# After a 30-year hiatus, Madison hip-hop legends Fresh Force set to headline Mad Lit Summer Concert Series tonight

By **David Dahmer** - Aug 11, 2023 0

*Fresh Force back in the day: (L-r) Emanuel Whitfield, Oren Ben-Ami, Johnny Winston, Erin Hynum, and Richard Henderson (Photo: Fresh Force)*

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Many older Madisonians remember Fresh Force as a local hip-hop sensation in Madison in the 80s and very early 90s before hip-hop became as popular as it is today. Tonight, the group will be reunited for the first time in over 30 years to perform at Mad Lit Summer Concert Series on the 100 Block of State Street.

"It's been a loooong time since we performed. I was just watching some of our old videos and stuff and I'm like, 'Wow, that was a long time ago!' But music is music and if it makes you feel good and it brings you back to a time which once was … then maybe for a little bit of time on Friday, Aug. 11, we can do that for the people here in Madison," says Johnny "Savior Faire/J-Law" Winston Jr., an original member of Fresh Force. "So that's why I think it's important.

"We had talked about something for a long time with [Mad Lit organizer] Rob Dz and Karen [Pfeiffer, president] of UCAN. I asked the guys [in Fresh Force] if they'd be interested in performing and everybody was like, "yeah, yeah, yeah!' But as we got a little closer they were like, 'Whoa… wait a minute…. What are we committed to?'" Winston laughs.

Also performing tonight will be another Madison throwback sensation, Black Poets Society, a hip-hop soul collective started in the '90s. L.U.V. and DJ Iron Mike will round out the bill as the Mad Lit free summer concert series, a free concert series every other Friday night in summer and early fall that features live music and highlights local artists and businesses of color, returns tonight (weather permitting!) after the first two Fridays were rained out.

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For Fresh Force, after more than 30 years, it's gonna be just like riding a bike … you never forget, right?

"We hope so," laughs Richard "Daddy Rich" Henderson, another original member of Fresh Force. "We won't be doing no wheelies or jumping off any ramps on Friday night, though."

*Fresh Force: (L-r) Johnny Winston, Erin Hynum, Emanuel Whitfield, Oren Ben-Ami, and Richard Henderson*

Tonight will be a special night for Fresh Force and their fans but also for MadLit, who will be hosting a special celebration for Hip Hop's 50th anniversary. As a hip-hop pioneer in Madison, Fresh Force is honored to be performing on the same night.

"We need to celebrate this history because we were a good chunk of it here in Madison … or at least got it going back in the day so the folks can do what they are doing right now," Winston says.

"For rap to still be valid and popular and mainstream today is amazing in itself because, honestly, as much as we loved it back then, we weren't sure that it was going to last as long as it has. But to perform at this 50th-anniversary event is amazing," Henderson adds. "It gives us an opportunity to do something that we truly loved doing when we were active so many years ago. And for us to get to together as a group and for all of us to still be around is amazing … everyone's healthy and in good mind and spirits, so this reunion is like 30 years in the making.

"This is a huge honor to perform on this night," Henderson continues. "We all have families and kids and we've always told our kids about what we used to do. And you know kids, they think that you're just their parents and they're old and they're not cool, so for them to be able to actually see us perform, I think that will be amazing."

First formed in 1984, Fresh Force consisted of Winston, Henderson, Erin "DJ Sweet E" Hynum, Emanuel "MC Yokes" Whitfield, and Oren "Finesse" Ben-Ami. Fresh Force performed at various talent shows and block parties throughout Wisconsin and Illinois and played two monster concerts back in the day at Breese Stevens Stadium, opening up for national groups Ready for the World and Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam. The late Madison-area producer and promoter Gaddi Ben Dan, who passed away last year, was instrumental in bringing those groups to Madison and making sure that Fresh Force was on the bill.

"Gaddi Ben Dan brought R&B and hip-hop acts to Madison and he gave us a chance when really nobody else would. So I think we're always going to be appreciative of Gaddi Ben Dan," Winston says. "I remember getting to open up for Ready for the World who came to Madison and then their single 'Oh, Shelia!' exploded on the charts soon after. It was great.

*Fresh Force*

"And for Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam, it was kind of the same thing. They came to Madison when they were kind of just getting started. And next thing you know, they have a hit single. We got to open up for some great people and there just wasn't a whole lot of hip-hop and R&B in Madison at the time. Nowadays, there's definitely a lot more and hip-hop is more mainstream than ever before. But we had to really beg to be on the radio, to have any opportunities that we got. We really had to work for it."

