

A Close Shave

Skinheads were youth culture's original whipping boys (and girls), demonised in the press, their look hijacked by the far right. But with skinhead gods Dave and Ansell Collins and The Pioneers appearing together in Bristol this week, it's a chance for the old originals to show us what they were really all about. Chris Brown and Cris Warren talk to local skinheads, past and present, and discover it's not just a haircut, it's a way of life.

DON'T BOVVER ME

From Levi Sta-Prest to Harrington jackets, Chris Brown's seen it all, growing up as a Bristol Rovers fan, back when the Tote End boot boys hated everyone - including each other.

There should be a new reality TV programme. A sort of Carol Smilie makeover of misunderstood and misrepresented inhabitants of these islands. And who would be at the top of the list of disenfranchised individuals badly in need of a spot of TV-friendly PR? Traffic wardens? Asylum seekers? Government press secretaries? How about skinheads? If ever there was a cult that was seriously in need of some of the smiley one's magic, it's those shaven-headed fascists from the Neanderthal age. Because, let's face it, that's exactly what they were, wasn't it? Sieg-heiling boneheads who thought nothing of forcing babies in their prams to sniff glue (well, OK, that did happen in a park in Bristol in 1983), but let's go back to the original crop-headed lads (and lasses) from the late 60s...

It's hard to imagine now just how huge the skinhead movement was more than three decades ago. As the old-school mods 'progressed' from purple hearts to acid, and de-camped to their free-loving communes in Wales, the angry young men of the nation cut their hair, donned overtly working-class clothing and, by and large, began kicking the shit out of each other with exceedingly large workboots. All this, while a backing track of 'janga, janga, →

janga' thumped in the background - a new music from Jamaica, which had evolved from ska and rock steady. And I don't mean Harry Belafonte. I'm talking reggae in all its politically incorrect 'Tighten Up Volume 2' glory. The early cropheads emerged in London in early 1968 as a direct rejection of the flower-power, peace-loving hippy. And by the summer of 1969, with Desmond Dekker at number one in the charts with 'Israelites', the grip of the skinhead movement on teenage Britain was irreversible and vicelike.

So what attracted young men and women to this violent, anti-social cult? Well, for a start, the very fact that it was violent and anti-social. But that's being simplistic - it also had style, bucketloads of it. It wasn't all bover boots and braces. Admittedly, early skinheads got most of their gear from ex-army stores (Marcruss on Hotwell Road was a favourite, especially for the suede zip-up USAF jackets), but as the cult developed, so did the fashion. Harrington jackets - named after the Ryan O'Neal character in 'Peyton Place', a popular soap of the time - replaced the flying jackets, while the Crombie overcoat, as worn by city gents, quickly became the must-have item of clothing on the terraces of Ashton Gate or Eastville during the winter of 1970. The ever-so-sharp Levi Sta-Prest changed colour from brilliant white to iridescent 'Tonik', while the all-important boot evolved from steel-toe-capped workboots to de rigueur Dr Martens and all-leather (and very expensive) brogues and loafers, customised with an extra inch of leather sole, courtesy of the cobblers in Fairfax Street. (And you thought Elton John invented the platform shoe.) The famous button-down Ben

DO THE REGGY

The top ten skinhead stompers

Moon Hop Derrick Morgan

Jesse James Laurel Aitken

Live Injection The Upsetters

54-46 The Maytals

How Long? Pat Kelly

Liquidator Harry J All Stars

Love of the Common People Nicky Thomas

Swan Lake The Cats

Whisky and Soda The Mopeds

Skinhead Moonstomp Symarip

Sherman shirt became synonymous with the skinhead, and as the candy stripe gave way to multicoloured checks, every 15 year old around the country begged his mum to get him a shirt bearing the legendary black and gold label.

