

Khan the king of indie rock controversy

Bizarre artist freaks people out

BY HEATH MCCOY, CALGARY HERALD MAY 20, 2009



Controversial and bizarre indie rock singer King Khan is in town with his band The Shrines.

Photograph by: Courtesy, King Khan

Preview

The King Khan & BBQ Show will be a part of Sled Island, which runs from June 24 to 27.

A confrontational sort of artist? You might say so.

It's hard not to reach that conclusion when looking back at the many rude, twisted adventures of garage-punk soulman King Khan.

He's even got the scars of a guy who has no inhibitions about getting in people's faces. Like the one on his lip, courtesy of the guitarist from the heavy metal band Mastodon, on whose head Khan dumped a beer during a live jam session in Atlanta -- provoking a violent response.

Then there was the time he urinated on the Black Lips' merchandise table, an obscene introduction when he first met his fellow garage rockers at a gig in Munich.

You might also say there's something socially confrontational about Khan encouraging his fans to burn cash as "a rebellion against money," which he's been known to do at some of his gigs.

"That's all true," says Khan during an interview to advance a pair of upcoming local shows. "People think it's bulls--t, but there really has been a lot of retarded moments."

Khan will be hitting Calgary tonight, fronting his psychedelic soul outfit The Shrines for a gig at The Warehouse. Then, during the Sled Island festival in late June, he'll return with his "doo-wop punk" duo, dubbed The King Khan & BBQ Show.

His outrageous reputation alone makes Khan an entertaining cat, to say the least, as does "the eyegasm" he promises at his shows. Adorned in many a ridiculous get-up -- often a Speedo, a poufy black wig and a gold headband (a look he describes as a cross between Cleopatra and Rick James) - - Khan boastfully compares his gigs to Mardi Gras in terms of the excitement they generate. "People freak out," he assures me.

But aside from all the insane fun, there is another reason to take in a King Khan show and that's the exhilarating music, especially where The Shrines are concerned. The group's critically acclaimed sound, filthy with garage grit and funky R&B, brings to mind the most delicious hybrid imaginable of James Brown and The Stooges.

Rounding out the bizarre Khan package is the rocker's offbeat origins. Raised in Montreal, the son of immigrants from India, Khan was going by the name Blacksnake in the late 1990s when he played bass for a punk band with a name too naughty to print in a family newspaper, suffice to say it rhymes with "spaceships."

While on tour in Europe, the group went its separate way with Khan opting to make a new life for

himself in Germany. There he met his wife, started a family and formed The Shrines in 1999. A few years later he reunited with former bandmate Mark Sultan, who became the BBQ half of the King Khan-BBQ duo.

Throughout the early part of this decade, Khan developed a cult following in Europe, his legend slowly seeping into North America with debauched tales like the one Atlanta band the Black Lips told on its website.

It encountered Khan in Munich on its first European tour. As the band describes it, it was met by "a wild eyed Indian man in an old German kaiser hat . . . who was high stepping all over the club . . . laughing like a mad man."

Approaching their merchandise table, Khan proceeded to pee all over their T-shirts.

Later, he created mayhem smashing bottles all over the club and jumping onstage in the middle of the Lips' set.

The scene resulted in both Khan and the Lips being ejected from the venue.

Strangely, Khan and the Lips came out of the experience as great friends. Khan explains that he was going through "some weird s--t" when he met the band, adding, "yes, I was very wasted."

He also describes the group as brothers and talks up a gospel album he's been working on with the band.

Khan, who has since become a notorious name on the North America indie rock circuit, had his most publicized misadventure last year, when he clashed with Mastodon guitarist Brent Hinds.

The incident took place at a rock club in Atlanta where Khan was having an emotional visit with a friend and fellow musician who had been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. While jamming with his friends, Khan was irritated when Hinds got onstage uninvited and started playing guitar. "It was a very inappropriate thing . . . so I turned around and dumped a beer on his head," Khan says.

This led to an encounter with a raging Hinds outside the club. Khan says he offered to buy the guitarist a beer, to smooth things over, but to no avail.

"He said to me: 'Do you know who I am? I am the greatest guitar player in the world!' I started laughing--because he was actually talking to the greatest guitar player in the world. The next thing you know . . . he split my lip open. I got four stitches."

All scrapes and bruises of the road aside, Khan says he's enjoying the fruits of his burgeoning popularity. "The whole propaganda thing has started and everybody's pretty happy with it, just flying around and doing our thing," says the showman.

He adds that he's particularly excited about his upcoming gigs in Calgary, a city that he briefly called home. Kind of.

"(My band) lived there in a van in a park for maybe week or two . . . around '97 or '98," Khan says. He laughingly recalls that while he was roughing it rock and roll style, suburbanites were bustling all around him, attracted by a nearby boat and trailer show.

Chalk it up to another strange scene in a career full of them.

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