

Rock band White Stripes breaks up: a look back

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On February 2, the members of The White Stripes announced their band had broken up. In a statement published on their official web site, they wrote that they would “make no further new recordings or perform live.” The reason, as stated by the band, was “not due to artistic differences or lack of wanting to continue,” but was primarily “to preserve what is beautiful and special about the band and have it stay that way.” This marks the end of one of the more talented and unique rock bands of the last decade.

The White Stripes were formed in Detroit, Michigan in 1997. Consisting of only two members, Jack and Meg White, the band was steeped in the traditions of early blues, country music and rock ‘n’ roll. Among Jack White’s biggest influences can be counted Delta Blues legend Son House and garage rock band The Stooges.

Jack White, who had worked as an apprentice upholsterer until forming The White Stripes, quickly established himself as a uniquely talented blues and rock guitarist and a musician of considerable *character*. His unusual way of singing, squeezing the words out of his mouth in the most unpredictable ways, and often with an exaggerated vibrato, was, and is, certainly unlike anything else in popular music.

His drummer, Meg White, was never a technically proficient musician, but the tasteful accompaniment she provided and the space she gave Jack to work with suited the band well. In a 2005 interview with Charlie Rose, Jack compared Meg’s drumming to 1930s blues musician “Robert Johnson tapping his foot on a floor.” As a duo, the group had an undeniable chemistry.

Jack and Meg were married at the time the band got its start and were divorced a few years later, but the musical partnership carried on. Partly as an effort keep the focus on

their music rather than their relationship, Jack and Meg would introduce themselves to the press as brother and sister.

From the beginning, The White Stripes adopted their now iconic red, black and white color scheme. Candy cane-style red and white stripes were everywhere and both musicians and their instruments were dressed accordingly. While they initially chose to present themselves in an intentionally naive and child-like manner, this element of the group’s “character” was eventually abandoned, almost certainly for the better.

Their debut album, simply titled *The White Stripes*, was released in 1999. Heard today, the album still retains its charm. A strong rendition of Robert Johnson’s “Stop Breaking Down” as well as memorable versions of “St. James Infirmary” and Bob Dylan’s “One More Cup Of Coffee” can be found here as well as strong original compositions “I Fought Piranhas” and “Cannon.”

The first album also included the furious “The Big Three Killed My Baby,” about the hardships faced by autoworkers in Detroit in which White sings “The big three killed my baby/no money in my hand again” and “I’m about to have another blowout.” While only dealing with the collapse of Detroit explicitly in one song, the musical textures and emotional territory explored by the band throughout much of the album reflect something of that process, which has turned a city once a symbol of US industrial power into the country’s poorest urban area.

The White Stripes’ second album, *De Stijl* (2000), named after a Dutch modernist art movement in the early part of the 20th century, is a fan favorite and saw the group exploring some new territory, hinting at things to come, although the album is not entirely satisfying. It does contain an excellent version of Son House’s classic “Death Letter Blues”. The song remained in the group’s repertoire for years and

provided some of the more explosive and powerful performances in their live shows. A performance of the song included in their concert documentary *Under Blackpool Lights* is especially notable.

An “underground sensation” for their first two releases, The White Stripes first gained wider recognition in 2001 with their album *White Blood Cells*. This album, for better or worse, became a landmark in the so-called garage rock revival, which included bands like The Strokes, The Hives, and The Mooney Suzuki. It certainly represented a breath of fresh air in a music industry dominated at that time by slickly produced pop vocal groups.

White Blood Cells' second single, “Fell in Love With A Girl,” was the first introduction many listeners had to The White Stripes and it isn't hard to see why the song attracted a large number of admirers. About someone completely swept away by a less-than-healthy love affair, the fast-paced punk rock song is completely exhilarating. Like the relationship at the center of the song, no doubt, the track, at just under 2 minutes long, is over before the listener knows what hit him or her.

White Blood Cells also gave us “Dead Leaves and the Dirty Ground,” “I'm Finding It Harder to Be A Gentleman” and “The Same Boy You've Always Known,” all standouts in the band's discography. All of these songs deal, in one way or another, with love and relationships, and in a much more sober and sincere way than many of their contemporaries.

With *Elephant* (2003), the White Stripes produced what is possibly their strongest album overall. The first single, “Seven Nation Army,” has become the group's best-known song. It features an unforgettable guitar riff that runs throughout the song, first played in deep bass notes before erupting into a high-pitched slide guitar solo. The sure-footed defiance expressed in White's voice as he begins the song, singing “I'm gonna fight 'em off, a seven nation army couldn't hold me back” immediately grabs the listener. This is genuinely exciting music.

While *Get Behind Me Satan* (2005) is not as consistent as *Elephant*, it contains moments as strong as any the band ever produced. The album's first single, “Blue Orchid,” is as hard driving and appealing a rock n' roll song as one can find in recent memory.

“My Doorbell” is another of the band's most exciting songs. With Meg White's drums playing perfectly “in the

pocket,” Jack adds stabs of chords on the piano and sings rapidly unfolding lines trying to coax a lost love back into his life, singing “I been thinkin' about my doorbell and when you're gonna ring it.” The gritty “Instinct Blues” and “The Denial Twist” are also highlights.

The White Stripes' final studio album *Icky Thump* (2007) saw the band return to a forcefully guitar-driven music following the more piano-centered *Get Behind Me Satan*. The title track, with its accompanying music video, is a well-intentioned if somewhat incoherent consideration of anti-immigrant bigotry. Much of the album feels fresh and sees the group exploring new possibilities for composition and song structure. It's worth noting just how much The White Stripes could do with a two-person band and a basic garage rock and blues foundation a decade into their career.

While the band produced several powerful recordings during their run, they were even more remarkable as a live act. The documentaries *Under Blackpool Lights* (2004) and *Under Great White Northern Lights* (2010) give a sense of the energy in their live performances.

In the documentary *It Might Get Loud* (2008) Jack White discussed the importance the band placed in spontaneity and creating a new and immediate experience both for itself and the audience every night on stage. “People know when something's fake,” said White, “and they know when something's rehashed and rehearsed. They know when you're telling the same joke between songs that you told in Poughkeepsie last night. They can smell it.” The White Stripes not only never played with a predetermined setlist, according to White, they didn't even discuss which song they would play first before walking on stage.

The break-up of The White Stripes comes as a disappointment and as something of a shock to many music lovers. But while the White Stripes have now come to an end, Jack White continues to perform as a member of The Raconteurs and The Dead Weather, two bands which also deserve to be heard. Most recently, he produced *The Party Ain't Over*, the first album by rockabilly legend Wanda Jackson in eight years.



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