

Kieran of

ANTI RACIST ACTION

Interview by Martin Sprouse and Tim Yohannan



ARA

P.O. Box 7471

Minneapolis, MN 55407

FIGHT THE POWERS THAT BE

MRR: Let's start with you explaining your vision of 'skinhead culture' because most people hear comes from the Nazis.

Kieran: For me, the Nazis' version is Ice. The origins of the movement came from black Jamaican music—the music came in the form of reggae and ska, later in ska, and was exported to England and shared with white working class youth. It was always a multi-racial thing and embedded with working class politics that are very much against racism.

MRR: The ironic thing is that the Nazis say that skinheads have always been white.

Kieran: That's just not true; it's a lie. You look at pictures from the English scene in the 60's and see that it isn't true. There have always been black skinheads and black music has always been the backbone. Even Ian Stuart (vocalist for Skrewdriver) was off the early Rolling Stones who ripped off black R&B artists.

MRR: Let's move onto some of the groups you're involved with by giving brief histories of them.

Kieran: The group I'm involved with is the anti-racist skinhead group called The Anti-Racist Action (ARA) formed in 1987. The Baldies were a multi-racial group of skinheads in Minneapolis who for the most part were apolitical until the Nazi skinheads came on the scene which immediately politicized them. At first there was an open conflict with the White Knight skin group in Minneapolis and the Nazis. We would be at the same shows together but there wouldn't be a big hassle—we'd look at each other. But this exchange didn't last and grew until we decided that we were going to put up with it. From then on every time we saw a White Knight or a White Knight they were physically confronted. These confrontations took place at the major hangouts in town as well as at most of the shows took place. After every time we saw them we confronted them and told them that this was their last chance to quit and that next time we would see them they would get it. That's how we got the Nazis in Minneapolis. After the Nazis had been kicked out of Minneapolis we had a big victory because it would be hard for them to try and reorganize in the area. In the meantime we weren't aware of other activities outside of the city. The few that remained went to St. Paul (right outside Minneapolis) and there they jumped on a black kid which started a mini race war at St. Paul high school. So we decided we first needed to branch out and let other people know that there are anti-racist skinheads and make contact with different cities because it shouldn't be just a local thing between bald head kids. This is when Anti-Racist Action was formed. The idea was not just to be a group of anti-racist skinheads but to involve all types of young people. Sometimes we were able to mobilize people from different cultural backgrounds to go confront Nazis, which was pretty successful. Another group that The Baldies are affiliated with is the Synthesizers which is a network of anti-racist skinheads mainly from the Midwest. The Synthesizers came to be because a lot of The Baldies went on tour with the local band The Approach (anti-racist skinhead band from Chicago) they met people who were involved with S.H.O.C. (Skinheads of Chicago) and talked with them about forming ARA, which they later on did and now it's the leading chapter of the organization because they do the most work and

Kieran of

ANTI RACIST ACTION

Interview by Martin Sprouse and Tim Yohannan



ARA
P.O. Box 7471
Minneapolis, MN 55407

FIGHT THE POWERS THAT BE

MRR: Let's start with you explaining your version of 'skinhead culture' because what most people hear comes from the mouths of the Nazis.

Kieran: For me, the Nazis' version is on thin ice. The origins of the movement came from black Jamaican music—the music which came in the form of reggae and soul and later in ska, and was exported to England and shared with white working class people. It was always a multi-racial thing and always embedded with working class politics which are very much against racism.

MRR: The ironic thing is that the Nazi skinheads say that skinheads have always been white.

Kieran: That's just not true; it's a lie. You can look at pictures from the English dance halls in the 60's and see that it isn't true. There have always been black skinheads and black music has always been the basis of it. Even Ian Stuart (vocalist for Skrewdriver) rips off the early Rolling Stones who ripped off black R&B artists.

MRR: Let's move onto some of the groups that you're involved with by giving brief history of them.

