

Two of Madison's first rap crews regroup for a Mad Lit concert

Happy birthday, hip-hop!

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COURTESY JOHNNY WINSTON JR.

Fresh Force

Rap has always been on the cutting edge of cool. Emcees create their own slang, make songs about life's current complications and stay in front of fashion trends.

As a whole, hip-hop culture — which also includes groundbreaking elements like graffiti, beatboxing, breakdancing and DJ-ing — embodies whatever is new and fresh. And for that reason, rap and hip-hop have become a timeless tool used by young people to express themselves. But that doesn't mean its pioneers and early adopters — or its fans — are ageless.

Proving that, there have been concerts and other events celebrating the 50th anniversary of hip-hop this year with throwback tributes to the culture's earliest creators.

Madison's hip-hop history doesn't reach back quite that far, but an Aug. 11 show will bring two of the city's earliest rap crews back to the stage for the first time in a long while: Fresh Force and Black Poets Society.

For Fresh Force, this rap reunion show is literally decades in the making. "We haven't been on a stage or performed together since 1991," says member Johnny Winston Jr. with a laugh.

First coming together in the mid-1980s, **Fresh Force** is a crew of five childhood friends who grew up together on the city's south side. The group appealed to promoters for their clean-cut image — remember, this was the 1980s — and their lively stage presence. Their songs tackled topics like teen pregnancy and drug use, but also lighter content like dating, the depth of their rhyme skills and, of course, partying.



Over the handful of years they were active locally, they opened for national acts like EPMD and MC Lyte. They also cut a few commercials for nightclubs, TV stores and even the local branches of the census bureau and transportation department. After signing to an independent label out of Chicago in 1990, they released such tracks as the fast-paced, electronic "**Body House**" and "**Who Runs This Mutha.**"

"Things were different back then," says Winston, now 55. "But one thing you could count on is that we were always ready with a routine — we had dances and DJ breaks built in — we had a whole show."

Given that it's been so long since they performed together, Winston admits that he's "not quite sure what to expect." But, he adds, "We're happy to finally do it and we'll pull something off. Now is our chance to pass the torch."

Also on the bill is Black Poets Society. Band member LaCour Yancey says when BPS came together in the early 1990s, they were heavily influenced by such groups as De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest. "Those groups were talking about a lot of positive stuff and so we wanted to find our voice and create something positive too," he says. "Plus, being young Black men, rap was probably the only platform we had where we could be heard at the time and not get shut down."

During their time together in the mid-'90s, the crew of eight, which included drummers, emcees, a guitar player and a keyboardist, became known locally for their uplifting songs. Some of their better work includes tracks like "Concepts," which tackles the roller coaster nature of relationships, to more traditional posse cuts like "AOF (Assessment of Freshness)," where each rapper boasts about his lyrical skills.

BPS has played a couple of **reunion shows** since disbanding, and Yancey says to expect an energetic set. "We're not the younger generation anymore but we're not so different from them either," he says. "For all of us, this is about self-expression. That's what hip-hop is — a chance to bring understanding to each other."

Fresh Force and Black Poets Society will perform with L.U.V. and DJ Iron Mike as part of the Mad Lit summer concert series Aug. 11 at 8 p.m. at the top of State Street. For more information see ourgmmc.org.



HEDI LAMARR

Black Poets Society