

## Rock Around the Bloc Transcript

**Underwriting:** *Lost Highways*, from History Colorado, is made possible by the Sturm Family Foundation, proud supporters of the humanities and the power of storytelling, for more than twenty years.

### [Music]

**Will Roberts:** You know, one of the first articles I found about Dean Reed was the 1956 *Newsweek* article...

**Ruth Anna Brown:** He was working up at Lake City at a dude ranch and singing his guitar at night and sort of helping around the ranch during the daytime and he'd come home and I knew he had something on his mind, but he wouldn't tell me what was coming up because he was afraid I might tell his father and then he'd be told he couldn't do it sort of thing.

**Victor Grossman:** But he was, became famous in Colorado because he - he took a bet. For how many how - many miles was it? I think it was a hundred mile that he would be quicker than the jackass, or a donkey.

**Will Roberts:** One hundred and ten miles for a quarter bet he made with this fellow named Wild Willie Smith that he had met while he was a singer in Estes Park, Colorado.

**Andrea Witte:** It was a bet that a man can be run faster than a mule. And it was a race, I think, over two or three days. And the other guy sat on the mule and he run bare feet. And he always,

the man on the donkey was in front - the mule was in front and the last mile or so, Dean made - ran faster and the mule didn't follow, so.

**Will Roberts:** And he won. He won the quarter bet.

**Victor Grossman:** He won the bet, but not very well, by much. But he won the bet. He said he wore out his feet, they were full of blisters. He wore out his feet. The prize was only a quarter at that time, I think. But he won, by God. He was very determined when he did something. He did it.

**Will Roberts:** It was just remarkable. And that was the first article in Newsweek at that point. And Dean did have the kind of stick-to-it-iveness. And he had an ability to accept a challenge.

**Ruth Anna Brown:** And I had been working downtown at the Mae company and I had gone to lunch after he had gone back up to Lake City and gone to lunch and and someone had a newspaper and there of course was Dean's picture about him racing this mule, one hundred and ten miles and winning the quarter. I still have the quarter. Did I show you the quarter I still have that he won with this race? Grace, I was really worried about it, because one hundred and ten miles is a long ways to run and I called him up and and thought "oh he'd be in the hospital or something" but no there he was singing that night with his blistered feet. The show must go on type of thing.

**[Music fades out]**

**Noel:** Years later, that teenager who was willing to run over a hundred miles just to prove a point would go on to become one of the most famous entertainers in the world... everywhere except in his home country of the United States.

**[Lost Highways Music]**

**Tyler:** From History Colorado and History Colorado Studies, this is *Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains*. I'm Tyler Hill.

**Noel:** And I'm Noel Black. In each episode, Tyler and I explore overlooked stories from our home state of Colorado and the American West.

**Tyler:** On this episode, Dean Reed. AKA, The Red Elvis, The Socialist Sinatra, The John Denver of the Eastern Bloc.

**Noel:** For as famous as he was, most Americans had never heard of him.

**Will Roberts:** Well, I had never heard of Dean Reed 'till 1979 when I was a guest delegate at the Moscow International Film Festival. I was there to present a film.

**Tyler:** This is Will Roberts. He made a documentary about Dean Reed called *American Rebel*. It came out in 1985, the year before Reed died.

**Noel:** Roberts donated all the reel-to-reels, film, transcripts, letters and other ephemera that he used to make the documentary to History Colorado. You'll hear audio from Will's documentary throughout the episode. AND from Will himself, who we interviewed and has told this story... countless times.

**[Roberts Documentary Audio fades in and out of Roberts 2019 interview audio]**

**[Film Audio]**

**Will Roberts:** Our story begins in Moscow. I had been invited to the Moscow international film festival to present a film. I was walking through Red Square with my...

**[Interview Audio]**

**Will Roberts:** interpreter and we saw this handsome man being mobbed by hundreds of people...

**[Film audio]**

**Will Roberts:** for his autograph. Oh my God, said my interpreter, it's Dean Reed!

**[Interview Audio]**

**Will Roberts:** And this is Moscow and nobody really gets mobbed there. Elizabeth Taylor is there. Francis Ford Coppola. And my interpreter says, oh, my God, it's Dean Reed. And I said, Who is...

**[Film Audio]**

**Will Roberts:** Dean Reed? Who's Dean Reed, he exclaimed, Oh my - I can't believe you've never heard of him!

**[Audio from both, overlapping]**

**Will Roberts:** Why, he is the most famous American in the whole world!

**[Roberts 2019 Audio continues]**

**Will Roberts:** And I had never heard of him, so I thought, is this some kind of trick?

**[Music]**

**Tyler:** Not only is Dean Reed's life an unbelievable, almost mythical Forrest Gump-esque story of a country boy from Colorado wandering through some of the most important geopolitical events of the 20th century, but it's also a tale of alienation, homesickness, and the sacrifices people are willing to make for their beliefs. Let's start at the beginning.

**Ruth Anna Brown:** So Dean was born in Lakewood Colorado, at this small chicken farm that we own, and we had a very, very small house because the chickens needed large chicken houses, right. But we only needed a little tiny house.

**Noel:** This is Ruth Anna Brown, Dean Reed's mom, talking to Will Roberts for *American Rebel*. She says that when Dean was first born on September 22, 1938, he got really sick and she thought he was going to die.