Kieran: The group I'm involved with is an anti-racist skinhead group called The Baldies who formed Anti-Racist Action (ARA) in 1987. The Baldies were a multi-racial group of skinheads in Minneapolis who for the most part were apolitical until the Nazi skinheads came on the scene which immediately politicized them. At first there wasn't an open conflict with the White Knights (Nazi skin group in Minneapolis) and the Baldies. We would be at the same shows together but there wouldn't be a big hassle—just bad looks at each other. But this exchange grew and grew until we decided that we weren't going to put up with it. From then on every time we saw a White Knight or a group of White Knights they were physically confronted. These confrontations took place at the major hangouts in town as well as where most of the shows took place. After a while every time we saw them we confronted them and told them that this was their last chance to quit and that next time we saw them they would get it. That's how we beat the Nazis in Minneapolis. After the Nazis had been kicked out of Minneapolis we had won a big victory because it would be hard for them to try and reorganize in the area, but in the meantime we weren't aware of their activities outside of the city. The few Nazis that remained went to St. Paul (right next to Minneapolis) and there they jumped a black kid which started a mini race war at a St. Paul high school. So we decided that we first needed to branch out and let people know that there are anti-racist skinheads and make contact with different communities because it shouldn't be just a battle between bald head kids. This is when Anti-Racist Action was formed. The idea for ARA was not just to be a group of anti-racist skins but to involve all types of young people. Sometimes we were able to mobilize a lot of people from different cultural backgrounds to go confront Nazis, which was pretty successful. Another group that The Baldies and ARA are affiliated with is the Syndicate, which is a network of anti racist skinheads mainly from the Midwest. The Syndicate came to be because a lot of The Baldies went on tour with the local band Blind Approach (anti-racist skinhead band). In Chicago they met people who were involved with S.H.O.C. (Skinheads On Chicago) and talked with them about forming ARA, which they later on did and now is the leading chapter of the organization because they do the most work and are the

largest group. The MRR so response be something came out against Nazis could see that of it was from few groups. City Skins from North Side Cincinnati few individuals. So that's a What are so that these g Kieran: The attempts at people have project we heads and through pre tions. We h tion with a gressive wh iversity whe We've also police bru Minneapolis in a black dentally bu uly couple of rage from others as v planning a security, an ividuals from political de are involve rape and a MRR: Are a Kieran: The polls than a macho ma woman in might be fo ARA which MRR: Let's stands out th is physical Kieran: For has worke confrontat kicking the means as a talk to peo and not let going out th going to b effective. V the young making sur defending to the Naz ganize at hangouts, people. Lik have racist racist peo moved the hang out a Nazis in Mi being usec MRR: You m go into son Kieran: Son heads are beat but t should be comes dow The Baldie we're on s huge peop to get the what's mo

FIGHT THE POWERS THAT BE

MRR: Let's start with you explaining your version of 'skinhead culture' because what most people hear comes from the mouths of the Nazis.

Kieran: For me, the Nazis' version is on thin ice. The origins of the movement came from black Jamaican music—the music which came in the form of reggae and soul and later in ska, and was exported to England and shared with white working class people. It was always a multi-racial thing and always embedded with working class politics which are very much against racism.

MRR: The ironic thing is that the Nazi skinheads say that skinheads have always been white.

Kieran: That's just not true; it's a lie. You can look at pictures from the English dance halls in the 60's and see that it isn't true. There have always been black skinheads and black music has always been the basis of it. Even Ian Stuart (vocalist for Skrewdriver) rips off the early Rolling Stones who ripped off black R&B artists.

MRR: Let's move onto some of the groups that you're involved with by giving brief history of them.

