Litz hushed them and conceded defeat.

"I have never seen competition as fierce as it was on Thursday," Litz said.

The sincere congratulations of

both strangers and other top-ranked air guitarists, Billmeier said, have made him realize he carries their hopes and dreams with him as the nation's air apparent.

To honor the efforts of William Ocean and other competitors, "I feel like I have to prepare," Billmeier said. "I want to be at the top of my game. After seeing all the effort these guys put into their routines and costumes and everything, there are people who are truly more deserving than me."

Litz said Billmeier stands a good chance of winning in Finland if he keeps the same unpredictable energy up, remarking that America, birthplace of rock 'n' roll, is also the home of the best air guitarists. Last year, however, Team America placed seventh at the championship in Finland, disappointing fans and spurring legions of patriotic air guitarists to practice harder.

"I've seen tapes of the world championships," Litz said. "(U.S. air guitarists) are on a whole other level. We should be winning every year."

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By Elizabeth Shemaria

A vandal fired a BB gun at five Alameda storefronts on the 1900 block of Encinal Avenue Sunday night, causing damage to two of them, Alameda police said.

Mark Hall was at his office at MonArt School of the Arts at 1918 Encinal Ave. when he heard glass breaking around 10:55 p.m., said Lt. David Boersma. Police said Hall then stepped outside and saw someone unarmed walking east-bound on Encinal Avenue.

Store owners were alerted of the

School Board

By Ryan White

Declining enrollment continues to be a major concern for local school officials as they sort out this year's budget and develop projections for the years to come. The Alameda Unified School District board adopted their new budget for the 2006-07 fiscal year after hearing a report from a fiscal crisis and management team at Tuesday night's meeting.

The district lost 150 students from the 2004-05 to 2005-06 school years, and the upcoming year's budget is based on projections of an additional loss of 200 students. The declining enrollment trend and the need to permanently cut \$800,000 in spending led the district to consolidate Miller and Woodstock Elementary schools this past year.

Also adding to the financial uncertainty: salary disputes between the district and the Alameda Education Association, the teacher's union. The two sides are currently in arbitration. District officials expect the arbitrator's decision on several sticking points, including whether Measure A funds should be considered when determining teacher salaries, in early August.

In October, 2005, the district requested a review from a Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) to assess the district's financial health. The team's findings were delivered Tuesday night and the district was given a moderate rating in the areas of financial health and risk. The study points out that the district's budgetary challenges will continue as student enrollment and per-student state revenues are projected to continue their decline.