**Ruth Anna Brown:** And I remember standing out in the kitchen and sort of talking to God and saying, you know, please let him live, if you'll just - just help me to - to bring him along. Why, Dean and I both will really do anything we can for you. I think that his soul was born with charisma. I think he's a man of destiny.

**Noel:** Dean's mom says that he was always a charmer. He had a great smile and was the quintessential Colorado child: he was wholesome-- involved with Boy Scouts and 4H. He became a track star at Wheat Ridge High School in the suburbs of West Denver. And he picked up the guitar.

**Ruth Anna Brown:** Well I remember, I think we got it for his - for his Christmas - was it Christmas one year? - that we bought him a guitar and he just simply took off. From there on, he did a lot of volunteer things too, like singing for the Kiwanis or singing for the hospital up at Grand Junction for the veterans hospital.

**Noel:** And he always loved the mountains. Here's Dean Reed, talking to Will Roberts.

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** : What I remember most about Denver was the Rocky Mountains. And I think that was probably the most positive thing I got from Colorado, was my love for nature.

**[End of clip]**

**Tyler:** After Dean got out of high school, he sang and played his guitar at various tourist destinations in the Rocky Mountains to put himself through college at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** I became a performer at the university because my older brother Dale was already studying at the university and my father didn't have enough money to pay the tuition for both of

us and so the only possibility so that I could go to university was to take my guitar and every evening to go into the restaurants and to sing for the tips. At that time nobody paid me, I sang for the tips which people gave to me at each table and during the summers I sang at the dude ranches in Estes Park in order to pay my way through the university.

**[End of Clip]**

**Tyler:** Here's Dean's daughter, Ramona Reed.

**Ramona Reed:** Really what it comes down to is this is an all-American Colorado boy, born and raised there. And, you know, he was performing in dude ranches and figured out how the ladies responded to the guitar and his singing, and his good looks, and decided, you know, someone would say "You should be in Hollywood", and he decided to try it in Hollywood.

**Noel:** Here's Cyril Reed, Dean's father.

**Cyril Reed:** ...A meteorologist was studying for two years, meteorology at the Colorado University. And then he went and went to Hollywood, and on the way out there he picked up a hitchhiker.

**Tyler:** There are several different versions of the hitchhiker story.

**Noel:** One version goes that Dean encountered a homeless man who claimed to know a big shot at Capitol Records, and -- like the devil at the crossroads -- said he could get Dean a record deal in exchange for a ride to LA.

**Tyler:** Some people say the hitchhiker WAS the big shot at Capitol,

**Tyler:** and others say he was an old entertainer who was well-connected.

**Noel:** Stories range from Dean taking him up on the ride despite not believing the tall-tale about the record deal, all the way to literally giving him the clothes off his back.

**Tyler:** Either way, he gave the hitchhiker a ride. It was 1956, and he was just 19 years old...

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** If I hadn't have met this hitchhiker it's possible that I wouldn't have stayed in Hollywood. I had two weeks free before going back for my third year at the university. By picking up this hitchhiker who then on Monday introduced me to capital and then Friday, I had my contract for seven years. I think many things in my life were by chance, which also some might say destiny played a role.

**[End of Clip]**

**[Music: Dean Reed's "Colorado Sun"]**

When I left Colorado

it was many years ago

The blue skies were clear as ever

The sun, It was bouncing off the snow.

**[Music fades out]**

**Tyler:** When Dean got to Hollywood, he started making records.

**Noel:** But like Elvis, born just two years before him in 1935, Reed wanted the whole Hollywood experience.

**Tyler:** And when he wasn't recording music, he was trying to break into the film and TV industries.

**Not:** It wasn't a time he looked back on fondly.

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** Hollywood was a very bad time. Hollywood was a time of fear.

Hollywood was a time of exploitation. Hollywood is a prostitution camp. Hollywood is a place where very few people I think are able to keep their integrity.

**[End of Clip]**

**Noel:** But during that time, Reed met Paton Price, his acting teacher and mentor. He said later that not only did that help him maintain his integrity while in Hollywood, he also helped solidify Dean's values and moral code.

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** I think Peyton had the greatest influence upon my life. I think the man that is sitting here today is only sitting here because of Peyton. He taught us that each one of us had to

search for our truth and when we found it, to defend it no matter what the consequences, and he always said your truth will not be ours, and will not be mine, but your truth is important and you must defend it no matter what the consequences.

**[End of Clip]**

**Tyler:** And integrity became more and more important to him as he struggled to find his place in the industry, says Andrea Witte.

**Noel:** Witte is the webmaster for the Dean Reed archive at deanreed.de. For as talented and handsome as he was, she says, he was just one of countless attractive young people being groomed for stardom, getting small TV parts, and singing sugary pop love songs.

**Andrea Witte:** He recorded some records, at Capitol records. had a contract over several years. But I think he was not so special. There were many young singers with such contracts and he had minor success.

**[Music fades in: Dean Reed's "The Search"]**

In the moonlight

In the sunlight

In the starlight I'll search for you

On the highways

In the skyways

On the byways I'll search for you

And when I find you

Just like in my dreams

I'm gonna love you

Out in the moonbeams

**[Music fades out]**

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** At that time in the United States, I was relatively unknown. The song “The Search” was a regional hit in some parts of Texas and Arizona and Colorado but nothing more. That was the first record. The third record, “Our Summer Romance” I had done a.. on TV with Dick Clark and I had made a tour of America. But it was not a national hit although it was in the top 20 list and number one in certain parts of America.

