

A Conversation With Chad Fondren

(Playing Like A Rock Star)

Ken Lee

It's not often that you meet someone who is so passionate about Chess and Rock and Roll but Chad Fondren isn't your typical player.

Chad owns and operates two School of Rock franchises (Seattle Downtown and Issaquah) and heads up the Issaquah Highlands Chess Club.

I sat down with Chad to discuss how he manages to blend his two passions and the unique connection between chess and music.

Ken: When did you start playing chess?

Chad: I started when I was five. My dad introduced the game to me and my older brother. Dad was clever and knew how to motivate us.

He offered us \$100 when we could beat him in chess.

When my brother finally beat my dad, my brother decided: "I'm good. I don't need to play anymore."

It took me until I was about six and I finally beat my dad. By then, I had already fallen in love with the game.

I played my first scholastic tournament with my elementary school club when I was ten.

Ken: What was a pivotal point in your chess journey?

Chad: It was in junior high school in Kent, Washington. I made a friend who was so passionate and competitive about chess that it really accelerated my interest through junior high and high school. It

was great to have a friend who would play, analyze games, and just talk about chess on a regular basis.

Ken: What's the strongest memory for you of playing chess at that time?

Chad: In 1992, I was playing in my first USCF tournament at the Yakima Open. By coincidence the tournament was happening when the Fischer-Spassky games were being televised.

It was kind of wild. We would play and then rush to hear updates from the Fischer-Spassky match between rounds.

Ken: Let's talk about your love of music. When did that start for you?

Chad: I was really drawn to music at a very early age. I loved to listen to music on the radio, and by the time I was in fifth grade I started playing the trumpet. That's been my main instrument ever since.

Ken: Did your competitive nature help you in music like it did with chess?

Chad: Yes, now that I think about it, I really liked to push myself in both chess and music. I wasn't the best, but I could always look up to someone and set my goals a little higher.

My high school band had a really competitive jazz program. It was always interesting to me to see where I was compared to my bandmates. I could see and hear where I was weaker and stronger than my peers. It gave me something to shoot for. I guess it's similar to the concept of "playing up" in chess, that is playing against stronger opponents to grow as a player.

Ken: In high school, cliques often form where people want to force you into a box. Did you feel pressure to pick between your chess and your music friends?

Chad: I just never paid that much attention to those labels. I'm sure there were people who were casting their opinions, but I just didn't care.

I just knew what made me happy.

I guess it was things that certain people would consider nerdy like chess, music, D&D, and computers. I just made it a point to pursue all those interests. I just loved them all.

Fortunately, I was able to make friends in each of those social circles.

Ken: How did your chess journey continue to unfold during your university years?

Chad: I attended Central Washington University in Ellensburg and as soon as I got there, I started the chess club. At the same time, I majored in music business with a minor in trumpet performance.

Ken: How do you think chess and music are related?

Chad: I think of both chess and music as beautiful blends of art and science.

Some players lean into more of the science part—I suppose the mathematical part of the game.

But I think what's more interesting to me is the emotional side of both chess and music.

Ken: Can you expand on that idea?

Chad: Music is a very emotional medium. Whether you choose to listen to a certain type of music or play a particular type of music, you are making a choice to place yourself in a specific type of emotional state.

When it comes to chess, I think my favorite emotional part of chess is the opening.

Ken: What do you mean by that?

Chad: I have a passion for openings in general. There is something about the beginning of the game when it's fresh and exciting. The game can go in any direction.

That's the emotional part of chess that I most relate to and the part that keeps me interested and engaged.

Ken: What are some specific differences between playing chess and rock music?

Chad: In rock music, you are supposed to emote and communicate what you're feeling through the music and your instrument. In chess tournaments, you are supposed to adopt a "poker face" where you don't let your opponent know what you are feeling or thinking.

But there are exceptions to that of course.

Ken: When would be a good opportunity to show your emotions in chess?

Chad: I'm thinking of New York and other cities where chess hustlers play with raw emotion.

They purposely try to rattle their opponents with anything and everything they've got including anger, humor, humiliation, and more.

I haven't personally played in those kinds of chess events, but I can see how emotions would be dialed up in intensity.

Ken: Did you continue to play chess after university?

Chad: No, I took quite a long break of almost 25 years. I got busy with my career, marriage and family, and things just kind of took over. The School of Rock Issaquah started up in 2016, and it took an enormous amount of work and time to get it up and running.

Ken: What brought you back to chess?

Chad: Like a lot of people, it was



Chad Fondren

because of the COVID Pandemic and The Queen's Gambit in 2020.

Way back in 1995, I had won the Washington State Class C Championship, and I thought that was going to be the pinnacle of my chess career.

But in 2020, I started playing again and rediscovering a whole new world through Chess.com, YouTube videos, and new chess meet ups at clubs.

It was exciting and it felt great to start competing again.

Ken: When did you start the Issaquah Highlands Chess Club?