Kieran: The group I'm involved with is an anti-racist skinhead group called The Baldies who formed Anti-Racist Action (ARA) in 1987. The Baldies were a multi-racial group of skinheads in Minneapolis who for the most part were apolitical until the Nazi skinheads came on the scene which immediately politicized them. At first there wasn't an open conflict with the White Knights (Nazi skin group in Minneapolis) and the Baldies. We would be at the same shows together but there wouldn't be a big hassle—just bad looks at each other. But this exchange grew and grew until we decided that we weren't going to put up with it. From then on every time we saw a White Knight or a group of White Knights they were physically confronted. These confrontations took place at the major hangouts in town as well as where most of the shows took place. After a while every time we saw them we confronted them and told them that this was their last chance to quit and that next time we saw them they would get it. That's how we beat the Nazis in Minneapolis. After the Nazis had been kicked out of Minneapolis we had won a big victory because it would be hard for them to try and reorganize in the area, but in the meantime we weren't aware of their activities outside of the city. The few Nazis that remained went to St. Paul (right next to Minneapolis) and there they jumped a black kid which started a mini race war at a St. Paul high school. So we decided that we first needed to branch out and let people know that there are anti-racist skinheads and make contact with different communities because it shouldn't be just a battle between bald head kids. This is when Anti-Racist Action was formed. The idea for ARA was not just to be a group of anti-racist skins but to involve all types of young people. Sometimes we were able to mobilize a lot of people from different cultural backgrounds to go confront Nazis, which was pretty successful. Another group that The Baldies and ARA are affiliated with is the Syndicate, which is a network of anti racist skinheads mainly from the Midwest. The Syndicate came to be because a lot of The Baldies went on tour with the local band Blind Approach (anti-racist skinhead band). In Chicago they met people who were involved with S.H.O.C. (Skinheads On Chicago) and talked with them about forming ARA, which they later on did and now is the leading chapter of the organization because they do the most work and are the

largest group. Getting ARA mentioned in the MRR scene reports created a big response because people wanted to do something and we were the first thing that came out that involved kids organizing against Nazis. We had letters pouring in, you could see the sentiment out there and a lot of it was from anti-racist skinheads. We got a few groups together like the Brew City Skins from Milwaukee, S.H.O.C. and the North Side Crew from Chicago, groups in Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Lawrence, and a few individuals in Des Moines and Winnipeg. So that's a brief history.

What are some of the different approaches that these groups have used?

Kieran: There's been a lot of half assed attempts at newsletters but the Chicago people have done much better at it. The project we worked on was fighting Nazi skinheads and making people aware of this through press conferences and demonstrations. We had one demonstration in coalition with a black student group and a progressive white student group from the university where we painted over Nazi graffiti. We've also been involved in an anti-police brutality demonstration when the Minneapolis police involved in a crack bust in a black neighborhood supposedly accidentally burnt down a house killing an elderly couple, which resulted in an outpouring of rage from the community and many others as well. ARA were involved in the planning of the demonstration, provided security, and provided some speakers. Individuals from ARA are involved in several political demonstrations. The women that are involved in ARA have done a lot of anti-rape and anti-pornography work.

MRR: Are a lot of women involved?

Kieran: There are more involved in Minneapolis than other cities but unfortunately it's a macho male dominated scene. There are women in Minneapolis and Chicago that might be forming a women's caucus within ARA which I see as a positive step.

MRR: Let's talk about the one tactic that stands out as dealing with Nazi skins, which is physically confronting them.

Kieran: From our experience the tactic that has worked in Minneapolis includes physical confrontation, which is fighting them and kicking the shit out of them. I don't see this means as an end because it's important to talk to people in the scene about racism and not letting it be acceptable. If you are going out there and fight and the scene isn't going to be behind you then it's not very effective. We started by talking with some of the younger people involved with the Nazis, making sure they know what they will be defending if there is a fight. We made it clear to the Nazi skinheads that they will not organize at shows, they will not organize at hangouts, we will not be friends with these people. Like the Specials song goes, "if you have racist friends then you're supporting racist people". So we kicked their ass, moved them out and wouldn't let them hang out and that has worked. There are no Nazis in Minneapolis because of this tactic being used and same is true for Chicago.

MRR: You make it sound so easy, so can you go into some details as to your approach.

Kieran: Some people get this fear that skinheads are these supermen that can't be beat but the fact is that any two people should be able to beat any one person if it comes down to that. One of the reasons why The Baldies won so much isn't because we're on some macho trip or that we're all huge people but because we've been able to get the numbers to support us and that's what's most important. For the most part

Nazis are not the majority of the scene and if the majority of the people in some way resist them either by not speaking to them, not letting them into shows, or fighting them they're going to be gone. I think all of those approaches are useful but I think fighting does it best for us.

