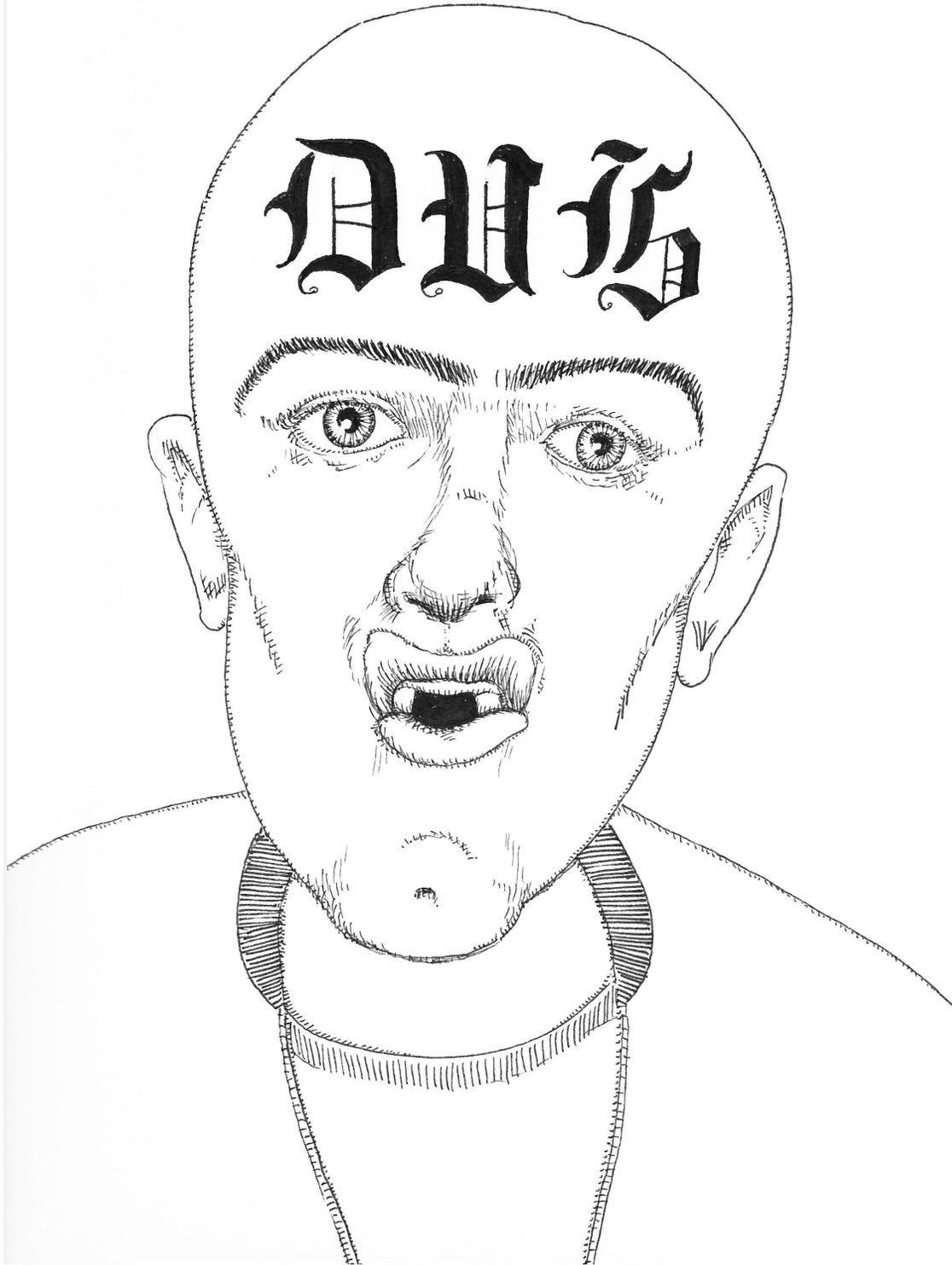


Take The Skinheads Brawling



In the summer of 1985 I was a disillusioned 15-year-old living in the suburbs. I wasn't getting along too well at home or school, and so I ran away.