Chad: This is when my music and chess worlds accidentally collided. We had completed a School of Rock event at Blakely Hall in Issaquah.

I asked the Issaquah Highlands Council (who manages Blakely Hall) if we could host some chess events in Issaquah.

Ken: When did that happen?

Chad: It was late 2021, and everything came together quite quickly. The folks in charge told us that we could host any chess event we wanted as long as it was open to the public and that we didn't charge any fees.

We've been running chess events once a week ever since. We host tournaments, simuls, lectures, and have built a strong chess community on the East Side.

Ken: What are your future goals in chess?

Chad: I was listening to Ben Johnson on the "Perpetual Chess" Podcast the other day and he wasn't shy about articulating how hard it is to improve in chess as you get older.

That being said, I don't like putting limits on myself or other people. I'd like to think I can continue to learn and work hard and get to a Class A (1800+) or even Expert (2000+) level in chess. In the meantime, I'm having a lot of fun.

Ken: I see you have a chess board here at the School of Rock Downtown Seattle. Do you actively encourage your music students to play?

Chad: Actually, it happens very organically. Somehow just having a chess board in our lobby encourages people to play. I don't routinely promote chess at the School of Rock, nor do I promote my School of Rock program at IHCC. It just

seems to happen naturally, which is great.

Ken: Now from your unique outpost of working in both chess and music, what are some interesting parallels you see between the two?

Chad: I think it boils down to three areas.

In both chess and music there is a strong element of improvisation. With music, you have to know the basics like chords and song structure, but what you do within that can be entirely up to you—particularly in jazz.

In chess, things don't always go as planned so you have to improvise and get creative.

The second thing chess and music have in common is pattern recognition. Your brain just starts seeing and recognizing patterns that help you become a more agile and versatile player.

The last thing is tempo/timing. The concept of tempo or rhythm is central to all music, but we often hear chess players and coaches talk about tempo in a chess game as well. Gaining tempo means achieving a desired outcome in fewer

moves than your opponent, while losing tempo means using more moves than necessary.

Ken: Why do you think so many neurodivergent kids gravitate towards chess and music?

Chad: I'm not an expert on this subject, but I can tell you that at the School of Rock, we've had many neurodivergent kids really blossom at our school. For many, I think it's the aspect of playing with other kids in a group, working toward the common goal of a big rock show at a major Seattle venue, and coming out of the experience more confident than when they started. The music itself also serves as a super effective focal point to channel their attention.

In the case of chess, it's the 64 squares. That's the whole world they need to deal with.

With music, it's a limited space for them to channel their focus as well (12 notes, 88 keys, six strings, etc.). In both cases, the magic happens when they pour all their creativity, focus, and love into that world.

Ken: Check and mate.



Vancouver Open

July 25 - 26, 2026

Info/Entries: Make checks payable to Washington Chess Federation.

Mail To: Washington Chess Federation, c/o Orlov Chess Academy-

4174 148th Ave. NE
Building I, Ste. M
Redmond, WA 98052

Contact: Josh Sinanan
WCF President, 206-769-3757
WashingtonChessFederation@gmail.com

Registration: Online at nwchess.com/OnlineRegistration. Pay with Zelle (ID: WashingtonChessFederation@gmail.com, Tag: WA-Chess), SettleKing (Washington Chess Federation), check mailed to address above, or cash at site.

Site: Hampton Inn & Suites, 315 SE Olympia Drive, Vancouver, WA 98684. (360) 891-3000.

HR: \$191 Standard King/Double Queen Room. Booking link: (coming soon). Use code 901 if booking by phone.

Format: A 5-round, USCF rated Swiss in two sections: Lewis Open and Clark U1700. Maximum of 70 players, please register early.

Time Control: Rd. 1: G/60; +10, Rds. 2-5: 40/120, SD/30; +10.

Prize Fund: \$2,700 (based on 60 paid entries).

Lewis Open: 1st - 3rd: \$400, 325, 250.
1st U2000/U1800: \$150

Clark U1700: 1st - 3rd: \$300, 200, 150.
1st U1600/U1400/U1200: \$140, 1st Unrated: \$105.

Special Prizes (per section): Biggest Upset win: \$25, Best Female Player (by TPR): \$50, Best Senior Player (50+, by TPR): \$50.

Byes: Two half-point byes available. If interested, request before end of round 2.

Entry Fee: \$90 if postmarked or online by 7/18, \$100 by 7/24, \$110 at site. \$45 play-up fee if rated U1700 USCF and playing in Lewis Open. Free entry for GMs, IMs, WGMs, WIMs.

At-site registration: Sat.: 9 - 9:30 AM.

Rounds: Sat. @ 10 AM, 12:30 PM, 6 PM. Sun. @ 10 AM, 3:30 PM.

Rating: USCF rated. July 2026 USCF rating supplement will be used to determine pairings and prizes. Foreign ratings used for players with no US Chess rating. Higher of US Chess or foreign ratings used at TD discretion.

Memberships: USCF and WCF membership required, other states accepted.