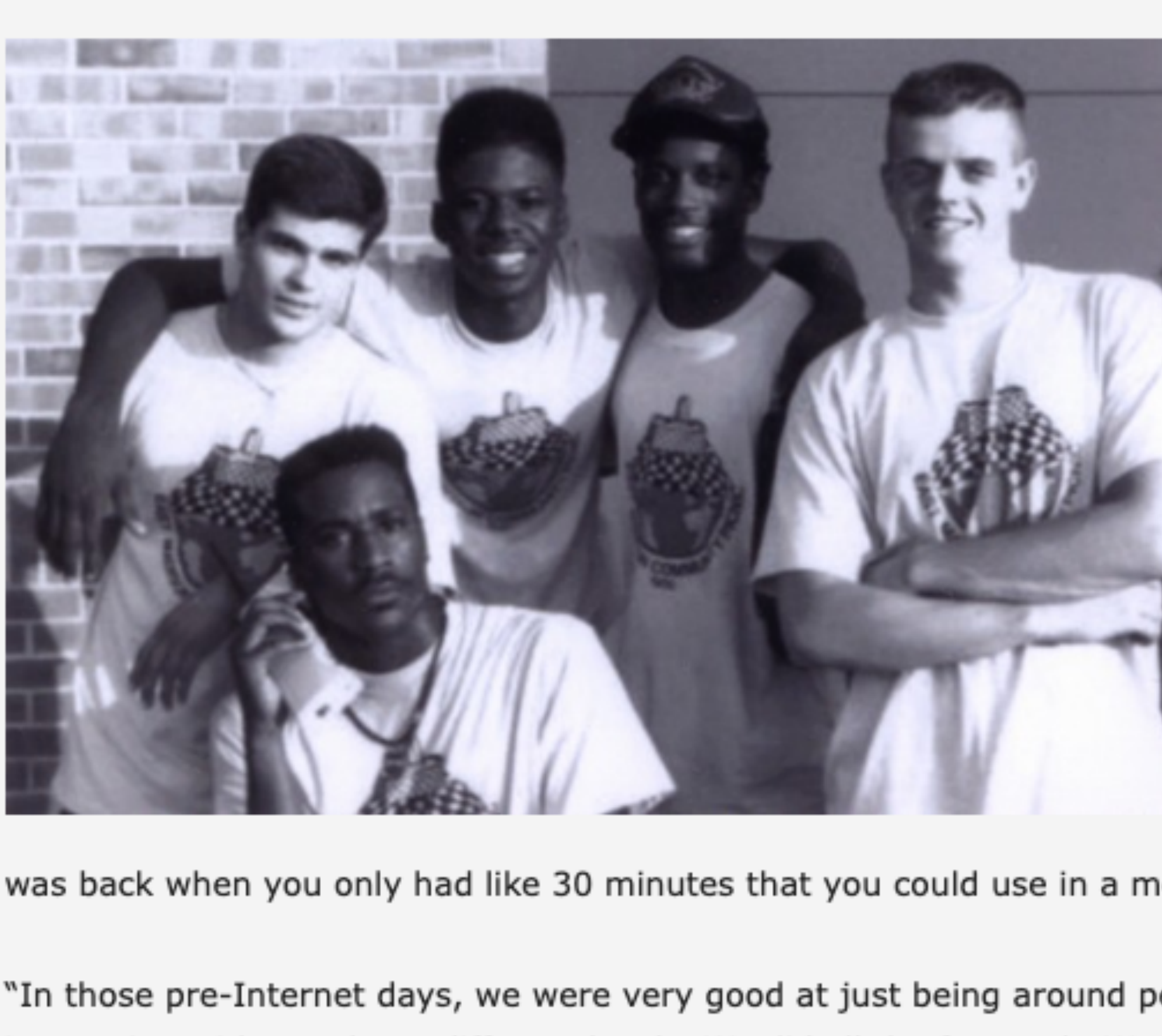
Henderson remembers Fresh Force also opening up for national acts like MC Lyte and EPMD. "And we also opened for a guy named Glenn Medeiros who was a one-hit wonder who had a super hit (She Ain't Worth It") that featured Bobby Brown on it," he remembers.

Fresh Force is often credited as one of Madison's first hip-hop groups. Henderson says it goes back even further.