It was something I'd been planning to do for a while, but I didn't know where I would end up when I finally did. A friend said I could stay with him at his girlfriend's warehouse across the street from Atlanta's legendary/notorious punk dive, The Metroplex. I knew the burned out, post apocalyptic-looking warehouse was where skinheads lived and congregated. And I surmised that the middle aged woman who owned the place had likely bought it so she and her teen daughter could have access to a bevy of young men and boys.

Apparently this woman had enough money to afford to live in a warehouse without having to work for a living and so could languish around the dump with young skinheads and punk rockers.

I settled in and found a corner of the hardwood floor on which to crash. I had nothing but the clothes on my back and a sketch pad. Pretty much the minute I arrived I was being sized up by every individual in the place. And it was quickly determined that I should get a hair cut to match all the other bald domes on the premises. Now, I didn't mind having a shaved head, I'd done it before, but I was happy with my shoulder-length hair at the time and insisted on keeping it. This would have likely been a problem

for me had I not been carrying my sketch pad. As it turned out the local alpha skin was into comic books and just learning how to draw, himself, so when he asked me to show him some of my work he was impressed enough to let the others know that I was not to be bothered. He then told me I could eat food from his personal stash that nobody else was allowed to go near, and even offered me a sip of beer from the quart he was drinking. I was in!

By the mid 1980s skinheads had infiltrated the Atlanta punk scene in a big way. Many were homeless or runaway kids, like myself, hiding out, and some probably adopted the skinhead look in order to avoid the law. Many came from St. Louis, and these folks brought a whole new outlook to our little scene. The Atlanta punks hadn't seen the kind of hard attitude and militancy the guys from St. Louis espoused, and that's when I noticed things begin to change. When I first started going to shows I'd see the odd shaved head, but everyone was welcoming no matter how hardcore you looked. By the time the skinheads formed a hard-edged identity and became "United & Strong" the scene began to splinter and there was infighting within our microcosmic subculture.

Of course there was an aspect of racism (which is funny considering the British skinhead subculture was originally associated with black popular music genres such as soul, ska, rocksteady and early reggae) and anti-gay sentiment running through their group. I had seen them practically destroy a car at the Metroplex belonging to an openly gay patron. But sometimes

they'd gang up on anybody for seemingly any reason and even beat on people who dressed in punk regalia as opposed to wearing the austere skinhead uniform. They would especially single somebody out for being unknown on the scene or looking like a poseur. Even the girl skins were violent. A friend of mine was beaten up and had a cigarette extinguished on her face by a group of skin chicks at a Violent Femmes show.

When I first landed at the warehouse I was mainly concerned about survival...and scrounging up enough money for a quart of beer. But I became a part of this happy home for wayward youth in no time at all. By the time I went to stay with them, they'd become infamous around town, and known as people to avoid. Except I never did avoid them back then. They gave me a bit of respect, I guess, because I had been on the scene longer than most of them and they figured I was authentic enough to hang.

Most of the older guys with work experience went to the labor pool in the morning, but many just hung out and polished their boots or cleaned their leather jackets (Yes, even though it was August in an un-air conditioned warehouse in downtown Atlanta, people still wore or carried around their "leathers") or tried to battle the fleas from a litter of feral kittens. The only available leisure activities were huffing stolen Freon or swinging on a rope hanging outside a second story bay door. If we got really bored we'd walk to the Peachtree Plaza and ride the scenic elevator to the top and freak the normals. Occasionally we'd pile into someone's car and drive

around looking for trouble. One night we heard about a party that a punker girl's parents were hosting in Virginia Highlands. We arrived at the party and the skins completely took over. It was a sad sight to see middle aged parents protest with impotent rage at these boys coming in and taking their keg of beer (and daughter). The skins all laughed at her hippie parents as we made it back to the warehouse and crowded around the keg.

