# John Fletcher (Ecstasy), member of pioneering rap group Whodini, dies at 56

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On December 23, relatives announced the death of John Fletcher, a leading member of the pioneering rap group Whodini. Fletcher, who went by the stage name "Ecstasy," was 56 years old. The cause of death was not made public.

Fletcher (born June 7, 1964 in Brooklyn, New York) represented one-third of the groundbreaking hip hop group Whodini. Comprised of rappers Jalil Hutchins and Drew "DJ Grandmaster Dee" Carter, along with Fletcher-Ecstasy, the group and its contemporaries are credited with helping to establish the popular basis of hip hop music today.

Many of Whodini's innovations, such as using vocal harmonies in verses and choruses, were attributed in particular to Fletcher. "Ecstasy was the lead vocalist on most Whodini songs because anything that we could play he could rap right to it in key," said Hutchins in a recent interview on the hip hop website the Foundation.

Whodini is primarily known for the string of albums released on Jive Records in the early and mid-1980s. Formed in 1982, the group released "Magic's Wand" the same year, dedicated to hip hop radio disc jockey Mr. Magic. The song is among their most highly regarded. The group added Grandmaster Dee to their line-up and adopted the name Whodini in keeping with their mentor's "magic" theme.

While not primarily a "lyricist," Fletcher had a flamboyant persona (complete with his trademark wide-brimmed "Zorro" hat worn onstage and in videos) and lively vocals that lend an element of personality and musicality to the group's recordings. In the period immediately preceding the emergence of intricate verbal technicians such as Rakim (William Michael Griffin) and Big Daddy Kane (Antonio Hardy), Ecstasy, with his self-assured and "cool" swagger, provided a boost to the somewhat stiff rhyme patterns of the late 1970s and early 80s.

Early on, songs such as "The Haunted House of Rock " (1983) showcased the rappers' lighter side. Ecstasy manages to steal the show, bringing humor to what might have been a tired Halloween-themed number:

> We sent out invitations for weeks and weeks
> We invited in all kinds of freaks
> Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
> The Addams Family and the Monster Five
> The Invisible Man—where could he be?
> We know he got inside the party for free

The group gained commercial success with their second album, 1984's *Escape*. The album features the two vocalists trading verses over catchy electro-influenced production provided by Larry Smith. A bassist by trade, Smith provided the backing music to a number of early rap music's most memorable songs. In addition to Whodini songs such as "The Freaks Come Out At Night," "Five Minutes of Funk" and "Friends," Smith produced for other well-known figures and groups such as Kurtis Blow ("Christmas Rappin'," "The Breaks") and Run DMC ("Rock Box," "Sucker M.C.'s").

While sometimes presented as more "commercial-friendly" than their contemporaries, Whodini created music that often visited serious topics in a fairly nuanced manner. On the aforementioned "Friends," Fletcher raps: "Some are ok, and they treat you real cool/ But some mistake kindness for being a fool." Rhyme partner Jalil recalls a relationship with a woman that went sour, "besides making love, we had nothin' in common!"

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In a 2013 interview on AL.com, Hutchins spoke to the themes in Whodini's music: "'Friends' is one of the realest general songs that we've ever made out of hip-hop, as far as telling the story of what's happening, giving it a light edge but making it effective and staying in the clubs for 30 years," he declares. "The younger generation may not study all the words, but they know that song."

The group recorded four additional records throughout the course of the 1980s and '90s. The harmonizing and melodic quality of their music influenced later subgenres of pop, such as "New Jack Swing," popularized by Teddy Riley, Boyz II Men and others in the early 1990s.

The group participated in the first inaugural Fresh Fest hip hop national tour, performing in front of sold-out stadium crowds. Likewise, the group was the first to tour the United Kingdom and the European continent to sell-out crowds, complete with a break dancer backup act.

Following Fletcher's recent death, tributes from fans and fellow artists abounded on social media. "[In] 1987 I entered the Def Jam tour," wrote Chuck D of Public Enemy. "I tended to be nervous, looking at 15,000 fans in front of me every night. There were two MCS that directly mentored my calm that summer. One was Doug E. Fresh and the other was Ecstasy of Whodini. Always there to reassure with advice and tips."

On Instagram, Barry Weiss, the CEO of Jive Records, explained that "it all began" with a record produced by Thomas Dolby, which was intended for Mr. Magic. Hutchins and Fletcher rapped the song instead. Once Weiss heard the record, he wrote, we "threw the rule book out the window when we heard his [Fletcher's] verse and his voice. We came up with the name Whodini, threw caution to the wind and watched as these two kids out of Brooklyn conquered the world and set the pace and tone for a generation of rappers that came after them."

While much is carefree and enjoyable in Whodini's catalog, the group increasingly became less relevant as time went on. "As new styles emerged in hip-hop, Whodini became part of the old school, and was pushed down the food chain. Their final album arrived in 1996, but the group continued appearing at reunion shows," writes Deadline's Bruce Waring of the group's decline.

The allusion to "new styles" points toward the emergence of harder "street" rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The latter phenomenon, "hardcore" and "gangsta" rap, reflected in part the increasingly dire state of life for wide layers of the younger population, but given the generally reactionary climate of the times, brought with it much that was disoriented and anti-social.

Against the official triumphalism of the day, the "greed is good" ethos on Wall Street, the scrapping of social reform programs and the explosion of American militarism, it isn't surprising that "lighter" and more carefree music seemed out of its depth. Whodini's final album *Six* (So So Def, 1996) sought to adapt itself to this "harder" style, with generally weak results.

Regardless, Fletcher will be remembered for his musical contributions and the genuine optimism and creativity that abounded in Whodini's numerous albums and songs.

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