But trying to make out that the first-generation skinhead was merely a follower of fashion, and a misunderstood victim who suffered from a bit of bad press, is indeed a half-truth. The violence that engulfed the skinhead, like the gas that made the old Rovers ground smell, was frighteningly real, and to dismiss and ignore it would be foolish in the extreme. The nation's football stadiums became the skinhead's battlegrounds, as did the seafronts, the dancehalls and the high streets. They fought greasers, hippies, gays and Asians, but mostly they fought each other - which, I

suppose, proved they weren't prejudiced. They hated everyone. Maybe they were guilty of selective racism, if there is such a thing. Among their ranks, in many cities, were large numbers of West Indian youths, and their love of reggae music spoke volumes - after all, it was skinheads who got 'Young, Gifted And Black' by Bob and Marcia into the top five.

Much is made today of the violence in Bristol city centre on a weekend. Well, you're having a laugh. Many a young man ventured into the centre back then, in search of pulling a mini-skirted 'sort', but the only thing that was guaranteed to come his way was a smack in the mouth, if he looked at someone 'the wrong way'. When the skinheads were at their peak in the early 70s, the city centre was no place for the faint-hearted, especially around the covered market area, where pubs like the Crown, Rummer and Elephant (pre-gay), as well as the notorious Stage Door in King Street, drew hordes of shaven-headed lads from the council estates in search of a bit of 'aggro'. The law even resorted to setting up a special taskforce, which was quickly named 'The Bover Squad' by the Evening Post, to try to contain the violence. It hardly succeeded, and as for the football violence... well, I could write a book.

'Where Have All The Boot Boys Gone?' was a record by Slaughter and the Dogs in the early 80s. Well, where have they all gone? What are they doing now? Do they look back on those days with regrets? Are they filled with remorse? Far from it. Here's what two ex-skinheads, 50-year-old Bob 'Dobbsy' S (now a heavy goods vehicle driver, married for 29 years and living in St George) and 49-year-old Ian H (computer systems analyst, married for 21 years and living in South Gloucestershire), remember of those days...



Where Have All The Boot Boys Gone?

Can you remember the first time you saw skinheads? What made you become a skinhead? What drew you to the skinhead movement? Who did you fight with?

Bob 1968, in the Croydon area of London. Crystal Palace and Millwall fans. I was 15 years old, and fell for the clothes, the reggae, the gorgeous skinhead girls and the excitement of the whole scene. I followed Bristol Rovers, so I was one of the Tote End boot boys. We hated greasers, although, funnily enough, a lot of our fans were greasers. We fought with other skins at football – they used to chant ‘soap and water’ at the greasers, because they were so filthy, but it still caused offence to us, so we stuck together with the greasers for the cause.

Ian Almost certainly whilst attending a football match. There was a considerable amount of media coverage about the emergent youth culture and the violence that accompanied it. I do remember that some of the articles dealt with the fashion of the skinheads – both male and female. This would have been around 1969-70. As I regularly attended football, I was drawn to being a skinhead, together with my mates, as that was what many working-class young males were doing. It also served that basic human need to belong to an identifiable group.

Where did you hang out? Favourite pubs, clubs? Clothes shops?

Bob At football grounds around the country, mostly. The infamous, but much-loved Never on a Sunday cafe in Fairfax Street, Cora's cafe on Colston Avenue, Monte Carlo cafe in Eastville (full of greasers, but they were Tote Enders), and pubs like the Elephant, the Way Inn (next to what's now the Royal Marriot) and the market cellar bars. The Top Rank (now the Works), the Locarno (above what's now the Academy). Bank holiday trips to Weston,

Torquay and Weymouth were absolute mayhem. Shops were Coke and Clobber (next to the Never on a Sunday), Carnaby One, Beau Brummel on the Centre and Austins in Broadmead.

Ian Many of the dancehalls and discos within pubs were playing Motown and reggae, so it attracted us. I used to go to the Locarno on a Monday night with mates, where we'd meet other skinheads. It was an opportunity to wear a suit, together with a tie pin and handkerchief in the top pocket, which was an absolute must.

What was your favourite item of clothing, where did you buy it, and how much did it cost?

Bob Doc Martens, purchased from Jacobs in Old Market for about £2 15s in 1969. Yellow Ben Sherman shirt bought from Kings Road, London for £2 10s, shrink-to-fit Levis for £3 – you had to sit in the bath for hours to get them to fit.

