

Music

Carlsbad resident is the 'Hottest Guitarist'

Local Sounds

BY PETER PENDRAS



Imagine a karaoke battle of the lead guitars with over 40 of Southern California's hottest pickers going head to head, shred to shred. That is what happened last month at FM Station, a Hollywood nightclub, where Washburn Guitar hosted its "Hottest Guitarist" contest.

Todd Pyke, Carlsbad resident and guitar prodigy, took first place in the three-week contest and, as a result, he will soon be appearing in Washburn guitar commercials on MTV.

Though Pyke is a mere 24 years old, he has been playing since he was 8 and in that time has competed in many of these guitar shootouts. But the Washburn contest proved to be one of the most challenging.

"Nobody rolled over on this contest," Pyke said in a recent interview. "They were all pro players, and I did not expect to win."

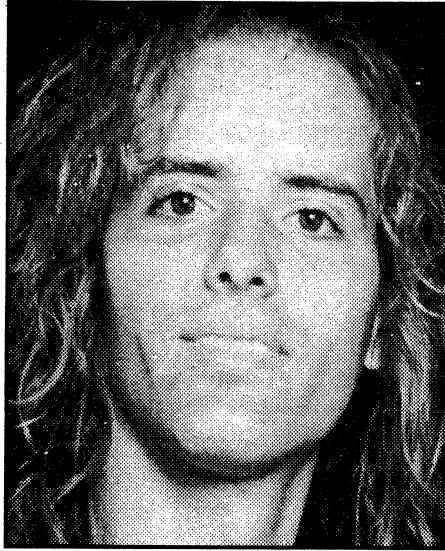
Anytime there is a lead guitar showdown, many musicians go for the technical jugular, using flash and speed to wow the judges. Todd Pyke took a different track and tried to reach a deeper emotional level by playing melodies from the heart.

"I just wanted to see if I could touch somebody," Pyke said. "I can play flash and fast—I did that some. But that's not the focus of my presentation."

Pyke's presentation was also shaped by something more basic, and something he couldn't control. All contestants play along with "jam tapes" representing different musical styles from blues to jazz to heavy metal. The tapes are made by taking a familiar song and then electronically removing the vocal and guitar melodies. By the time Pyke got to the contest, only one category of jam tape was available: modern rock.

"I played on the third Wednesday of preliminaries," Pyke said. "There were 23 guitar players that night. The only backing tape left was something called 'Smells Like Teen Sneakers', the Nirvana song with no guitar."

Pyke made it into the semifinals and then went home to woodshed with the tape. And he approached this challenge the same way a serious student goes into final exams. He crammed.



Todd Pyke will appear in Washburn guitar commercials on MTV.

"I worked out solos with the tape," Pyke said, "composing in my head for 40 hours a week. Before I went up there, I went over to Arno Kinsey's studio and recorded my ideas."

So Pyke was prepared. He had a plan and the skill to pull it off. Then Washburn threw everyone a curve when the six finalists gathered on the last night of competition.

Each guitarist was to play solo, without a backing tape. OK. No problem. One more thing: All contestants must play Washburn guitars for the finals. No exceptions.

Now asking a guitar player to lay down his or her favorite axe in favor of a cold, showroom model is a low blow. Imagine Andre Agassi in the Wimbledon finals being asked to put aside his handpicked racket in favor of a mid-priced demo provided by the sponsor. No way.

But Todd Pyke bit the bullet, strapped on an alien Washburn, and prevailed. Since the conclusion of the contest, Washburn Guitars has been in touch with Pyke to work out production details for the forthcoming MTV spots.

In the meantime, Pyke is busy with other guitar chores that include appearances with Deja-Vu, a rock cover band, as well as a solo classical performance tonight at the Kiosk Cafe in Del Mar.

Pyke also teaches guitar lessons at Guitars West in San Marcos and regularly contributes to film scores for local writer/producer Arno Kinsey. All Todd Pyke needs now is a solo record deal.