

# Fender's new CEO says his ASU humanities degree was instrumental in his career journey

**How Edward 'Bud' Cole went from an English student in a local band to leading one of the world's top guitar companies**

By Scott Bordow, ASU News  
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When Edward "Bud" Cole was 19 years old, he thought he would become a rock star.

He had a guitar in his hand and his band, Rain Convention, would record hundreds of songs and open for the English rock band Radiohead.

That was 40 years ago.

On this Wednesday, with the bright Phoenix sky shining outside the window, Cole, 58, is sitting in a conference room on the third floor of Fender Music Corporation's Phoenix headquarters.

He has a guitar in his hand, again. But it is no longer a mechanism of his dreams. He is the face of the company, the newly named CEO of Fender.

"I found my way to be a rock star in just a different way," Cole says, a wide smile on his face.

This is the story of Cole's journey — and how Arizona State University was, you might say, instrumental in his success.

It all started back in 1985. Cole had taken a gap year after high school to help take care of his ailing father, and four of his friends from Chicago who were attending ASU came home for the Thanksgiving break.

They told great stories, their skin was tan and Cole was hooked.

"My mom kind of wanted me to go to the schools in the Midwest," Cole said. "I said, 'Mom, I want to go out and be my own man.'"

The idea that I could go to ASU and be lost in this big crowd and re-create myself to be anything and anyone I wanted to be ... I could go out and be my own person and chart my own course."

Cole did just that. He majored in English, made friends and immersed himself in the thriving music scene, his bands playing notable Tempe clubs like Long Wong's, Minder Binders, Hollywood Alley and Edcels Attic.

"You could go out and see live music in 20 different venues and see great bands literally seven days a week," Cole said.

After his final class in 1991, Cole walked outside, threw his folders in the air and, soon after, jumped on a tour bus and traveled around the Southwest for months with his band.

Fast-forward 12 years.

Cole, 33, was working for Pernod Ricard, a French wine and spirits company, when he was told he was being transferred to Tokyo.

One of the requirements of getting a working visa in Japan at the time was a college degree. No problem, Cole thought. He called ASU and asked to have his transcripts and diploma sent to him.

Except there was a problem.

"The lady on the phone said, 'We're happy to send you your transcripts, but we can't send you the diploma,'" Cole said. "I said, 'Why can't you?' She said to me, 'Because you didn't graduate.'"

Cole had received two incomplete grades in core English courses his freshman year. He broke his ankle in an intramural wrestling event and went home the week before finals.

"All I ever did was look at the credits I had and thought I was well within (the number to graduate)," he said.

Cole knew he could work his way around the degree requirement. A visa could be acquired if a person had unique skills. Cole had traveled the world for work and spoke multiple languages. But he said that once he found out he hadn't finished school and was only six credits shy of graduating, "it was an absolute obsession for me."

Cole asked if he could take the credits while he was in London, reasoning that "they invented English here in England."

But there was no ASU Online at that point. He had just one option: return to Tempe.

(Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpF\\_vrX\\_Yic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpF_vrX_Yic))

"I shared with my boss in total embarrassment that I actually didn't know I hadn't graduated," Cole said. "He said, 'Just go get it done.'"

His company put him up at the Tempe Mission Palms hotel for six weeks.

"My boss was like, 'Dude, you're 33 years old, you've got money now, you can stay there and have the time of your life.' And you know what? I did."

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Cole bought a beach cruiser bicycle, a backpack, flip-flops, some Gap T-shirts and a couple of pairs of shorts. Once again, he was a student, taking a course on the Bible as literature and a second course that taught prospective teachers how to teach literature to adolescents.

Cole thought he would get his six credits and then leave Tempe and ASU behind. Instead, through completing his bachelor's degree in English in 2000, he discovered a newfound passion for the university and the education he received.

"I learned how to communicate with people both through writing and through the spoken word," he said. "I learned how to influence people.

"My perspective on school and how I framed up school was very, very different. I took it a lot more seriously. And I can tell you, going back to ASU was one of the luckiest and most fortunate resets I've ever had to make. Those six-and-a-half weeks materially changed my life in every way. It transformed the way I see education in the world. And I can't be more grateful for it."

It might seem odd that a humanities degree would lead Cole to where he is today, leading a music company with more than 2,000 employees worldwide. But Cole said his degree in English taught him how to think and analyze.

One example: In 2023, Fender was preparing to open its first flagship store, located in Tokyo. Before meeting with the design company, Cole, then president of Fender's Asia Pacific division, spent three months composing a 60-page document that in detail described the journey customers would take as they walked up to the store, opened the doors, saw the product and dealt with staff.

The document didn't include a single photo, but the language Cole used, the picture he painted, was the result of all those lessons he learned long ago at ASU.

"It told this compelling, beautiful, amazing story," Cole said.

"When we handed it to the international design company, they came into our first meeting and said to us, 'We have never received anything like this in our life.'

"I go back to all the wonderful literature, to all of the poetry, to all of the business writing I did when I studied at ASU that helped me build a base to be able to write and to communicate with flair, with style, with passion and emotion."

In 2024, Cole was named one of three [outstanding ASU alumni](#) from The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. When he returned to Tempe to receive the award and meet with President Michael Crow, he closed his eyes and thought about his journey.

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“I will never forget the spring day in 1985 when I received the notification in the mail that I had been accepted into ASU,” he said. “I was in tears. I was so proud to be a Sun Devil. I packed up my stuff, landed at ASU the first week of August and I’ve never looked back.”

*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



ASU alumnus Edward “Bud” Cole, pictured at Fender's headquarters in Phoenix, is the new CEO of the company. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

## Text image(s)



Fender CEO Edward "Bud" Cole spent time playing at local nightclubs while studying English at ASU in the late '80s. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News