**[End of Clip]**

**Tyler:** Even though he seemed to be on an upward trajectory, Dean Reed didn't find the fame and fortune he'd hoped for in California.

**Will Roberts:** ...and Dean basically is walking around the block and not eating lunch because he doesn't really have the money. So he gets a few bit parts. He's in *Bachelor Father*, Ben Bentley and then major, major Majorette in 1960.

**[Dean Reed performance audio clip]**

**Announcer:** ...twirly twirly. Let's have a nice welcome back for Dean Reed!

**[clapping]**

**Dean Reed:** (performing “Twirly Twirly”)

I went to a football game

And I never will forget

That pretty little, pretty little, pretty little, pretty little pretty little majorette

**[Clip fades out]**

**Tyler:** Then, in 1961...

**Roberts:** He has a few reasonably good hits, but then finds out that in South America in 1961, he's at the top of the South American hit parade. He's more popular than Elvis Presley, who's on the roster at that point, The Everly Brothers, The Supremes. Dean Reed is the top of the list.

**[Music: Dean Reed's "Our Summer Romance"]**

Although the summer's gone

I'll try to carry on

although you won't be with me

and when school is through

I'll still be loving you

for nine months can't be so long

I'll cherish every vow

**[Music fades under Noel and Tyler narrating]**

**Noel:** So Capitol records planned a tour in South America, and put him on a plane.

**Tyler:** When he got off in Santiago, Chile 12 hours later, his life would change forever.

**[Music continues, then fades into underwriting]**

**Underwriting:** Support for History Colorado comes from the Coors Brewing Company. Coors is proud to sponsor “Beer Here: Brewing the New West”, now on view at the History Colorado Center in Denver. The exhibition features artifacts and insights that reveal why Coloradans today enjoy 360 breweries and counting. More than just a tale of Ale, “Beer Here” is a story of Colorado, told over a few beers.

**[Dean Reed’s “Our Summer Romance” fades back in]**

I love no one but you  
my love belongs to you  
someday I hope to marry you

**[Music fades under Noel narrating]**

**Noel:** Still struggling to make it in America, when Dean Reed stepped off his plane in Santiago, Chile in March 1962, he was a star.

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** There were hundreds of thousands of people waiting for me at the airport with motorcades with police going into the city, going to bed at night with the whole plaza in front of the presidential palace screaming for me. Of course, this is a great shock to a young boy from Colorado because it happened all so so fast.

**[End of Clip]**

**Tyler:** It's hard to say why Dean's records were duds at home in Hollywood, but hits in South America.

**Tyler:** But between his good looks and his accessible, folksy pop lyrics, people in Chile loved him.

**Noel:** Here's Will Roberts.

**Will Roberts:** Every time he goes to the hotel window, thousands of people are waiting outside screaming. The applause was incredible. I mean, the money, the opportunity was there, that there he was truly loved and it wasn't a fight.

**[Music: Dean Reed's "Don't Let Her Go"]**

Well, if you should have a sweetheart  
you'd better keep her by your side...

**[Music fades out]**

**Will Roberts:** And not only does he change Chile, but Chile changes him

**Noel:** Here's Peter Schmelz, associate professor of musicology at Arizona State University. He studies music and politics of the Cold War.

**Dr. Peter Schmelz:** That's what makes it an interesting story is that the reason that he started off on this path was because he was getting the attention that he wanted, right. He wanted to be

a movie star and a pop star. And so he went to where the audience was, which is how he ends up in 1961 in Chile. Right. Because that “Summer Romance” song - song Summertime Romance, was such a hit there and he went and there are crowds of adoring fans and I think that that was...

**Tyler:** Those crowds changed him. But not in the way they would change most people. He had already seen the dark side of Hollywood fame, and didn't want it.

**Noel:** Now he saw a much bigger world, AND a much darker reality through the lenses of his sudden stardom. There was something almost Messianic about it.

**Dr. Peter Schmelz:** And at the same time that he develops this sense of this sense of belief in social justice, right? He goes to Santiago and he sees these slums and he says, “This is terrible. I can't believe people live like this. What can I do to help?”

**[Music]**

**Noel:** Will Roberts:

**Will Roberts:** So he began to do records there, and that is where he became politicized to a certain extent because he saw the poverty. He saw the injustice. He saw the problems in South America, the great differences between wealth and - and poverty there.

**Noel:** Much of Latin America at that time was in a state of major political upheaval. The Cuban revolution in 1959 had brought communism to the doorstep of the U.S. just three years before Reed's arrival in Chile. Many countries that didn't align themselves directly with the Soviet Union were embracing socialist leaders, some of them with authoritarian impulses. And widespread suspicion of CIA interference and anti-American sentiment ran high throughout Latin America.

**Tyler:** Ramona Reed says that it makes sense that her father developed the political beliefs he did during this time. She told us he always thought of himself as a man of the people.

**Ramona Reed:** You know, he would drive, if he was on that bus and he was going through those neighborhoods, he - he would literally stop the bus, get out and - and listen to everybody. That's the one thing that - his skill of listening to what people really need. And then he would bring awareness to it.

**Noel:** After what he saw in South America, Dean said, he never really felt that he had any other choice but to take politics more seriously.

