

“Tied up in Nottz”: The Politics of Music and Style in Austerity Britain  
Jessica Strübel  
April 11, 2018

Summary by Courtney Brown

Politics, as well as a country's political climate, can have an effect on the creation of counterculture groups which distinguish themselves from others through the clothes that they wear. Jessica Strübel discussed the creation and development of the traditional British Skinhead, and how their styles and actions evolved through changing political climates.

The Skinheads can be traced back to the 1960s when they evolved from several different subcultural groups that popped up post World War II in the United Kingdom, such as the Teddy Boys and the Mods. Both the Teddy Boys and Mods consisted mainly of working class British youths who needed a way to separate themselves from the upper class, which they perceived to be lazy and entitled. After World War II, a large influx of immigrants from the West Indies came to the United Kingdom in search of better opportunities for life and work. Many of these immigrants flocked to South and East London, where they lived and interacted with the Hard Mods, a group of young working class men and women who lived in economically depressed areas in London, and adapted a type of Mod style that differed from the typical Mod look. Instead of wearing the rather bright and colorful, tightly fitted clothing that the more “popular” and well-known Mods wore, the Hard Mods adapted the style of the West Indian immigrants known as the Rude Boys, sporting “too short” trousers and Trilby hats. The Hard Mods liked Jamaican ska music and would often interact with the West Indian immigrants at ska clubs. They favored their culture because they were working class people who did not relate to the Hippie counterculture, which was centered around the educated middle class.

The early Skinheads, who took most of their styles from the West Indian Rude Boys, placed an emphasis on working class origins, often wearing tight, bleached jeans, cherry red Doc Martens, and closely shaved heads as an ode to traditional masculinity. When most people envision Skinheads, they think of white, racist, and typically violent, neo-Nazi men with shaved heads, wearing work boots and suspenders. Many of the earliest Skinheads were not at all racist, and spent a lot of time interacting with West Indian immigrants and adapting their way of dress and speaking. In fact, black Skinheads did exist at one point. By the late 1970s, however, Skinhead was ultimately synonymous with racism. Many of the racist Skinheads felt alienated by the British government, and were upset with the U.K.'s immigration laws. They felt as though they were being left behind, and that the West Indian immigrants, who were once friends of theirs, were taking away their jobs. With all the pent-up anger Skinheads felt towards the British government came a change in their way of dressing. They began dressing in a rough, almost militaristic fashion, donning body and face tattoos, which contradicted the “smart” look that the early Skinheads were so well known for. At this point, Skinheads were known by the British media to be far right-wing white nationalists, which was a stereotype that they could not shake. There has been a resurgence of racist Skinheads in the U.K. today, mostly due to the current political climate, which has been affected by Brexit. Many working class Brits feel left behind by the British government due to excessive immigration, leading to an increase in Neo-Nazi and Fascist thoughts and ideas, similar to those of the more well-known, politicized Skinheads from the late 1970s. The politically charged music of the Sleaford Mods, who are based in Nottingham, inspired the title of Dr. Strübel's presentation: “Tied Up in Nottz.”