

Meet Andrew W.K., the philosophical rocker: Oddball musician brings mixed bag of talent to stage

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Andrew W.K. is playing the Sled Island Festival this year.

Photograph by: Archive, Calgary Herald

Preview

Andrew W.K. performs today at the Marquee Room as part of the Sled Island festival.

Heath McCoy

“Been a puppet, a pauper, a pirate, a poet, a pawn and a king.”

Why do I find myself quoting the old Frank Sinatra tune *That’s Life* in a story about Andrew W. K.?

Well, having chatted with the 30-year-old rocker in advance of his upcoming Calgary appearance at Sled Island, I couldn’t help but pick up on an energy and a level of enthusiasm entirely reminiscent of that song’s breathless narrative.

Like the man trumpeting his story in *That’s Life*, the perpetually white T-shirted W.K. also has a list of achievements and passions that are all over the map — adventures which he has pursued heartily.

Consider the guy’s incredibly well-rounded and, frankly, bizarre resume.

He’s the thrashing hard rocker who weirdly combined bubble-gum pop melodies with heavy metal aggression on his early albums, in which he urged us to *Party Hard*, *Make Sex* and *Party ’Til You Puke*.

However, he’s also the classically trained pianist who’s about to release an album of spontaneous solo piano improvisations. In other words, he sat down at a piano and recorded whatever came to him at that moment.

In addition, W.K., who was raised in Ann Arbor, Mich., and now lives in Manhattan, has a successful gig touring universities as a “New Age self-help motivational speaker,” which makes a strange sort of sense given the artist’s zealous approach to the power of positive thinking.

Then there’s his work as a producer. *Repentance*, a 2008 album that W.K. produced for reggae-dub pioneer Lee (Scratch) Perry, was nominated for a Grammy at the 2009 awards show.

W.K.’s recently become a game show host, too, appearing on *Destroy Build Destroy* on the cartoon network, a program in which competing teams of teenagers use dynamite, tanks, wrecking balls and the like to destroy various pieces of heavy machinery, which they then rebuild into new pieces of heavy machinery. Wacky it is, and, therefore, right up W.K.’s alley.

Now, appropriately enough given his Sled Island gig, W.K. has added “Canadian punk rock enthusiast” to the whole loony mix.

This comes with the release of his latest musical offering, *A Wild Pear* which is available on white vinyl and digital download this week.

A split seven-inch EP on which W.K. shares track space with Vancouver punk band The Evaporators — a group led by guerrilla celebrity interviewer Nardwuar The Human Serviette — A Wild Pear finds W.K. covering a pair of Canuck punk tunes. Those are Oh Canadah by The Subhumans and Don't Sell Hotdogs Tonight by The Leather Uppers.

"I have a great relationship with The Leather Uppers going back to when I was 14 years old," says W.K. "They had a self-titled CD with Don't Sell Hotdogs and also Siamese Connection and Sugar Sandwich. Every song was a winner. . . . To play one of their songs now on this record with Nardwuar . . . it's like the circle is completed."

W.K. says he was exposed to Canadian punk as a teenager, when he was a regular customer at a particularly hip Ann Arbor record store. As for his connection to Nardwuar, he first saw the goofy gonzo journo in action when he watched bootleg VHS copies of The Human Serviette's cable access show.

W.K. was entranced by Nardwuar's weird, disarming style when interviewing rock stars like Snoop Dogg, Iggy Pop, Courtney Love, Marilyn Manson and Henry Rollins, the latter whom was noticeably angered by the experience.

"It was like something from a science fiction book," W.K. gushes. "I was completely enthralled by him. By his interview guests. By the way people behaved and the way he behaved. The way he looked and spoke. . . . Once you get into it, it's endless. It's very deep. . . . (Nardwuar) lays people bare. Sometimes it can be awkward, sometimes it can be very embarrassing. . . . A lot of his interview guests didn't even realize they were exposing their souls so blatantly."

Watching Nardwuar as he plotted his own musical career, W.K. dreamed that one day he, too, would go head to head with the eccentric Vancouverite, who's also set to perform at Sled Island with The Evaporators.

"This is before I had ever been interviewed by anybody," W.K. explains. "But I had this idea that maybe I would be interviewed someday soon. Maybe I'd even be interviewed by Nardwuar. . . ."

"It wasn't long after that I did meet Nardwuar, and I was interviewed by him, and that was really exciting to me. . . . I think (A Wild Pear) is a magical culmination of my Nardwuar experience."

Grand conceits like magic and destiny often come up when W.K. discusses his many endeavours.

As does philosophy. When he raves about his new game show Destroy Build Destroy it's clear that to W.K. this is not simply a program about demolition. It's a metaphor for life itself.

"There is no difference between creation and destruction," he says. "When you destroy something, you create something else. If we're going to blow up a car — yes, we've destroyed the car, but all of a sudden we've created a pile of objects to build with. . . . Even when we're building a sandwich, let's say I put meat on the sandwich. I've destroyed the animal. I've destroyed a loaf of bread by slicing into it. I've sliced the tomato and I've torn the lettuce to shreds. I've created this beautiful sandwich, but I've destroyed a bunch of stuff in the process."

He's either on to something big or he's completely demented. Or both.

Either way, it's well in keeping with his entertaining, oddball persona and — in a nutshell — that's always been the key to the Andrew W.K. experience.

hmccoy@theherald.canwest.com

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