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** Since that time in one land or another, I have been famous for the last 20 years, but South America was the most important and South America changed my life because, of course, there... one can see the great differences of justice and injustice of poverty and wealth. They are so g - so clear to see for anybody that you *must* take a stand. And I sometimes I like to say, well that there are three types of people in South America. There are blind people who don't want to see the truth. There are capitalists and there are revolutionaries. And I was neither

a capitalist nor was a blind and there, I became a revolutionary. Because in South America you have to take a stand...

**[End of clip]**

**[Music: Dean Reed's "We are revolutionaries"]**

We are revolutionaries,

And we'll fight for justice

And liberty today.

We are...

**[Music fades under Tyler narrating]**

**Tyler:** Here's how Dean's dad, Cyril puts it.

**Cyril Reed:** He was a normal American boy and he's been to college two years and he went South America. There he saw where 10, 15 percent of the people were very wealthy. And the great majority of them were at the low end of the totem pole. And there he began to get things not communistic, but socialistic. And there's a difference. Don't ask me what it is but he can take 10 or 15 minutes and he will tell you the difference, he did that to me once but I forgot most of it.

**Noel:** Ramona Reed:

**Ramona Reed:** That's where everything changed for him. Now he understands this - and as long as I - I mean, we didn't have Twitter, Instagram or Facebook back then, right? So it was as long as I do concerts and albums, and as long as I can have a following, then the injustices I

see, I can bring awareness to it. And that is I - I'll tell you, I don't want to end it right here. But I mean, that is the entire purpose of his life, is he wasn't interested, he wasn't motivated by...

**[Music: Dean Reed's "Venceremos"]**

Recordando al soldado valiente  
 cuyo ejemplo lo hiciera inmortal  
 enfrentemos primero a la muerte  
 traicionar a la patria jamás.  
 Venceremos, venceremos,  
 mil cadenas habrá que romper,  
 venceremos, venceremos,

**[Music fades out]**

**Noel:** During the early 1960s, Dean returned to Chile frequently. And his songs became more political. He joined protestors demonstrating against capitalism, imperialism, and the United States government.

**Tyler:** In South America, Dean met prominent leftists like the poet Pablo Neruda and Salvador Allende, the physician, activist, and marxist who would later be elected President of Chile in 1970.

**Noel:** Unlike Hollywood-style celebrity, creative and artistic fame in South America often came with a sense of political responsibility. He became well-known as an activist as well as a performer, and started connecting with leftists in other parts of the world as well.

**Tyler:** Here he is talking about attending the World Peace Council in Helsinki, Finland in 1965. It was an international meeting started by the Soviets to promote disarmament, among other things.

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** And at this meeting there was great problems and they asked me to sing to get the people quiet and I began singing, and the Soviets were so impressed with how I was somehow, through luck, I got the people all to hold hands and started singing “We Shall Overcome”, that I sang for about a half-hour and the Soviets invited me to come to Moscow and the next day I was on a trip to Moscow. So also, that changed my life.

**[End of Clip]**

**[Music: Dean Reed’s “We Shall Overcome”]**

We shall overcome

We shall overcome someday,

Oh, deep in my heart

I do believe

**[Music fades out]**

**Tyler:** Here’s Ramona Reed. Again, she’s Dean’s daughter by Patricia Hobbs, the first of three wives.

**Ramona Reed:** So the following year, in '66, he went on a Russian rock tour and of course, at that time in Russia, they hadn't seen anyone like him. He would not stay on the stage. Right. He would jump off and he would sit on some pretty girl's lap and sing to her and sing to the men and... So, he blew up.

**Tyler:** And as always, Dean used his charisma and ability as a showman to amplify the causes that he really cared about.

**Noel:** Back in South America in 1970, he used his fame for political stunt during a key moment in Chilean history. Here he is describing one of his more famous acts of defiance.

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** This flag here, just hanging on the wall, of course caused me to go to jail in Santiago, Chile one week before the elections in 1970 in Chile. Before Salvador Allende became president, well, I got this flag made because you couldn't find one in Chile, an American flag. And I went in front of the American consulate in Santiago and washed it and said that I, as a good American, want to wash this flag. The flag is dirty with the blood of the Vietnamese people, with the blood of the South Americans who are being exploited because of American imperialism, and that I, as a good American, I want to wash it and - with the greed within the great traditions of the American Revolution. And the police came and arrested me and took me to jail. Pablo Neruda, the Nobel Prize winner for literature, came and got me out of jail.

**[End of Clip]**

**[Music: Dean Reed's "El Cantor"]**

El Cantor

He'll live forevermore

For we shall hold his banner high

**[Clip fades out]**

**Tyler:** Dean's popularity grew, and he made his way through South America and toured the Soviet Union.

**Noel:** Reed's fame seems to have allowed him to travel freely throughout the world. But, says Will Roberts, spy agencies — from the US, to the Soviet Union, to the German Democratic Republic, had him under constant surveillance.

**Will Roberts:** I mean, his phones are always tapped, right? Everything Dean Reed says. You know, it's like this full employment in the GDR, in the Soviet Union. And so people just — it's a cushy job. Listen to Dean Reed's phone calls, and follow him around, and go to his concerts. (laughter) You know, give these little reports and it's total employment.

**Noel:** But Reed seemed to almost float above all of it.

**Tyler:** His fame protected him and opened doors all at once.

**Noel:** Like Elvis, Reed moved effortlessly back and forth between the music and the movie industries. He filmed spaghetti Westerns in Italy before eventually landing in East Germany where he continued his career as an actor.

