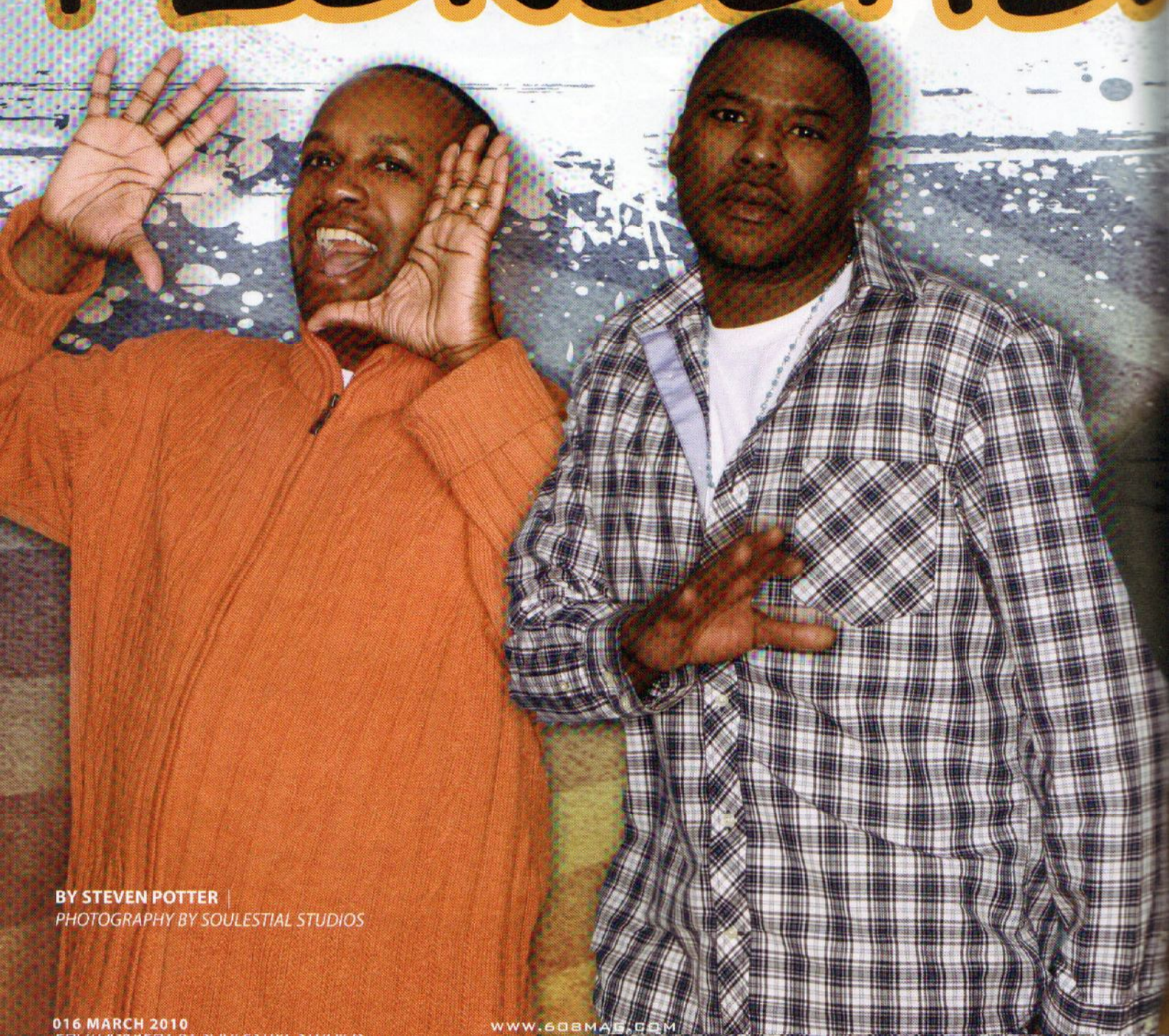


# HIP-HOP PIONEERS:



BY STEVEN POTTER |  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOULESTIAL STUDIOS



# FRESH FORCE

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, FRESH FORCE WAS PAVING THE WAY IN THE MADISON HIP-HOP SCENE





OREN  
AN ORIGINAL  
MEMBER



**MON. OCT. 16th**

Wally Gators Welcomes

# EPMD

**ALL AGES  
NO ALCOHOL  
EARLY CONCERT**

Doors 6:00 Show 7:30

**PLUS SPECIAL GUESTS**

**FRESH FORCE**

TICKETS AVAILABLE AT:  
WALLY GATORS  
HEADLINERS  
THE CHAR-HOUSE  
GOOD n LOUD MUSIC

**Fresh Force**  
Who Runs This Mutha

DJ 914  
33 1/3 rpm  
STEREO

Other Side: 1. Tyrone's Mutha Mix (5:58)  
2. Fresh Force Mix (4:30)  
This Side: 1. Job Smooth Mix (4:40)  
2. Criss S. Lottia Mix (4:40)  
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100. Criss S. Lottia Mix (4:40)

Today, rap tops the charts, is comprised of a variety of styles and new groups seem to pop up wherever you turn. Things weren't always this way.

