



WONKAVISION issue 32

ANDREW WK ART AFICIONADO? TOTALLY STUPID? MAYBE NOT!

By Jack Firmino

Sure, Andrew WK sings about partying a lot. And sure, some of his solos are composed entirely on the same piano key. But who says that to be a gloriously dumb guy? Long before gaining international recognition with his debut album in 2002, WK was a kid living in Michigan. He considered becoming a scientist, but piano lessons since the age of four made a career in music a viable option as well. By his teens, WK was playing in a succession of slam rock bands and ran a cassette-only record label. This budding music career brought him to Florida, and then to Brooklyn, by the age of 18. Now 26 years old, WK has two solo albums, *I Get Wet* and *The Wolf*, two DVDs, and a short-lived television show on MTV2 under his belt.

WONKA VISION sets out to interview

WK in Manhattan. We bat around some ideas before agreeing on an arts and culture tour of sorts. Far from the usual themes of WK's music, the night finds Mr. Party Hard checking out some contemporary art, taking in a poetry reading, and digging a set at a jazz club. Along the way, there is also time to discuss making music and DVDs, handling criticism, and art in general.

How will the night turn out? Will Andrew WK be bored to tears while a poet peddles his verse? Will he long for a three-minute barrage of power chords in the middle of a tender jazz ballad? Does he already have an appreciation for these art forms or is he eager to be exposed to them? Let's find out...

☞ MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ☞

Andrew WK enters the Museum of Modern Art, wearing a hooded leather coat over his trademark stained white jeans and t-shirt. He joins Wonka Vision and heads to the *Take Two: Worlds and Views* exhibit. There's a sign explaining the collection "addresses three significant preoccupations in contemporary art—shifting perceptions of identity, explorations of the political landscape, and the notion of the sublime and the dematerialization of the art object." "Great," observes WK, strolling into the room. "So, it's about nothing."

He encounters a platform with sculptures of a man, woman, boy, and girl. Anatomically correct and realistically detailed, the four nude figures all stand the same height. WK meets the figures' stare. "Wow," he mumbles, "that's wild."

Wonka Vision poses the question—what makes something art? WK explains, "I guess 'cause someone made it. Or, simply, the person who made it decided that it was art. And that's good enough for me."

As it turns out, WK is no stranger to challenging art. His father paints abstract expression pieces. "I was at an art gallery in a mall and there was this piece for, like, \$6,000." The painting was a square, half white and half green. WK remembers hearing some kids claim they could make the same thing for a lot cheaper. "But like my dad says, 'You could, but you didn't.'"

WK looks around and continues. "What's exciting about art is that it reminds us that the act of living is an art. It takes craft and creativity. You can apply this to life. It makes it more exciting."

Exploring the exhibit, WK gives more attention to how a piece is made rather than what it could mean. "Wow," he softly comments about a rug whose fibers are actually sewing needles standing close together. He takes in an enormous cubist

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painting of a crowd surrounding a dismembered person. "Holy smokes," he says quietly.

Then WK looks closely at the needle rug and imagines how the artist graphed out where the needles would go and stuck them through the base fabric one by one. He steps back to take in the crowd painting and wonders how such a large piece is transported.

On the way out, WK passes the four nude figures again and offers up one of the night's few left-brained analyses. "They're all the same height, but their proportions are normal... it's reminding us to look at kids as people." He takes one last look around. "I don't know much about art," he confesses, "but I like to think I like it, and I like coming to these museums."

In a taxi heading downtown, Andrew WK reflects on craftsmanship in music. He's a multi-instrumentalist with a clarifier. "I feel like I can only play piano well enough to say that I play piano. I can do what I need to on guitar, bass, and drums." Most of his songs feature WK multi-tracked on various instruments. When recording he aims to showcase the song and not the individual instruments. "It's not about hearing the instruments, it's about playing them."

☞ POETRY READING ☞

Across the street from the legendary rock club CBGB's is the Bowery Poetry Club. WK had mentioned especially looking forward to this, having never been to a poetry reading before. When the lights go down he's motionless in his front row seat.

Poet John Godfrey sits at the table on stage. "I will start reading," he announces dryly after sipping his water, "in order to not continue drinking." Most of Godfrey's works state a theme and expand on it through association and metaphor. WK's eyes remain fixed on Godfrey as if they were physically penetrating his words.

After Godfrey, John Yau reads selections from his book, *Ing*. His poems change scenes and ideas rapidly. WK follows them with the same frozen look. Even when a depiction of a cell phone as vibrator elicits laughter from the audience, he remains unfazed.

"I like that neither seemed accustomed to reading their poems out loud," observes WK afterwards. Godfrey would occasionally stumble on a line and Yau read as if it were the first time he had seen the text. "It created tension, and that excited me." His intense stare also produced an interesting effect. "[The poets] were at a fixed

distance," he explains, "and you get into this trance when you're watching them intently. It's like staring at a candle."

Earlier, WK commented on defining art. Now, he discusses the possibility of judging it. He recalls a review of *The Wolf*. "It said the song 'Make Sex' ruined the album. I thought, 'Thank God, I put it on there.'" Throwing a curveball keeps things unbalanced, he says. "And when you're unbalanced it makes you use more resources to stay stable. It forces you to operate at a higher level."

Indifferent to critics, WK charges forward. His second DVD, *Who Knows? (MVD)*, was released on Feb. 7 and sold out two public screenings. His first DVD release was mostly music videos; this one is made up of personal and concert footage from 2000 to 2004.

Live, WK is joined by six other players, a far cry from when he was singing and playing on keyboard or guitar, accompanied only by a drum machine. He formed a band because the solo shows weren't sounding right. "Four people versus one on stage is a different vibe."

☞ JAZZ CLUB ☞

Arthur's Tavern is a small bar featuring live jazz. Pianist En Yamamoto's trio is about to start its second set of the night, and WK sits near the drummer as the set begins. The trio plays for an hour, performing five extended numbers. While bassist Alan Hampton is unobtrusive, drummer Ikuo Takeuchi wanders into intense rhythmic explorations as the bandleader creates long, melodic passages.

WK zones in on the performance. He's perpetually tapping his foot in time and occasionally nodding his head. A crowd-pleasing drum solo elicits only an approving nod and soft "nice" along with his polite applause. When the set is done, WK is still humming the last song's bass line. "I really enjoyed that," he says. "It's one of the few jazz concerts I've been to, but it was great."

Outside, Andrew WK thanks Wonka Vision for taking him to the places he's wanted to visit since he moved to Manhattan four years ago. Of course, he takes nothing that happens to him for granted. "I feel really good about having the opportunity to excel, because that in itself is a blessing. I'm thankful to have been in situations that provided opportunities." ■

For more info, go to: andrewwk.com