MRR: Among the baldies, is there a general level of consciousness? How much of your action is political awareness and how much of it is a matter of being in the gang that is going to win?

Kieran: I think this is worth talking about because a lot of people accuse us of this. A lot of them are my friends so I won't pretend that I have an unbiased view of it all. I talk a lot about it, other people talk a lot about politics, people have some basic ideas why there are racists out there. They are aware of some basic class politics to understand that by splitting black people and white people up then it makes regular people weaker as a class. People also have moral outrage because they have friends who are black, Latin, and Asian. So those are the main driving forces. Other people are more political and identify themselves as black nationalist, anarchist, socialist, or various different stripes of the left. Some identify themselves as anti-racist U.S. patriots. But everyone is clear on the fact that racism divides people that should be united. That is our base level of understanding. I wouldn't say that people aren't attracted to us because we won the battle with the local Nazis. Obviously people aren't going to join a gang that is losing all the time. But we're not out looking for a fight every night; people who are looking for that are going to get bored.

MRR: One interesting aspect that we were talking about earlier is the aspects of other consciousness including macho attitudes, homophobia, and sexism.

Kieran: I think it's growing. A lot of the women involved are constantly confronting people who make derogatory comments towards them or sexualize women. That's how I learned a lot from women talking to me about it and think this is true for a lot of other men involved. I won't say that it's perfect but it's better than a lot of scenes that I've been a part of. People are struggling with these issues. As for homophobia, there aren't any openly gay members of The Baldies. Gay people have come to our ARA meetings and we've had discussions on how to deal with homophobia. No one is outright anti-gay, there's no gay bashing because that is seen as something the Nazis do, but then again people still at times use the word fag to describe someone's sexual preference but they are usually confronted when this happens. I can't speak for other cities on this topic but this is what it is like in Minneapolis.

MRR: Do you want to talk about some of the other skinhead groups you work with and some of the differences that you have?

Kieran: I'm willing to work with people who are willing to fight Nazis because I think it's important to have some type of unity in fighting them, but I'm also going to be honest as to what my politics are. If I see shit that I don't like I'm going to criticize it and I'm not going to apologize for my politics. I think there is a tendency among some sections of anti-racist skinheads to dive into nationalism but to me that's what Skrewdriver does. Nationalism isn't appealing to me and it's as divisive as racism. People talk about how they want the United States to be a melting pot and they think the ideas of the U.S. are good. I think that's a little naive of them. But if those people are going to put themselves on the line and fight Nazis without pushing

aining your ver-
because what
m the mouths of

ersion is on thin
ment came from
e music which
e and soul and
ted to England
ng class people.
ing and always
ss politics which
m.
t the Nazi skin-
ve always been

's a lie. You can
ilsh dance halls
Isn't true. There
skinheads and
on the basis of it.
Skrewdriver) rips
who ripped off

of the groups that
ng brief history of

ed with is an anti-
The Baldies
Action (ARA) in
multi-racial group
who for the most
e Nazi skinheads
ch immediately
ere wasn't an
ite Knights (Nazi
and the Baldies.
shows together
hassle—just bad
exchange grew
that we weren't

m then on every
ght or a group of
physically cons-
s took place at
as well as where
ce. After a while

we confronted
this was their last
ext time we saw
t's how we beat
ter the Nazis had
pols we had won
ould be hard for
in the area, but in
t aware of their
ty. The few Nazis
Paul (right next to
they jumped a
nini race war at a
decided that we
it and let people
-racist skinheads
fferent commun-
be just a battle

This is when Anti-
The idea for ARA
of anti-racist skins
of young people,
omobilize a lot of
ural backgrounds
h was pretty suc-
t The Baldies and
s the Syndicate,
f racist skinheads
The Syndicate

ot of The Baldies
ocal band Blind
head band). In
ole who were In-
inheads On Chi-
m about forming
ld and now is the
organization be-
work and are the

largest group. Getting ARA mentioned in the MRR scene reports created a big response because people wanted to do something and we were the first thing that came out that involved kids organizing against Nazis. We had letters pouring in, you could see the sentiment out there and a lot of it was from anti-racist skinheads. We got a few groups together like the Brew City Skins from Milwaukee, S.H.O.C. and the North Side Crew from Chicago, groups in Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Lawrence, and a few individuals in Des Moines and Winnipeg. So that's a brief history.