**Tyler:** It was there, in East Germany, that he met Victor Grossman, an American who had defected.

**Noel:** It's worth noting that Reed himself never officially defected. He maintained his U.S. citizenship, and even paid taxes to the IRS until he died in 1986.

**Tyler:** When Dean Reed first arrived in Germany, Victor worked as his translator.

**Victor Grossman:** And he came over, and I was absolutely amazed because here came this, not the usual kind of lefty I expected and who had often visited here. Instead came this gorgeous Coloradan cowboy type with this gorgeous I think it was blonde hair then, and - and muscular and - and actually very, extremely attractive. I almost couldn't believe it I felt like pinching him to see if he were really true.

**Noel:** Dean and Victor became fast friends, in part because of their shared values.

**Victor Grossman:** Well, he was an unusual guy. First of all, I got along with them very well. He was first of all, he liked me. He was very devoted to the idea of working for a better world without war. Now, it was really deep in his heart as he sought a socialist world. I did too, by the way.

**Tyler:** Victor, somewhat reserved, immediately noticed the effect that Dean had on people.

**[Music fades in]**

**Victor Grossman:** I was with them when we had to fight off about a - about a hundred girls and women who all wanted autographs. And he was besieged. But he always was very correct about it. He - I said, gee, we can get away from 'em - from all 100 women waiting to get your signature. We can get away. There's a door here. We can get out the back. He said, no, no. My duty as a - as a singer and an actor is to meet all of them and to give all of them, if they want a signature, to give all of them a signature. And he did.

**[Music fades out]**

**Noel:** Victor was fascinated by the paradoxical combination of Dean's love of the spotlight and his sincere belief in the political causes he supported.

**Victor Grossman:** He had this vanity, but he also had this integrity, I would say. And it was really a funny mixture. He was a - in a way, a peculiar character. He was a real celebrity type from the United States. But at the same time, a very highly principled person with a sort of - a mission. And I - I took - I liked the one. And I got along and enjoyed the other. It was, as I say, something of a Hollywood showman. But at the same time, a certain, sometimes even almost naive - naivete about himself. He saw himself as a - as a sort of a leader in the fight for a better world.

**Tyler:** While talking to Victor, it was clear that he had a great deal of respect and affection for Dean. So I asked him what he meant when he described him as naive. He referenced the flag-washing incident.

**Victor Grossman:** He got arrested for this. It got into the headlines because he was so popular. And later, I think a bit naively, he thought that this activist was what became known in the press, may have helped win the election for Allende. That was perhaps - and maybe it was true. But I always had the feeling it was perhaps a bit naive.

**[Music fades in]**

**Noel:** Naive or not, Victor also noticed the ways that Dean Reed practiced what he preached. Here, he describes a labor incident on one of Reed's movie sets.

**Victor Grossman:** They didn't pay their workers properly. They either didn't pay them at all or they did pay them only part. And the workers complained. And there was a lot - it lasted for weeks because they wanted to save money and didn't pay properly. So the workers went to Dean, and Dean made a deal with them. Dean said to them, You kidnapped me. So he let them kidnap him. Of course. No, they didn't tell anybody that it was - it was a deal. He was kidnapped and they said, we won't let the main actor out until we get our proper pay. And that worked. This was also, in a way, typical of Dean in many ways.

**Noel:** But he also saw the rigidity in Reed's two-dimensional understanding of art, music and film. For Reed, art always took a backseat to politics. In that way, everything from his folky pop music to his westerns were Marxist propaganda in Hollywood drag.

**[Music fades out]**

**Tyler:** Reed himself admitted that music wasn't his strong suit. He always took his acting more seriously as a tool for drawing attention to the things he cared about. Which is exactly what he thought all art should accomplish. Grossman remembers once when Reed and his wife, Wiebke Dorndeck, went to see a collection of French expressionist paintings at a museum in Leningrad.

**Victor Grossman:** They were not these pictures that look like photographs. They were very- In any case, Dean said, looked at them and said to his wife and to me, what kind of painting is that? He said. They're just smearing up paper. He said, any kid could paint like that. What's the meaning of that? His wife, who had - who was very, quite well-educated, she was a teacher, she said, no, Dean. That's - That was great art at the time, that's really something beautiful in its way. A picture doesn't have to be just like a photograph. It can be sort of fanciful. He said, no, no, no, that's - that's baloney. He said that's just, they're just putting one over on us.

**[Music]**

**Tyler:** Victor Grossman says Dean remained committed to the idea that his music and acting were contributing to a greater good in the world.

**Victor Grossman:** That was always in his mind. And he always - sometimes people were taken aback by his insistence on that, but he always - that was always central to him.

**Tyler:** Here's Ramona Reed.

**Ramona Reed:** And it was really just a vehicle, so his music and his songwriting and his movies most of the time were just a vehicle to - to better the lives of other people.

**Noel:** This approach to art was also very Soviet - that art had to serve a realistic, easily understandable social and political purpose.

**Tyler:** Professor of musicology Peter Schmelz says that in the Soviet Union, even pop music was commonly classified as "folk" in an attempt to make it fit the desired aesthetics of the State.

