

WHITE KNIGHTS WHITE FACEPLANT HEAT INTO ROOK ♖

AT the end of the 20th century, a fierce new rivalry emerged from an ancient game.

A complex blood-sport of the mind – played by emperors and generals, artists and philosophers – would see the largest audiences the game has ever known. Across the long, brutal autumn of 1995, tense confrontations unfolded night after night from coast to coast, set to a bold rock and roll soundtrack.

It was a different and singular age for American culture and American sport, more elegant, but also more cutthroat. For the first time, a traveling chess team could fill the country's largest sports arenas and be met nose-to-nose by equally competitive ticket-buying crowds. And between two nightly moves, these audiences proved increasingly eager to hear the music of the squad's talented in-house quartet, Phish.

Over two widely-studied games, Phish and their audience rewrote the rules of band-versus-audience chess amid intellectual clashes and feats of game-grid derring-do.

With Phish playing white, the audience black, the first match began in late September at Shoreline Amphitheater in California, where Phish found themselves pitted against an opponent that might make any player tremble – northern California champion Eric Schiller. Phish didn't blink, though, leaning back into their long game.

As they made their way up the coast, Phish converted their Portuguese opening into a Ruy Lopez exchange variation, taking out a black Knight en route. The drama turned deadly serious when the tour crossed the border.



In Vancouver – to avenge their fallen Knight – the audience surged its Queen forward and set the stage for historic carnage.

While Phish and their giant chess-board made a long run from Montana to the southwest, through Texas towards New Orleans, the game exploded into action. Here, for the first time, Phish fully embraced what scholars would later call improvisational "Type 2" chess. Phish swarmed forward, the audience cracked right back. Knights and bishops fell. It was observed that, on many nights, Phish's music was a necessary means of calming down after the chess moves for band and audience alike – one of several reasons the match-up only persisted for several months.

The first game moved towards its destiny as the tour took the northerly route through the heartland, home of the early so-called territory chess orchestras of the '20s and '30s. An audience pawn-storm on the white King's defenses failed to penetrate, but put pieces in place as the tour buses trucked out of Louisville.

In retrospect, the audience's legendary turn in Chicago, known now as the W00k Gambit, might be seen as forestalling the inevitable. But in the heat of the game's swelling battle, the Halloween move has been extensively theorized as throwing the perfect wrench into the rules of quadraphonic tour chess, and might have prevailed under different conditions.

When the tour picked up in Atlanta for three evenings at the Fox Theater, the match reached its zenith on the middle show of the engagement, when the night began with the band's King capturing the audience's Queen. In a display of celebration, Phish's Page McConnell – one of their chief strategizers, who also played keyboards – affixed the slain Queen to his piano for the night, a trophy for all to see, luminescent under Chris Kuroda's Alstar lights. Like Bob Dylan's early electric performances with the Hawks, the energy virtually crackles from the audience on the long-unreleased concert recordings.

In interviews, members of Phish have often cited this as a pivotal performance in their musical development, having to play an entire show having just won their audience's Queen. Though some in the audience perceived McConnell's celebration as arrogance, many understand it now as arguably the true beginning of Phish's transition from chess team into rock band.

Several moves later, at the Sun Dome in Tampa, the audience was forced to surrender. Though humbling for the chess enthusiasts, it proved a peaceful night. All accounts – by local press as well as fans – seem to focus almost entirely on the musical part of the proceedings.

The second and equally legendary contest of 1995 began the following night in West Palm Beach – the audience now white, the band black – with the game off to a crisp start in the warm autumn air. Where the first game might be remembered for its slightly languorous pace, perhaps a result of the new larger venues the band was playing, all parties were more aggressive during the rematch.

The audience developed their King's pawn and both knights, converting to a Giuoco Piano game,

which Phish met with a symmetrical defense as the tour moved from the southern climes to the mid-Atlantic region. Phish wasted little time in setting a brisk pace, perhaps hoping to avoid a long positional battle that could outlast the tour. But an aggressive knight move into the center of the board changed the course of events and had bold implications beyond the game at hand.

Chess games have been compared to intricate dances, the proscribed movements of its partners moving in graceful and interlocking patterns across

the board, but Phish's almost bald aggression in their second game with their audience was an entirely contemporary kind of maneuvering. Like Charlie Parker plunging from swing to bebop, Phish would receive their share of criticism from the moldy figs of the chess world. Commentators have annotated the moves with an unusually harsh eye, with one even labeling Phish's attacks as "mechanical."

But what might look mechanical on paper also made for thrilling chess. Simply: nobody plays quadrasonic chess like this two decades into the 21st century, and certainly nobody did in 1995. Each time the audience moved to defend the center of the board, Phish was right there to push and nudge. The audience's forces contorted into awkward spots, with one knight scattering to the periphery and a rook taking one step off the back row without a clear next destination.

And though Phish's aggression was undeniable, it was also untenable. Their gambits dazzled, the black Queen hurtling towards the white King and the audience's uneven defenses. Phish's ultimate doom, though, was to be an equally landmark moment for their opponents. Disheartened by their showing in the

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first game, the chess-fixated that followed the game from city to city couldn't have been feeling too great as the tour entered Phish's natural habitat of the wintry northeast.

Perhaps lured by the promises of their own beds and fire-warmed sitting rooms at the tour's end, Phish frothed the game into overdrive, bending the new rules on the second night in Lake Placid. There, during the intermission after the first musical portion, the audience members were linked to the stage via Walkie-Talkie, where Pete Schall and the band responded swiftly.

Swift as the band may've been, decisive they were not. As so often happens, humiliation followed hubris, this time at the World's Most Famous Arena™. Midway through the second of two sold-out nights at Manhattan's Madison Square Garden, the audience took Phish's Queen. What should've been a triumphant appearance for Phish turned to bitter defeat in front of their friends, family, and the New York media, and the band resigned the game following what was deemed "a brilliant audience assault."

The recordings of Phish on December 31st, following the audience's victory, are of a much different tenor than those of November 10th, following the audience's defeat. Released in 2005 to wide acclaim, the final moments of the second chess game feed into some of the most startling music yet made by the young chess players.

Phish wouldn't tour again until the following summer, by which point a confluence of new insurance policies and the increasing popularity of Phish's musical output made it impossible to pursue band-audience chess games at the same grand scale. The decision to convert to a strictly musical operation was reluctant but firm, flash-freezing the heated competition at a 1-1 tie.

At the dawn of a new age, a fierce old rivalry reemerges.

by Jesse Jarnow with additional reporting by Owen Poindexter