What are some of the different approaches that these groups have used?

Kieran: There's been a lot of half assed attempts at newsletters but the Chicago people have done much better at it. The project we worked on was fighting Nazi skinheads and making people aware of this through press conferences and demonstrations. We had one demonstration in coalition with a black student group and a progressive white student group from the university where we painted over Nazi graffiti. We've also been involved in an anti-police brutality demonstration when the Minneapolis police involved in a crack bust in a black neighborhood supposedly accidentally burnt down a house killing an elderly couple, which resulted in an outpouring of rage from the community and many others as well. ARA were involved in the planning of the demonstration, provided security, and provided some speakers. Individuals from ARA are involved in several political demonstrations. The women that are involved in ARA have done a lot of anti-rape and anti-pornography work.

MRR: Are a lot of women involved?

Kieran: There are more involved in Minneapolis than other cities but unfortunately it's a macho male dominated scene. There are women in Minneapolis and Chicago that might be forming a women's caucus within ARA which I see as a positive step.

MRR: Let's talk about the one tactic that stands out as dealing with Nazi skins, which is physically confronting them.

Kieran: From our experience the tactic that has worked in Minneapolis includes physical confrontation, which is fighting them and kicking the shit out of them. I don't see this means as an end because it's important to talk to people in the scene about racism and not letting it be acceptable. If you are going out there and fight and the scene isn't going to be behind you then it's not very effective. We started by talking with some of the younger people involved with the Nazis, making sure they know what they will be defending if there is a fight. We made it clear to the Nazi skinheads that they will not organize at shows, they will not organize at hangouts, we will not be friends with these people. Like the Specials song goes, "If you have racist friends then you're supporting racist people". So we kicked their ass, moved them out and wouldn't let them hang out and that has worked. There are no Nazis in Minneapolis because of this tactic being used and same is true for Chicago.

MRR: You make it sound so easy, so can you go into some details as to your approach.

Kieran: Some people get this fear that skinheads are these supermen that can't be beat but the fact is that any two people should be able to beat any one person if it comes down to that. One of the reasons why The Baldies won so much isn't because we're on some macho trip or that we're all huge people but because we've been able to get the numbers to support us and that's what's most important. For the most part

Nazis are not the majority of the scene and if the majority of the people in some way resist them either by not speaking to them, not letting them into shows, or fighting them they're going to be gone. I think all of those approaches are useful but I think fighting does it best for us.

MRR: Among the baldies, is there a general level of consciousness? How much of your action is political awareness and how much of it is a matter of being in the gang that is going to win?

Kieran: I think this is worth talking about because a lot of people accuse us of this. A lot of them are my friends so I won't pretend that I have an unbiased view of it all. I talk a lot about it, other people talk a lot about politics, people have some basic ideas why there are racists out there. They are aware of some basic class politics to understand that by splitting black people and white people up then it makes regular people weaker as a class. People also have moral outrage because they have friends who are black, Latin, and Asian. So those are the main driving forces. Other people are more political and identify themselves as black nationalist, anarchist, socialist, or various different stripes of the left. Some identify themselves as anti-racist U.S. patriots. But everyone is clear on the fact that racism divides people that should be united. That is our base level of understanding. I wouldn't say that people aren't attracted to us because we won the battle with the local Nazis. Obviously people aren't going to join a gang that is losing all the time. But we're not out looking for a fight every night; people who are looking for that are going to get bored.