**Dr. Peter Schmelz:** Folk was more authentic. There is something more natural about the folk, they're closer to the land, and of course in communism right, the people - the folk, are the bases of the government. So anything that gets away from the elites, anything that isn't as concerned with the niceties of art, right? Anytime there is a kind of art form that was too concerned with being art, right. Like art for art's sake. That was something that the Soviets were very suspicious of because they thought that all art had to have a function and that function should be to create better people mentally, spiritually, emotionally, socially.

**Noel:** But not everyone could get behind art that fit too neatly into the Soviet agenda.

**Dr. Peter Schmelz:** The real problem when you go back to the very beginning right after the revolution in 1917 then you have the 20s as this period where they're trying to implement the revolution on all levels of society. And when it comes to culture it becomes an issue, because there are all these accounts of them trying to play Beethoven, for example, for factory workers because the idea is that they wanted to elevate the workers by showing them what good music was. But it became very clear that at - at some point the workers didn't want to listen to Beethoven, right. So then they had to develop these more popular forms of music-making that would be more appealing.

**Noel:** And that's why, when the Soviets found out about Dean Reed at the World Peace Council in 1965, they were immediately enamored.

**Dr. Peter Schmelz:** So when Dean Reed comes along it's perfect because he's doing exactly what they want him to do right he's singing about love. Right, his first big hit was Summertime Romance, and he's willing to go along politically with them. So it's j- it's so uncanny that he came at the right time and and just looked the role so well right.

**[Music: Dean Reed's "Thunder and Lightning"]**

When I see you walk,

I hear thunder,

When I hear you talk,

I see lightning

When she whispers in my ear,

whisper so soft so I can hear

Thunder and lightning,

Thunder and lightning,

Thunder and lightning all night long

**[Music fades out]**

**Tyler:** Here's Nick Hayes. He's professor of history at St. John's University in Minnesota and specializes in the former Soviet Union. He's also worked in TV and radio and interviewed Dean Reed a number of times for an old current affairs show.

**Dr. Nick Hayes:** Dean Reed is a particular case in the sense that number one, probably for good reason, the Kremlin distrusted rock and roll, it was treated as an alien, depraved expression of late capitalism. What it did, at least Moscow always tried to do in its cultural politics, is give them a substitute. There were officially sanctioned, kind of saccharin puppy-love type Russian rock and roll that was, you know, was boring, uncreative, and maybe would inspire a 12-year old on occasion to listen to it. Into that mix, they gave us Dean Reed. Meaning they allowed Dean Reed to perform because of his politics, because he spoke favorably about the communist world. And he was meant to be a substitute for that.

**Noel:** Both the Soviet government and Dean Reed as an individual benefitted from the convenience of Dean's ability to walk the party line.

**Tyler:** And while the transactional nature of that relationship has caused many over the years to be skeptical of Reed's motives, Nick Hayes disagrees that he was some sort of puppet.

**Dr. Nick Hayes:** I don't think he was naive. I think he - he knew exactly what he was doing. He made a series of choices, he was aware of them. And he - you know - he - he wasn't an idiot. He had a fairly good knowledge, certainly of the pop world, and a reasonable knowledge of the East European world. He was using it to his advantage. "Naivete" I don't think would characterize the way he looked at things.

**Noel:** Though it would be easy to be skeptical of the convenient nature of Reed's relationship with the Soviets, says Hayes, it's no reason to blame him for making the decisions he did.

**Tyler:** Many who knew him have argued that he could have come back to the U.S. And there were other anti-capitalist artists like Pete Seeger who *had* found an audience here. But — whether it was true or not -- he felt like coming home would force him to compromise his values.

**Dr. Nick Hayes:** And he was treated with the very best that that world could give. Why would he give that all up to return to the United States, as he once said, to what? To sing songs about Coca-Cola. He said he would return to the United States, but only if he could keep his politics intact.

**[Music: Dean Reed's "Values"]**

I know a man,  
who truly thinks that nudity is sin,  
he would never think to show  
the color of his skin,

he works for the CIA,  
killing all who are in his way,  
hey! hey!  
Hey! Hey!

**[Music fades out]**

**Tyler:** Hayes was skeptical about Reed when interviewed him in 1985 for a TV series he was doing about Soviet culture.

**Dr. Nick Hayes:** Dean Reed was officially promoted by the government as that great progressive rock and roll voice that the CIA would not let Americans hear. But he had a free voice in Russia and so on and so forth. The truth is, for someone like me, those of us who, whether from academic life to the State Department, had an involvement in Russian affairs, Dean Reed was the butt of a number of jokes, and he was treated as an absolute puppet and not exactly an accomplished singer.

**Tyler:** But when Nick finally met Dean, he was shocked to find his assumptions immediately challenged.

**Noel:** Nick also found himself charmed by Dean's self-deprecation.

**Dr. Nick Hayes:** He heard what I did and that I had a heavy involvement in Russia. And he - I think he said - he stopped short of saying and I suppose you think I'm a joke, but you could tell by the smile, the way he spoke, that he knew, in my mind I was kind of dismissing him, at least

at this stage, and he was disarming. You didn't have to make jokes or pick him apart. He kind of did it for you, for you in advance, and then you get to a more serious side of what really motivated the man, and what his cultural and political interests were.

**Noel:** In the archival tape that History Colorado was given by Will Roberts, he and Dean talk extensively about the accusations that Dean was some sort of puppet or opportunist.

