

prologue

Plenty disagreed. To them, it seemed fantastically rude: “Our marriage or your Sony,” as graphic designer James Miho’s wife warned him in 1980, after, as the *New York Times* reported, he tuned her out for reggae. The philosopher Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, inveighed against the specter of a boy doing his homework with a Walkman on, “a pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms”—a generation of kids cut off from great literature: “As long as they have the Walkman on, they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say.”

Soon enough the Walkman was a symbol of navel-gazing self-absorption. Critics mocked narcissistic yuppies for listening to self-help books on their commutes to upscale jobs, and derided GenX slackers for lethargically dropping out, sitting in an emo trance. “A technology for a generation with nothing left to say,” *Der Spiegel* reported.

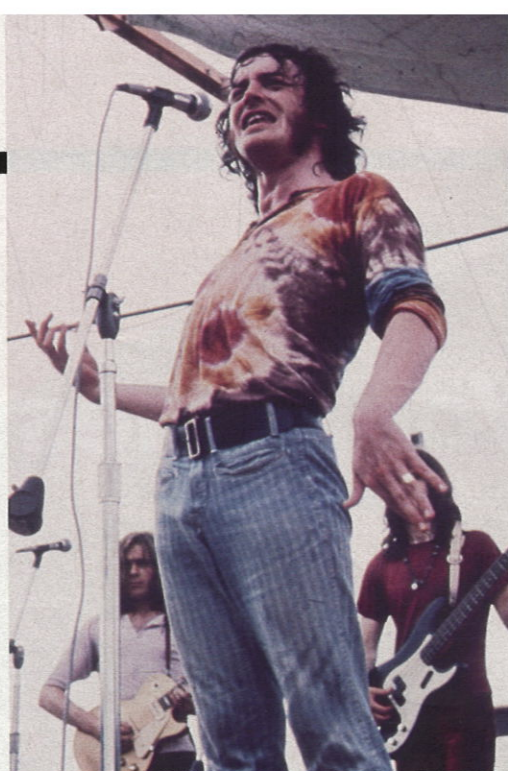
“You couldn’t win, no matter how you used it,” Tuhus-Dubrow laughs.

Interestingly, Sony itself was worried the machine encouraged antisocial behavior. Sony’s boss, Akio Morita, ordered that the first Walkman include a second headset jack—so two could listen at once. But it turns out nobody wanted it. “People wanted to listen by themselves,” Tuhus-Dubrow notes.

Yet people did indeed create a vibrant social culture around the Walkman. They shared earbuds; they made mixtapes for friends or dates. Indeed, making mixtapes—stitching together songs from one’s home stereo, to make a new compilation—became a distinctly modern activity. The message was not in any one song but in their combination, their sequencing. “Mixtapes mark the moment of consumer culture in which listeners attained control over what they heard, in what order and at what cost,” as the critic Matias Viegner wrote. Mixtapes also helped fuel the panic over copyright, with the music industry launching a campaign claiming that “Home Taping Is Killing Music.”

It didn’t kill music, of course. But gave us a glimpse of our coming 21st-century world—where we live surrounded by media, holding a device in our hands at all times. ♦

In 1969, the *New York Times* described Joe Cocker’s air guitar as “unusual gesturing.”



Origins

Air Apparent

AN ELECTRIFYING HISTORY OF THE WORLD’S MOST POPULAR INVISIBLE INSTRUMENT

By April White

JOE COCKER COULD FEEL THE MUSIC channeling through his body as he began his final number on the Woodstock stage. With one hand, the singer mimed the song’s opening piano notes, and then, as the drums kicked in, Cocker lifted his left arm and swung his right in front of his body in perfect time with the dramatic first chords of his hit “With a Little Help From My Friends.” The term wouldn’t be popularized until the 1980s, but there, in front of hundreds of thousands of people, Joe Cocker was playing air guitar.

You could start the history of the invisible instrument at that formative moment in 1969, says Byrd McDaniel, an ethnomusicologist at Northeastern University. But McDaniel, who studies “air playing,” has found the same impulse to embody music throughout history. In the 1860s, it was described as a symptom of mental illness, but by the 1930s, it was a mere curiosity, a side effect of the phonograph; some listeners, the Minneapolis Phonographic Society reported, had “taken to ‘shadow conducting.’”

Since then, air playing has become a socially acceptable alternative for those who don’t dance, says ethnomusicologist Sydney Hutchinson of Syracuse University. The practice crosses cultures; in the Dominican Republic, people pantomime the air güira, a metal percussion instrument. But only air guitar has also become an international spectator sport.

One of the first known air guitar contests took place at Florida State University in November 1978. Hundreds of students turned out to watch “Mark Stagger and the Rolling Bones” take first prize: 25 vinyl records. This August, top air guitarists from nearly a dozen countries will compete in front of some 30,000 people in Oulu, Finland, at the 24th annual Air Guitar World Championship. They will be judged on technical skills (which are different from those needed to play an actual guitar), stage presence and “airness.”

Airness “is that spark of creativity. Someone who makes the song come alive,” explains Eric “Mean” Melin, who won the 2013 world title by swinging his air guitar behind his back, Kip Winger style. “We want to express ourselves in a way that goes beyond what a ‘there’ guitar can do.”

Also essential to being a great air guitarist: a sense of irony. “You have to know it’s ridiculous,” Melin says, “but also be really passionate about it.” ♦