MRR: One interesting aspect that we were talking about earlier is the aspects of other consciousness including macho attitudes, homophobia, and sexism.

Kieran: I think it's growing. A lot of the women involved are constantly confronting people who make derogatory comments towards them or sexualize women. That's how I learned a lot from women talking to me about it and think this is true for a lot of other men involved. I won't say that it's perfect but it's better than a lot of scenes that I've been a part of. People are struggling with these issues. As for homophobia, there aren't any openly gay members of The Baldies. Gay people have come to our ARA meetings and we've had discussions on how to deal with homophobia. No one is outright anti-gay, there's no gay bashing because that is seen as something the Nazis do, but then again people still at times use the word fag to describe someone's sexual preference but they are usually confronted when this happens. I can't speak for others cities on this topic but this is what it is like in Minneapolis.

MRR: Do you want to talk about some of the other skinhead groups you work with and some of the differences that you have?

Kieran: I'm willing to work with people who are willing to fight Nazis because I think it's important to have some type of unity in fighting them, but I'm also going to be honest as to what my politics are. If I see shit that I don't like I'm going to criticize it and I'm not going to apologize for my politics. I think there is a tendency among some sections of anti-racist skinheads to dive into nationalism but to me that's what Skrewdriver does. Nationalism isn't appealing to me and it's as divisive as racism. People talk about how they want the United States to be a melting pot and they think the ideas of the U.S. are good, I think that's a little naive of them. But if those people are going to put themselves on the line and fight Nazis without pushing

their nationalist view on others then I'll work with them.

MRR: A lot of middle class kids who mainly constitute the hardcore scene are not used to violence or they're afraid of violence and when they see it they're put off by it. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Kieran: If people feel that they can't fight then that's their decision. Maybe they could do something else to support anti-racist activities. I think we should do what works to fight Nazis and that's what convinces me.

MRR: What about people who say that you employ violence so you're as bad as them or sinking to their level?

Kieran: I think that's really fucked up and I think there's some racist attitudes to that.

MRR: How do you distinguish what's OK violence and what's not OK violence?

Kieran: I think it's a matter of violence that tries to oppress people and violence that is used to defend a scene or community. We're not fighting so we can have power over everyone (and I don't think we could if we wanted to). I think people just get fed up with Nazism and are willing to do whatever it takes to kick them out.

MRR: What do you think about the results of damage that the Nazi skins have done and the publicity surrounding that? Do you think that it is possible for anti-racist skins to ever regain the confidence of either minorities or the general public at large or is it a losing battle because people only relate skinhead to Nazi and at best you're just treading water?

Kieran: I think there are a lot of valid points there and I don't know what the answer is. But a good example is England where there are still anti-racist skinheads who are organizing and turning the tide even though in Europe skinheads thought of as a Nazi thing. One of the main reasons why we stay skinheads is because we have affinity with the subculture but also by anti-racist skins existing we damage a recruiting tool that Tom Metzger and the Nazis have. I think that it's really important for any movement to have some type of culture and skinhead is the one they're pulling for right now and if there are people within that culture actively fighting it then it makes it harder for them to grow. For me, I like the music and style and there are going to be kids who are going to like it and if they come into it and the only option they have is to hang out with Nazis then they'll do that. So I think it's important to have alternatives to that.

MRR: Is the public you deal with in Minneapolis aware of the difference between racist and anti-racist skinheads?

Kieran: We had one press conference (after one Nazi attack) to make it clear that we weren't Nazis and that we were going to fight these people. I think we need to do more things like that because obviously we can't compete with Geraldo and Oprah pointing out Nazi skinheads. In the high schools, word gets around that there's this group called the Baldies who are different. Once in a while people will question us about whether we're Nazi and we've always been able to explain ourselves before the fists fly. It's something that scares me because I don't want to get to the point where people of color are afraid of me or anyone from our group, and if that happens I might have to reevaluate things. At this point we've made enough connections through different communities so it's ok. In other cities, the scene is so separate from other communities that the two elements are rarely around each other and that's the reason why they don't have to change, I don't know if that's good or not.