"There was actually a big hip-hop scene back in the day and I think it actually started with a lot of the breakdance groups," Henderson says. "Once the Sugar Hill Gang and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five … once their songs started coming up then rap started to become a little more popular in those days.

"There was a group back then [in Madison] called the MPs, the Madison Players I believe, and they were one of the first groups to perform …and they kind of inspired our group," Henderson adds.

Fresh Force's growth in popularity in the '80s was a little more impressive in that it came at a time that was pre-Facebook, pre-Twitter, pre-Instagram … pre-Internet, and pre-technological advancements that we see today that are key in the promotion of an upstart band or group. (Case in point: check out Henderson's giant block cell phone below.)



"That wasn't my phone… that belonged to Erin "DJ Sweet E" Hynum… that was his phone … I was just trying to be cool like I had my own cell phone," Henderson laughs. "That was back when you only had like 30 minutes that you could use in a month.

"In those pre-Internet days, we were very good at just being around people and interacting with people on different levels. We did all the footwork. We beat the pavement," Henderson continues. "We used to print out flyers on a regular basis. We were fortunate enough to be able to go on to Z104 [radio station] back in those days and also 89.9 FM [WORT], the local radio station, to talk about things and promote things, but most of it back then was honestly word of mouth."

Group members of Fresh Force would spend their whole weekends out and about throughout the city promoting their group.

"We would go from the South Side of Madison to the high schools. I think the biggest area where we did our promotion was on State Street on the weekends. Everybody went down there on Fridays and Saturdays and they hung out at the arcade … it was called Spaceport," Henderson remembers. "Everyone would hang out down there … people were breakdancing … we were having rap battles. Johnny and I used to work at the New Loft Teen Center, too, so we'd do a lot of promotion there."

They eventually made their way to TV ads (see below). During a Madison West High School talent show, Fresh Force was recognized by Len Mattioli "TV Lenny" of American TV and the group signed a contract to appear in a series of television commercials, mostly during the Christmas season.

Fresh Force American TV Christmas Commercial ...
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Musically, the group, in 1987, finished recording their first 45-rpm vinyl EP "We Rock the House," "Always Together," and "Prejudice," produced at Butch Vig's Smart Studios, according to Fresh Force's website and were at the peak of their careers in the early '90s when they signed a record contract with an independent record label from Chicago, D.J. International.

"I know there's a lot of ego in rap and hip-hop music and stuff and really, the thing about us, is that we really didn't have that," Winston remembers. "We just didn't. We just went out and performed and had a good time doing it."

Winston says that it's exciting to be a part of Mad Lit's 50 Years of Hip-Hop celebration tonight.

"We were part of that hip-hop history here in Madison," Winston says. "I think one of the things that made us so unique was that our membership was multicultural. I think people saw us as like five approachable young men that really represented Madison in the community."

*Fresh Force now: (Clockwise from front left: Johnny Winston, Oren Ben-Ami, Richard Henderson, and Emanuel Whitfield (Not pictured: Erin Hynum)*

Now solidly in their 50s, the group has been busy rehearsing at One City School for their big concert tonight at 8 p.m.

"[Fresh Force member] Oren [Ben-Ami] is here from Israel and we've been hanging out with him quite a bit. Anytime we all get together it's just like back in the day … we talk and we reminisce and we have a lot of fun and a whole bunch of laughs … we never stop laughing," Henderson says.

As for tonight's material, Winston says, "We're going to do the stuff that we did back in the day and just have fun doing it. We are going to relive 1991 on Aug. 11.

"I have four children. My two older children saw me perform when they were younger. And now they're adults," Winston continues. "My younger two children never saw me perform … never even knew that dad was the rapper and when I play them old songs they just kind of look at it like, 'No, That's not you.' Like they can't believe it."

Winston now has grandchildren, as do other members of the group, and they are looking forward to inviting their whole families to see them perform.

"Grandfathers With Attitude," Winston laughs. "They might be embarrassed when they see grandpa up there rapping, but it is a part of history and so they should see it and I'm really looking forward to having fun that night because that is what it's really all about."

"It's gonna be fun," adds Henderson. "I think just the process of us getting together and practicing and then doing the show … I think the journey of it is what's gonna be the most important and the most fulfilling for us. It's just amazing to know that people still remember us in their life. It's amazing how many people actually remember our old songs and how many people are actually looking forward to seeing us perform."