

Your Battle of the Band Winners: West of the Gate

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In September 2024, two strangers walked into a Guitar Center in Groton, Conn. Colin Gordon just began his first semester at the University of Connecticut's Avery Point campus, and headed to the back of the store to check out and play some of the guitars. At the other end of the store, Jack Lombardo, a UConn alum, was looking to pick up a new electric drum kit for Christmas. He was talking to the employee at the counter when he heard "some beautiful guitar solos lilt through the store."

Unbeknownst to Gordon, Lombardo was searching for a guitarist to start a band with. "I walked over and we strike up a conversation," Lombardo said. "I'm like, 'you want to play with us? I'm having a Labor Day party. You wanna come?'"

Gordon said yes. Fast forward almost a year and a half, and Lombardo and Gordon, alongside Charlie Gauthier, Alex Herrera and Mike Melillo, became the winners of WHUS Radio's Battle of the Bands as the band West of the Gate.

"It was euphoric and exhilarating," Gordon said. West of the Gate is a jam band based in central Connecticut, focusing on long, improvisational sets of original songs and covers. "Think of it as, it starts somewhere, it gets somewhere and it ends nowhere," Gordon said. The band formed in September 2024 and won the Battle of the Bands after performing live together for the first time.

Lombardo, the band's frontman, lead singer and songwriter, graduated from UConn in 2024 with a degree in computer science, and currently works as a software engineer. He started West of the Gate in his basement after wanting to start a band for years. "Literally my biggest de-

sire from 2023 onward was, I wanted to start a band," Lombardo said. "I played music in high school. I lead worship sometimes in church, but that's different than being in a rock band, and I love doing that, but I was like, 'man, I want to be in a band.'"

Gordon, who is now a fourth-semester UConn student majoring in journalism and linguistics, is the band's lead guitarist and "hype man," Lombardo said. Herrera, the bassist, is an eighth-semester student at UConn, and Gauthier, the drummer, is an Eastern Connecticut State University alum. Lombardo, Herrera and Gauthier had known each other for years prior to the forming of the band and were the first people Lombardo went to.

Melillo, the rhythm guitarist, graduated from UConn in 2023 with a degree in economics, and currently works as a real estate agent in Milford, Conn. Lombardo had lived with Melillo during his time at UConn, and "accidentally" got him to join the band when venting about his inability to find a guitarist. "I was telling him I'm trying to start a band, but I'm really looking for a guitarist," Lombardo said. "And then he and I just look at each other, and he's like, 'I'm a guitarist.' So I'm like, 'well, can you join?' And he said yes."

The band began having on-and-off practices in Lombardo's basement, which had poor acoustics, before relocating to a new rehearsal spot in a church that was closing. "[The church was] just a big empty hall with a stage up front, a small stage, enough room for a drum set and all of us if we stand close," Lombardo said. Although the band was practicing semi-consistently, most times weren't with all five members, and a hiatus began in August 2025 because of the unavailability of members. Gordon studied abroad in



Bands compete in WHUS Radio's Battle of the Bands on Feb. 21, 2026 at Rome Ballroom. West of the Gate were formed in September 2024 and played their first live show at Battle of the Bands.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NORA MARIANO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS



Bands compete in WHUS Radio's Battle of the Bands on Feb. 21, 2026 at Rome Ballroom. Vices Inc., Part of the Problem, Elizabory and West of the Gate competed, but attendees voted West of the Gate the winner.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NORA MARIANO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Tokyo during the summer of 2025, Gauthier went on a mission trip in Uganda for three months and Lombardo was in the process of getting married at the time. However, this changed when Gordon heard about WHUS' Battle of the Bands. Gordon, who is a part of two other bands along with West of the Gate, had an idea.

"My divine comedy was that I'm gonna get all three of my bands to apply and whoever wins, I get to win it all," Gordon said. However, Gordon realized that neither of his other bands were available for the event. So, Lombardo jumped on getting the band to record an audition tape. But the band faced another issue here. They had never written or performed an original song before. "We found out the night before that, actually, we need to have an original song as part of the audition tape. Problem is, we don't have any original songs," Lombardo said. Lombardo said that an idea came to him for a song in the middle of the night. He rushed out of bed and spent 45 minutes "whisper-singing" the melody into his phone in an attempt not to wake his wife up. This idea culminated in the band's first original song, "I Get This Feeling," which they used for their audition tape. The band submitted their audition tape for the Battle of the Bands in January, but they didn't learn that they'd gotten accepted until two weeks before the event. This didn't stop the band from spending the following month preparing. "We had to assume that we were in because if I didn't start writing music the day after we submitted the tape, we would be cooked," Lombardo said. "Because, 'oh crap, we need 30 minutes of original material, what are we gonna do?'"

When the band found out that they had gotten accepted, it became a two-week-long sprint to get enough practice to make sure they were ready for the performance. Although the band was putting their all into practicing, they had never performed together live and weren't sure how it was going to go. "Obviously we wanted to win, but I was kind of just content to play it up and

have fun," Lombardo said. "That was the mindset I was trying to have because it's our first performance."

Once the competition started, their nerves weren't calmed. "We went up against Vices Inc., so that was our competition for the first bracket," Gordon said. "We heard they had 2 originals, and I think 3 covers, and the last cover was Pink Pony Club by Chappell Roan, and as soon as I heard that I said, 'we're cooked.'"

However, despite their reservations, the band ended up winning that round "in a landslide," Gordon said, and headed to the final round against Part of the Problem. "For us and Part of the Problem... it was neck and neck," Gordon said. "I was tense. Everyone was tense."

The round was so close that the director of the event had to decide who the winner was, Lombardo said. Minutes later, WHUS announced that West of the Gate were the victors. Lombardo said that it was "tough competition" going against the two bands. "Vice Inc. definitely had a really good stage presence, and Part of the Problem had a really solid foundation with their music," Lombardo said. "They were very in-line, they were very coordinated. I have high respect to their musicianship."

The band initially planned to dissolve after the concert, Lombardo said, but winning the Battle of the Bands has changed that, at least temporarily. "We're together basically as long as we have something that we need to stay together for," Lombardo said. "It doesn't have to be for forever."

The band is looking to have a studio session with WHUS to get their music on streaming services and, historically, the winner of the Battle of the Bands opens for WHUS' Spring Fling concert.