**[Dean Reed Archival Tape]**

**Dean Reed:** I don't think it's f- in any way, can one say I'm an opportunist. I was thrown out of every country after becoming famous because I opened my mouth to defend the working class, which I felt had - were living with injustices, which obviously then brought me into unpopular situations with the dominant class of who I had to work for. So, you can - so I only lost because of my ideals, I lost from country to country, I had to leave, and begin again. Then I would open my mouth after I had the power to open it, and then I was thrown out, again and again.

**[End of Tape]**

**[Music: Dean Reed's "Bella Ciao"]**

E se io muoio da partigiano

O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao

E se io muoio da partigiano

Tu mi devi seppellir

**[Music fades out]**

**Noel:** Though Dean wore out his welcome in multiple countries around the world, much of his life-long exile was self-imposed.

**Tyler:** Maybe he was being used, or maybe he gladly accepted his role advancing various political agendas. But there's no denying that forces on both sides of the cold war were using culture as one of the major ideological battlegrounds. And artists on both sides of the iron curtain got used by their governments to advance an ideology, whether they knew it or not.

**Noel:** We spoke to the woman who wrote THE book on the cultural aspect of the Cold War.

**Frances Saunders:** My name is Frances Stonor Saunders and I'm author of *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*.

**Tyler:** Saunders says that culture was a key part of the ideological battle for people's minds during the Cold War.

**Frances Saunders:** The Soviet Union emerges at the end of the Second World War, kind of economically and militarily on its knees, but it has a long and well-honed tradition of propaganda and of pushing it's - pushing its case intellectually, artistically, culturally, as being the morally superior option, and inevitably that sets you up for a major clash of ideas and values.

**Noel:** And the Soviets weren't the only ones engaged in this type of manipulation.

**Tyler:** This level of propaganda took place on both sides of the Cold War. One of the most notable of the CIA's investments in art during the Cold War was their promotion of abstract expressionism.

**[Music fades in]**

**Frances Saunders:** When I look at Jackson Pollock, I don't see an agenda on the canvas to promote freedom, liberty, independence, some kind of like - free wheeling, boundless energy of political freedom. I don't see that at all. But, that's what the CIA wanted me to see. That's how they promoted it. They promoted it as this great sort of juggernaut of the American century, as a place of - of - that could tolerate and celebrate, you know, hectic, messy, avant garde-ism.

**Noel:** And there's an irony to this kind of high-concept, cultural meddling that the CIA was doing, considering what they were doing in other parts of the world.

**Frances Saunders:** It's very rarely I know that the CIA, the same CIA that was doing all this kind of, you know, really sophisticated cultural stuff. It's - it can't be separated from the CIA that was crashing, you know, around like a rogue elephant in the - in the sort of scrub lands of countries that it should really never, ever, you know, been present in at all. And, you know, up installing and supporting right wing dictatorships and stuff like that.

**Tyler:** Whether Reed was a willing puppet, a naive dupe, or something in between, is irrelevant, says Saunders.

**Frances Saunders:** There were a lot of people who said, you know, I would never, ever, have knowingly written for a CIA-backed magazine or played, you know, my instrument in the Boston Symphony Orchestra for the CIA or anyone else. I would never have taken a check and I would never have signed up to any campaign of cultural promotion that involved the CIA. So that was the problem. Was that - As I say, you kind of take the wheels off of artistic development and freedom. And activities. By - By forcing these - these contracts on people, but they don't even know they've signed them.

**[Music fades out]**

**Noel:** Ultimately, Dean Reed's self-styled persona of the idyllic American cowboy who had embraced communist ideals was the perfect message in the perfect package.

**Tyler:** Not only did it make him extremely popular, but with that fame came a certain amount of privilege as well. Will Roberts told us about a time while he was filming his documentary and he wanted to recreate the moment he first saw Dean Reed.

**Noel:** He was planning on filming it in Red Square, it was the place he first noticed Dean getting mobbed for autographs.

**Tyler:** But Will's camera crew told him and Dean that it would take months to get the permits.

**Will Roberts:** And he said, well, I don't understand. And the cameraman, and the soundman, and the interpreter, explained that they didn't have the permits and therefore it was not possible

because there was no authorization. And Dean looked at them and he said, I authorize it. And they said, oh, OK. And we - (laughter) we filmed in Red Square, which is very rare footage at the time. And so that's how big he was.

**[Music: Dean Reed's "You"]**

You who's got the power  
 you who's got the guns,  
 you who's got the planes  
 to keep us always on the run.

**[Music fades out to underwriting]**

**Underwriting:** Support for History Colorado comes from Colorado State University. CSU embraces the critical role that History Colorado plays in preserving and telling the stories of our state and the West. As Colorado's land grant university, CSU is proud to be a partner in programming and outreach state wide. As they celebrate 150 years of education, research, and service, CSU remains committed to preserving the past, and creating a brighter future. Learn more at [COLOstate.edu](http://COLOstate.edu)

**[Music: Dean Reed's "You" fades back in]**

You who got the press - to tell your dirty lies

**[Music fades under Noel narrating]**

**Noel:** As the Cold War approached its end, so too did Dean Reed's career. Here's Nick Hayes.

**Dr. Nick Hayes:** He aged, you know, as he rolled into his forties, he was no longer quite the heartthrob he had been. A rock star in his 40s, becomes kind of a disposable commodity. As

Gorbachev relaxed cultural restrictions, rock and roll came from the underground of Russia to prominence, presenting a *real stage*. Well, at this point, what did Moscow need Dean Reed for? It - it had its own native-grown rock and roll movement now allowed to come out into the public and produce what, in my opinion, and many others, might have been one of the more remarkable rock and roll movements of the history of the genre. Well, you don't need a Dean Reed anymore to come out and do kind of, you know, beachside versions of American folk songs.

