**IDHH Episode One: Setting the Stage - Portland Oregon**

**Episode Summary:**
In the late 1980s, Portland was a known haven for racist skinheads. They roamed the core of Portland unhindered. This episode is about Portland back then, in the before, when Portland was a skinhead stomping ground.

In this episode we interviewed Chyna, Jason, Jorin and Michael who were all punk rockers in Portland in the 80s and 90s. We also talk to Patrick Mazza, a journalist for the left wing Portland Alliance newspaper, who reminiscences and reads from his music column. We also hear about the recruiting and radicalization of Portland’s skinheads by right wing and white nationalist organizers.

We get a little background on Oregon’s racist history and set the stage for understanding the punk scene and neo-nazi violence in the Rose City.

**Background:**

**Portland’s racist history:** As a background for this podcast we urge you to learn about the living legacy of white supremacy woven into this state’s very foundation. We highly recommend Walidah Imarisha’s video “Why Are There No Black People In Oregon” as a great starting point. Briefly, Oregon was founded as an explicit white Protestant homeland, with a constitutional clause forbidding Black people to take up residency in the state; this clause remained within the state’s founding document until repeated requests and demands from Black Oregonians finally enacted successful removal in 2001. Like most other states in the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan was a mainstream force in local white politics, including Klan-endorsed governor Walter M. Pierce, who worked closely enough with the Klan to be considered a member by modern historians. Pierce went on to serve 10 years in the U.S. House of Representatives. George Baker, Portland’s mayor from 1917-1933 had deep ties with the city’s chapter of the Klan as well.

Additionally, Black neighborhoods in Portland were under almost continuous pressure for displacement and dispossession. The first Black neighborhood came with the railroad and its need for labor; Black railroad workers were permitted to reside in what is now Old Town, around Union Station. Segregation was made explicit in 1919, and initially barred Blacks and Asians from owning property in the city and later confined Black and Asian populations through redlining shenanigans.

Between 1910 and 1940, more than half of Portland’s (Oregon’s?) Black population of 1,900 was pushed across the river into the Lower Albina neighborhood by the real estate industry, local government, and private landlords, who restricted housing choice to an area two miles long and one mile wide in what is now the Rose Quarter and the Eliot neighborhoods. In the 1940s, roughly 23,000 Black workers migrated to Portland for wartime work in the Kaiser...
shipyards. They were restricted to segregated sections of defense housing developments in Vanport (in N Portland), Guild’s Lake (in NW Portland), and the Albina District (in lower N/NE Portland). After the 1948 flood when the dikes failed around the Vanport housing development, displaced Black families were funneled into the Albina District where community members built a thriving alternative economy outside the Jim Crow-style segregation of the city. Albina, by then Portland’s only Black neighborhood, became one of a number of important hubs on the national jazz circuit.

The Federal Housing Act of 1957 granted powers to city governments to clear out neighborhoods they declared as ‘slums’ or ‘blighted’ after depriving services to the neighborhoods to encourage deterioration. Hundreds of families lost their homes to the construction of the Memorial Coliseum in 1960, Minnesota Avenue Freeway/Interstate5 in 1962, and the incomplete Emanuel Hospital expansion in 1973. Adding outrage to violent devastation, federal funding for the hospital expansion was pulled after homes were cleared, and blocks of former Black homes still remain as unbuilt open lots, within reach of homes that were spared. Gentrification began in earnest in the 1990s, and dramatically displaced Portland’s Black population from their now historic homes in N/NE Portland.

These brief paragraphs sketch a mere outline of the continuous assault on Black people living in Portland over the last 100 years. The roots are deep.

Walidah Imarisha’s presentation Why Aren’t There More Black People In Oregon: A Hidden History

Karen Gibson’s Bleeding Albina history

The Clubs: The small but vibrant local punk music scene in Portland attracted young people from the entire metro area to clubs where they found rapport on the edges of society. In those years, the three main public venues where bands played were the Starry Night, Satyricon and the Pine Street Theater, where Chyna’s story happened. If you’ve never been to Portland, here’s the lay of the land. Picture the Willamette River running right through the middle of the city; close in on the west side are the gritty downtown neighborhoods of Chinatown and Old Town. That’s where the all-ages club Starry Night used to be. Starry Night still hosts music shows and is now called the Roseland Theater, again a medium sized concert hall with a capacity of around 1,000.

Starry Night is infamous for the shady practices of owner Larry Hurwitz, who went to prison in 2000 for the 1990 murder of one of his employees who refused to take a fall in a counterfeit ticket scam at a John Lee Hooker show promoted by Monqui Productions—but that’s another story. A little over 300 feet east in Old Town was the Satyricon, a grimy bar run by Old Town poet George Touhouliotis. It had less than half the capacity of the Starry Night and a
legendary reputation as the longest-running West Coast punk rock club, famous as the apocryphal meeting place of grunge megastars Kurt Cobain & Courtney Love. You can learn more about it from Mike Lastra’s 2013 documentary film *Satyricon: Madness & Glory*.

The Pine Street Theatre was across the river close in on the east side, in a rambling old multi-level building. Pine Street, which lasted from 1980-1991, was similar to Starry night—all ages, with an occupancy of around 1,000. It occupied the entire block and had lots of ambush points both inside and outside the building where young punks were especially vulnerable to attack while approaching and departing shows.

**Pioneer (Courthouse) Square** is a city park in the middle of downtown Portland, between Northwest 6th and Broadway on the west and east sides, and Yamhill and Morrison on the south and north sides. For 61 years, from 1890-1951 it was the site of the Portland Hotel, a late 19th-century grand hotel with a courtyard that occasionally functioned as public space. Demolished in 1951 to become a parking lot for the Meier & Frank department store, civic leaders planned a public plaza. Debate over intention and design lasted over 10 years from 1969 when the Portland Planning Commission first put forward the idea. It eventually opened in 1984 as a public park. Structural elements of the grand old hotel remain, including an iron archway and gatework on the east side.

**The Music:** For information on Portland’s early punk scene check out Mark Sten’s *All Ages: The Rise and Fall of Portland Punk Rock 1977-1981*, available at the Multnomah County Library. The Portland music scene of the late 80s and early 90s has a devoted following. For a mainstream take on the rock scene, check out S.P. Clarke’s history at *Two Louies Magazine*. Or listen to Erin Yanke and Icky A’s interview with the Neo Boys from 2004.

**Miscellaneous:** Gang members from the Los Angeles area had maintained a quiet presence in Albina since the early 1980s, but that changed during the summer of 1987, when competition intensified between the Crips and the Bloods over crack cocaine. There were also Vietnamese and Lao-Tian gangs, which everyone else at the time called ‘Asian street gangs’.

Drugs prevalent on the streets at the time were the usual West Coast suspects: Cocaine (and later crack), speed, heroin, weed, psychedelics and various pharmaceuticals. Stories from that time revel in the wide availability of drugs in Old Town and downtown, which were basically open air markets who would sell to anyone regardless of age.