Twenty-five years ago, rap was still finding its own, establishing its voice and searching for outlets to reach the masses. But that's not to say there weren't pioneers making moves and drawing attention to Hip-Hop culture. And even 25 years ago, Madison had a few of their own doing just that.

One of just a couple of active rap acts here at that time was Fresh Force, a set of five south side kids from different races, religions and backgrounds.

"[Rap] was still really new [back then]. People were still trying to figure out if it was 'real music,'" recalls Richard Henderson, who was the group's beatbox specialist, known as Beatbox Daddy Rich. "But everyone was doing it — male, female, pretty boys, thugs, even nerds. [But] it seemed just as fast as groups or emcees started, they disappeared."

### A Clean-Cut Image

Fresh Force appealed to promoters and fans for their clean-cut image, members say. Their songs tackled topics like teen pregnancy and drug abuse as well as lighthearted, fun topics like dating, their respective rhyme skills and, of course, partying.

"Back then, we didn't talk about cars, jewelry, etc.," says Oren Ben-Ami, known then as Finesse. "We talked about everyday life."

"We respected our elders and our fans," adds Emanuel Whitfield, whose stage name

was and still remains Yolks. "You could trust Fresh Force to keep it clean. We weren't studio gangsters."

Like many songs from that late '80s to early '90s era, Fresh Force's tracks carried an uptempo, house music-styled beat layered with samples and often carrying an almost R&B-esque hook. Their shows — which ranged from high school events and block parties to opening for rap acts on national tours as they came through town — also contained something rare and almost unheard of in today's rap: dance routines.

"We had actual routines we had to practice for hours to get right," remembers Henderson. "Back then, it was about entertaining the crowd and the art of performance."

"Anytime we performed we gave 100 percent and we could tailor our performance to any group of people," adds Johnny Winston, Jr., who went by Johnny Law on stage.

### Just Missed Blowin' Up

As the group grew more popular, opportunities began to open up. Over the five or so years the group was together, they opened for EPMD, MC Lyte, Lisa Lisa, the Brat Pack and other up-and-coming acts from the national scene.

But that was far from their only achievement. The group also recorded several radio and TV commercials for American TV as well as Wally Gators nightclub and even public service announcements for the Dane County Census Bureau and Wisconsin Dept. of Transportation.

Then, in 1990, Fresh Force got what they thought would be their big break. Signing with the independent label D.J. International out of Chicago, they released the single "Who Runs This Mutha" and then in 1991, they released the song "Body House," which appeared on a compilation disc with several other artists.

Although these achievements were major and the first for a rap group coming out of Madison, little materialized from the first two singles. Members blame a lack of marketing expertise on behalf of the label as the reason why.





**"I REMEMBER WE WOULD HAVE ONE BOOMBOX PLAY THE INSTRUMENTAL AND ANOTHER TO RECORD AS WE RAPPED OVER THE INSTRUMENTAL," REMEMBERS HYNUM.**

#### **Where Are They Now?**

Still, the members of Fresh Force, who all now float around that 40-year mark, aren't bitter and look back on it all with a sense of childhood excitement and pride. We had an unbelievable amount of fun just hanging out together," recalls Erin "DJ Sweet E" Hynum, who now works as a chief financial officer.

They also learned valuable skills that would help them later in life. "First, it gave me confidence with public speaking in front of large crowds which I use today as a politician," says Winston, a firefighter who has been an elected member of the Madison school board since 2004. "Second, leadership skills."

Henderson, who owns a custom t-shirt company, agrees and adds: "It gave me the courage to be myself, to take chances, to not take things for granted, to work hard for what you want (and) to have plan B and C ready in case things don't go as planned."

"I wouldn't be who I am or where I am without Fresh Force," says Whitfield, who still actively raps in and around the Madison scene.

Ben-Ami, currently a documentation and training materials team

leader, also says performing in front of others was the biggest skill he learned while in the group. "My experience with Fresh Force allowed me to be able to provide training, give speeches and so on in public without being as nervous as if I never would have experienced Fresh Force," he says.

#### **Once Fresh Force, Always Fresh Force**

As these boys became men, Fresh Force naturally disintegrated as members began taking on family, college and full-time jobs. "We just kind of grew apart," says Whitfield. "But we'll always have that time. Once Fresh Force, always Fresh Force."

For all of them, the memories of the parties, shows, recording studios and events are something they'll always cherish and reflect on. And in today's times and Hip-Hop climate some of those memories can never be duplicated. "I remember we would have one boombox play the instrumental and another to record as we rapped over the instrumental," remembers Hynum.

Now, that's old school. And without the old school element that groups like Fresh Force helped create, who knows where Hip-Hop would be today.

**For more information about Fresh Force, check out their site at [www.fresh-force.net](http://www.fresh-force.net), which contains archives of their songs, videos and performances. ■**

