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Guitar Center Crowns Champion of Drum-Off 2026 Following National Competition

The Hamilton, AL drummer earns the Drum-Off title, brand endorsements, professional gear and a \$25,000 cash prize as the legendary competition concludes its first run in a decade

WESTLAKE VILLAGE, Calif., Aug. 24, 2026 — Guitar Center today announced Jonathan Fortson of Hamilton, Alabama as the **Drum-Off 2026 Champion**, marking the culmination of the legendary drumming competition's first run in a decade. First launched in 1988, Drum-Off ran for 28 years and drew more than 100,000 participants, helping provide an early platform for drummers including **Tony Royster Jr.** (Jay-Z, Katy Perry), **Cora Coleman-Dunham** (Prince, Beyoncé), **Thomas Pridgen** (The Mars Volta), **Glen Sobel** (Alice Cooper) and **Ilan Rubin** (Nine Inch Nails, Foo Fighters).

The competition returned this year with more than 2,600 submissions nationwide and a lineup spanning some of music's biggest names. Hosted by comedian, actor and drummer **Bill Burr** and *Jane's Addiction* drummer **Stephen Perkins**, the National Finale featured judges including **John Stamos** (The Beach Boys), **Tré Cool** (Green Day), **Adrian Young** (No Doubt), **Josh Freese** (Nine Inch Nails), **Brad Wilk** (Rage Against the Machine), **Alex González** (Maná), and **Jay Weinberg** (Slipknot), with performances from **Robert Trujillo** (Metallica), **Michael Anthony** (Van Halen), **Phil X** (Bon Jovi), **Kenny Aronoff** (Sammy Hagar) and more.

Fortson emerged from six finalists at Thursday night's National Finale at Hollywood's Fonda Theatre, claiming the championship with a standout performance that impressed judges with his showmanship, flawless fluidity, and ability to make technically difficult playing look effortless. As the 2026 Drum-Off Champion, Fortson receives \$25,000 in cash, a brand endorsement opportunity, a complete pro-level drum, hardware and cymbal setup, a Roland electronic drum kit and a trip to Drumeo HQ to create original content.

"Winning Guitar Center's Drum-Off is an answered prayer," said Fortson. "I entered as a teenager and never made it past the district round, so when a friend told me more than a decade later that Drum-Off was coming back and 'this is your year,' I knew I had to give it another shot. To come back all these years later and be standing here as the Drum-Off Champion is crazy."

Fortson is a professional drummer, musician and teacher based in Hamilton, Alabama, who began playing drums at age two and has spent 33 years behind the kit. Originally from Elberton, Georgia, he has toured throughout all 50 states and 13 countries and currently serves as a full-time staff musician and teacher at The Ramp Church. After previously competing in Guitar



Center's Drum-Off but not advancing beyond the district round, Fortson returned this year to see how far he could take his craft.

Fortson competed in the National Finale alongside fellow finalists Chris "CJ" Darden of Lillington, North Carolina; Jacob "Jake" Golden Ward of Provo, Utah; Mitchell "Mitch" Gorman of Antioch, Illinois; Caleb Robinson of Lansing, Michigan; and Michael-Andrew Tao Cornish of Stockton, California.

The road to the Fonda Theatre began in May, when drummers visited Guitar Center stores nationwide to record and submit original three-minute auditions. Competitors advanced through District Finals at 24 Guitar Center locations and Regional Finals in Hollywood, Nashville and New York City before six earned their place on the National Finale stage.

"Every day across America thousands of incredible undiscovered musicians are grinding away, working their tails off to perfect their craft," said Gabe Dalporto, CEO of Guitar Center. "It's our mission at Guitar Center to shine a spotlight on those musicians and Drum-Off gives great drummers a national spotlight. Today Jonathan stepped into that spotlight and knocked our socks off."

The National Finale put the six finalists onstage alongside established artists from across rock, pop and beyond. In addition to the judges highlighted above, the panel included **Pocket Queen** (Beyoncé, Alicia Keys), **Eric Moore II** (Suicidal Tendencies, Infectious Grooves), **Dave Elitch** (The Mars Volta), **El Estepario Siberiano**, **Daniel Jensen** (OCDP Drums), **Jared Falk** (Drumeo) and **Thomas Lang** (stOrk).

The evening also featured **Kenny Aronoff**, **Michael Anthony**, and **Phil X** performing together for the first time as a power trio, along with performances by **Tosh Peterson** (Lady Gaga, MGK), **Tim Stewart** (Lady Gaga, Rihanna), **Jordi Radnoti** (Olivia Rodrigo), **Tiara Stewart** (Ashlee Simpson) and Grammy-nominated rock band **Rival Sons**.

The 2026 National Finale supported the Guitar Center Music Foundation, with 15 percent of ticket proceeds benefiting the nonprofit's work to expand access to music education and instruments in communities nationwide.

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About Guitar Center:

Guitar Center is the leading retailer of musical instruments, lessons, repairs and rentals in the U.S. With more than 300 stores nationwide and one of the top direct sales websites in the industry, Guitar Center has helped people make music for more than 60 years. Guitar Center provides a range of musician-based services, including Guitar Center Lessons for players of all ages and skill levels, GC Repairs, an on-site maintenance and repair service, and GC Rentals,



offering easy access to instruments and gear. Guitar Center's family of brands includes Music & Arts, which operates more than 250 stores specializing in band and orchestral instruments for sale and rental, serving teachers, band directors, college professors, parents and students, and Musician's Friend, a leading direct marketer of musical instruments in the United States. Guitar Center Business Solutions is the company's commercial division, delivering professional audio, video, lighting and integrated technology solutions for businesses, institutions and creators nationwide through a portfolio of brands including AVDG (Audio Visual Design Group), GC Pro and Custom House at Guitar Center. The Guitar Center Music Foundation is a national nonprofit that expands access to music through instrument donations and support for communities in need.

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