Ian Doc Martens identified you as a skinhead. They became associated with the culture of bowver more than anything else – and they were very comfortable to walk in. I think that's why I kept them for so long after I ceased being a skinhead. I bought them at the market for £4 19s 6d. For a long time, I kept them in the garage, not telling my parents, and put them on once I'd left the house in my 'sensible' shoes. We used to have our trousers and jackets made to measure by a tailor in Broadmead called 'Jacksons'. You went in one week to be measured up and pay your deposit, then returned the following week to pick up the finished garment and pay the balance. It was important to have your trousers exactly in fashion, being prescriptive about the width of the trouser legs, width of the turn-ups, patch pockets and having a ticket pocket. Similarly, jackets had to have a certain length for the centre vent, a specific style and width of lapels, and also a specified number of buttons on the sleeves.

Do you still own any of that clothing, and do you still wear it?

Bob No, but I still wear similar clothing, like button-down shirts, Levis – but full-length now, not short. A smart pair of Wegian Loafers (leather slip-on shoes) – classic look, still instantly recognisable to anyone from that era.

Ian I've kept a long black leather coat (more from the smoothie era), which was styled on one that Marvin Gaye wore on the cover of 'What's Going On', but that's it.

Do you think there were any specific skinhead 'values' that have influenced your life today? Do you still adhere to those values?

Bob I still retain a great passion for Rovers, still spend a lot on clothes that aren't that far removed from then – quality jeans, smart polos, even bought a pair of brogues last winter. Still see mates from 35 years ago at football. I'm disciplined with work, never lost any time, been at the same company for over 33 years.

Ian I don't think there were any particular values that were specific to the skinhead culture of the time. Perhaps there was the liking for smart clothes and being well dressed, which I suppose I've retained since, although not to the same degree.

What made you stop being a skinhead? Do you still engage in 'skinhead activities' – football, music gigs?

Bob Skins and suedeheads naturally progressed to smoothies. The second generation of skins, in the late 70s, lost the edge in clothing, music and politics – I got married, and settled down. I'm a season ticket-holder at Rovers, still buy and retain my original collection of soul and reggae records. Love to see footage of musicians from that era.

Ian The fashion moved on, and I wanted to be the same as my mates. We had now become 'suedeheads', and had grown our hair longer and wore different, less utilitarian clothes, no more boots – loafers and even moccasins. I haven't been involved in skinhead culture or activities since the early 70s, but still retain a love of Motown and soul music.

Do you have any regrets about being a skinhead?

Bob No regrets. Had a great time. Still see a lot of people from that era who are like-minded. Could have done without the criminal record, though!

Ian No.

Chris Brown is the author of 'Bovver' (Blake Publishing Ltd, £5.99), the best-selling eyewitness account of growing up as a Bristol Rovers fan: the sights, the sounds, the fashions and the fights.



Skin up

Skins are what they used to be, says Cris Warren.

The haircut seems almost ubiquitous nowadays, but real skinheads are hard to find. They're still around, though. Go to any gig by a visiting Jamaican artist, and you'll find them immaculately turned out, sharply cropped hair for the men, feather cuts for the women, suited and booted, as if it were still 1968. Shirehampton skins Ricky and Lorraine admit that skinheads are a rare breed these days, but they keep the flame alive, paying immaculate detail to the look and regularly going out to ska gigs and attending scooter rallies. "You do get some funny looks now and then. People want to know what it's all about, or they make assumptions about you. We go to see The Simalators [Bristol-based ska group with an absolutely storming live reputation] a lot. In fact, I do their website, and they're brilliant. They really keep the flame alive – you see quite a lot of the old-school skins there dancing to the music and meeting up."

The pair have been immersed in skinhead culture for "...ever," says Ricky, a former butcher, now a website designer, decked in perfectly creased dressed-down, taken-up Levis, properly cut Ben Sherman shirt (not the flabby ones on the market now) and DMs (which must be polished). When he's out for the night, he dons Crombie coat and fastidiously pressed suit, topped off with a three-pointed hankie in the breast pocket.

"We've got home movies of me as a kid in a Harrington, two-tone trousers. It's just carried on from that. I've always listened to the same music – ska is my passion – and worn the same style. I got into it in the two-tone era – then you were either a mod or a skin. I took the skin path."