One afternoon I decided to take the alpha skin up on the offer of free food and began to preheat the communal toaster oven. As I was reading the cooking instructions on the back of the box a couple of skinheads warily approached and asked me what I was doing. A look of wonderment came over their faces as I explained that I was cooking. The more I tried to explain how easy it was to prepare food this way the more confused they got. It occurred to me that these guys might not even know how to read.

Although the skins accrued a well deserved reputation for roaming in large numbers and ganging up on people, there was a practicality to staying in a group. The neighborhood the warehouse was located in was a no-man's land of old abandoned buildings. Anybody who walked around those parts alone was an easy target for beatings or muggings. I was shown how to minimize traveling on the streets by walking on rooftops of connected buildings whenever possible. On weekends after shows at "the 'plex", and after most of the club's patrons had gone back to suburbia, a small scale race war took place.

There was a club located about a mile down the road called The Phoenix that catered to the black Down by Law gang, and when it closed there was a flood of traffic. In anticipation the residents of the warehouse would collect all of the bottles, rocks and bricks they could find in the street and lock up the warehouse as tight as a drum. Then, perched on the roof they would rain down these projectiles upon the traffic. But the crowd leaving from The Phoenix was always prepared, and usually armed with pistols.

There were a few black punks staying at the warehouse that summer, and they were left alone, but not the black skinhead. The black skinhead was another runaway who went under a pseudonym and was hiding from his parents and/or the police. The skins wore their racism on their bomber jacket sleeves, and this poor guy weathered insults, abuse and humiliation. He was even the victim of a drive-by shooting, in the stomach, right in front of the warehouse.

I went back home after a few weeks, but still crashed at the warehouse from time to time after shows. The woman who owned the space freaked me out one night when she came onto me while I was tripping my brains out at some *Oi!* shithole called The Boot Locker and so I avoided her thereafter. She had acquired a reputation for taking advantage of young men when they were drunk, and the thought of that made me nauseous.

The skinheads just became a bigger nuisance as time went on. The skin chicks would position themselves directly in front of the stage at shows so that anyone who attempted to stage dive or slam dance would inevitably bump into them, whereupon their goon boyfriends would step in to kick ass. They were always starting trouble at shows or crashing parties (some friends fled to my home in the suburbs one night when they were driven out of their midtown apartment) and spoiling the fun for anyone else in their path. Even touring bands weren't immune from the abuse. I took it upon myself to apologize to Sonic Youth after some skins heckled them during their *Bad Moon Rising* set. They beat up the local recruiter for the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade at a Corrosion of Conformity show (a benefit for the Sandinistas), effectively shutting it down.

One night about twenty skins beat one punk rocker until he was lying on the sidewalk unconscious. They wouldn't stop until a man with a pistol walked up and fired off a warning shot. After the skins scattered we took the battered punker home and put him in a bath until he came to. I was disgusted at having to explain what happened to this bruised, naked, confused man.

Finally, the violent antics of the skins made the news. A door man at 688 club was hospitalized after a serious beating. Some went to jail while others left town or changed their appearance to avoid capture. The alpha skin who shared his beer with me was rumored

to have a raped a girl and later committed suicide. Another warehouse resident stomped a homeless man to death.

By the late 1980s the skinhead movement in Atlanta began fizzle out, but left its mark on me. For years I was mistaken as the guitarist for The Anti-Heroes. I also resembled a certain skinhead who was known to lie, cheat and steal. Once at a party I was only barely able to talk a group of guys out of pummeling me because of this. Then I would go to another party and have to deal with harassment by neophyte skins who just treated me like anyone else with hair. A group of skins tried to crash a party at my apartment after a Butthole Surfers show. After attempting to commandeer the keg, a black one (Really, what is it with these guys!?) told a friend that she was “hairy”. Within seconds they were surrounded by every male friend she had in that place, and we made him apologize. Turns out these idiot bullies would back down if you stood up to them.



[Keith E. Lee](#) [Mar 29, 2016](#) · 8 min read