Ricky's partner Lorraine, manager at a dry cleaners, has been a 'skingirl' slightly longer. Her brothers were skinheads when she was growing up in Shirehampton, and she adopted the classic skingirl style – feather-cut hair ("which Ricky

does. You go into a hairdresser's now, and ask for one – they're like, 'You what?'), sharp two-piece suit (single-breasted, three buttons, bottom left undone, double pocket flaps), fishnets and white ankle socks. "It's attention to detail, a very sharp but simple look. It's a working-class thing, and we take a lot of pride in our appearance. A few years ago, you could be ostracised if your suit wasn't pressed, or you were in the wrong shirt... it's not so snobby now, but we still take pride in it."

Being a skinhead nowadays is a quieter business, but the prejudices still exist. "We still don't get accepted. Older people just use the old stereotypes about bovver boys, and the younger generation know nothing about it. It's like you're from another planet. Skins nowadays are mainly people our own age, or a bit older. Some people do look at you, and you can tell that they assume you're in the far right, or something. There are skinheads who are fascists, but there are also a lot of people who are Nazis, and who don't have a skinhead or wear boots – sadly, that's the way it is. We, personally, don't have time for those sorts of politics. Our culture is based around the original skinheads, and reggae and ska music, black West Indian music. That's at the core of everything. People lump all skins together, and usually say they're racist or whatever. That's just a stupid stereotype, and it's certainly not true of us and the people we know."

So what keeps them being a skinhead? They both reply at the same time, laughing: "We've got a wardrobe full of clothes. We can't do anything else." Lorraine takes over: "It's just a way of life – Trojan, ska. It's passionate music... the clothes... it's a way of life," adds Ricky. "Society just tells you what to do, what to wear, what to listen to. It shouldn't be like that, and we like being slightly different, doing our own thing."

The Simalators next gig is at The Prom on Gloucester Road, Bristol on Oct 3. Visit their website at www.thesimalators.co.uk for more details.

SKA-BOOM

Cris Warren traces the legacy of two of Ska's biggest tunes.

● "The two biggest records, if you were a skinhead in the late 60s, were Dave and Ansell Collins' 'Double Barrel' and The Pioneers' 'Longshot Kick De Bucket'. It's as simple as that – they sort of defined the time." Reggae DJ Steve Rice was a 15-year-old Brixton teenager when Trojan records unleashed the 45s that soundtracked the growing skinhead movement. Rice was already something of a ska and rocksteady buff, regularly buying Studio One cuts imported from Jamaica, but, he says, "Double Barrel and Longshot were something else. Dave Barker's shouts over 'Double Barrel' – nobody had heard anything like it in this country. It was, like, what the fuck was that? They were massive tunes, way ahead of their time. The bands must have been pretty overwhelmed when the tracks were hits over here. They probably only got about \$20 for recording them, and all of a sudden they were massive on the other side of the world. I remember them being on 'Top of the Pops', looking a little bemused."

Although The Pioneers scored another huge hit with a version of Jimmy Cliff's 'Let Your Yeah Be Yeah', chart action for both acts practically disappeared. D&AC's singer Dave Barker (the band's producer thought they'd do better if audiences imagined the pair were brothers), pursued a not-so-successful soul career, while Ansell Collins went on to be a much-in-demand keyboard session player, featuring on many of King Tubby's records.

A gig by the now re-formed Pioneers and Dave and Ansell Collins at Fiddlers in Bristol on September 12 promises to be something of a red-letter day for fans of ska and rocksteady. "I imagine there'll be quite a few of the old-school skins and a bunch of old farts like me, but there'll be a good mix of other people, too," says Steve, reflecting on the enduring legacy of Jamaican ska. Steve will be DJing the night, with selections from his formidable reggae and funk collection. So he'll be playing the aforementioned anthems, then? "Er, no. I'll be honest with you – I like the songs still, but you don't half get sick of hearing them being played all the time. In fact, I don't think I've even got a copy of them. I'll leave that to the bands." Dave and Ansell Collins play Fiddlers, Wilway Street, Bristol on Friday 12 September. See Music Diary, starting on page 78, for more details.