**[Music fades in]**

**Noel:** Andrea Witte, the webmaster of deanreed.de, who used to wait outside his concerts for autographs, remembers her own fascination with Dean Reed waning as she got older.

**Andrea Witte:** He was a special kind of a star. Because he was there, he met the people, in person. He wasn't just on the radio and on the television, but he was there. So the - the 70s was a special time. Later it was different. And when we grew up and we're young adults in the 80s, we had - we had our own problems and our own life. So, we were not so starstruck. (Laughter)

**Tyler:** It was around this time that Dean Reed started to make more serious moves in order to fulfill a life-long dream of his. He hoped Will's documentary would help him achieve that goal.

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** And - I would like to - I would like to live again in my country, obviously, too, only though, if I can be productive and creative in my land. If that is cut off from me and if I cannot be

productive creative then of course I think only the CIA would be happy if I came back and sat on my ass and did nothing.

**Tyler:** Hoping to lay the groundwork for his return, he came back to Denver with Will when the *American Rebel* premiered in 1985. Here he is doing a press appearance on Peter Boyles' talk show -- who you may remember Boyles from the Alan Berg episode.

**[Radio Talk Show Audio]**

**Peter Boyles:** I have read that you are a socialist American so -

**Dean Reed:** again -- I don't like - I don't like labels. I'm not a member of any party. I can take a sword 360 degrees around me and I cut no strings. (Crosstalk: Boyles interjecting) Peter, I'm a puppet of nobody. I am an artist who believes that the only value of being famous, if you're lucky enough to be famous, is the fact that you can do something to try to make this world a better place to live in and hopefully a peaceful world, and I tried to do that with my life.

**Peter Boyles:** I can't conceive that these Germans...

**[Audio fades out]**

**Noel:** Later, the interview would come to an abrupt end when Reed touched on an especially sensitive subject for Boyles.

**[Radio Talk Show Audio: Reed and Boyles arguing over one another]**

**Peter Boyles:** Everybody that I've read says that the people are starving because the Marxist government would not take the western food and feed the people in Eritrea.

**Dean Reed:** You're talking just like the neo-Nazis that killed Berg here.

**Peter Boyles:** Don't you ever accuse me of that. We're gonna end this right - right now. Don't you ever say that to me again!

**Dean Reed:** That's the way you're talking, and I think that's very dangerous.

**Peter Boyles:** Get out of here! Get out of here! Take a walk! Get me out of here. Don't call me that -

**[Something hits the microphone as altercation gets physical]**

**[End of clip]**

**Tyler:** Shortly after the confrontation with Boyles, Dean Reed appeared in a segment on the CBS News program *60 Minutes*. It seemed like a great opportunity to finally introduce himself to the American public.

**[60 Minutes program audio]**

**Mike Wallace:** There is just one thing missing for him. He yearns to duplicate his success behind the Iron Curtain with a similar success back home.

**Dean Reed:** The Americans very often see the American press -- some of them call me the red Sinatra and some of them call me The Johnny Cash of Communism. And the Elvis of South America. You know, I'm just Dean from Denver, Mike. And we have a saying in Denver, we say, you can take the boy out of the country but you can't take the country out of the boy. And I believe that. I'm an American.

**[End of clip]**

**[TV sounds fades in then out]**

**Noel:** The interview didn't go as planned. Not only was the segment snarky and condescending toward him, but Reed made statements that were controversial on BOTH sides of the Iron Curtain.

**Tyler:** Here he is shortly after being confronted by Mike Wallace about performing for Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Lebanon.

**[60 Minutes Program Audio]**

**Mike Wallace:** Reed declines to label PLO violence as terrorism. He talks instead of terror practice from the White House.

**Dean Reed:** I think it's terrorism when for example, Mr. Reagan says he's going to make Star Wars, and he's going to give the military billions of dollars more to create more weapons. He's putting *me* in terror. He's putting millions of people to live in terror from a third world war. That's also called state terrorism.

**Mike Wallace:** You equate Ronald Reagan with Joseph Stalin.

**Dean Reed:** I equate the possibilities of Ronald Reagan with Stalin. He - I say he has the possibilities to do the same injustices and much more by incinerating this planet through an atomic war.

**[Audio fades out]**

**Dr. Peter Schmelz:** And there's that that 60 Minutes interview that he gives in the - in the mid-80's that was just a disaster for him, right, because he's comparing Reagan to Stalin and he doesn't understand that that is not going to sell very well in the U.S. because he's been gone for too long. Right.

**[Music]**

**Noel:** Just six weeks after the *60 Minutes* segment aired, and in the midst of difficult times in his personal life, Dean Reed was found dead in a lake near his house in East Berlin.

**Dr. Nick Hayes:** Well, in the end, Dean Reed died in very suspicious circumstances in the summer of 1986. The *official* explanation was suicide. That was not the first opinion. The first opinion was that he had drowned. He swam across this lake in East Berlin every day. He drowned in less than 12 inches of water. There is no evidence of any trauma, of a heart attack, a stroke, or anything like that to explain why this highly athletic man would have drowned.

**Tyler:** As for the authorities, and the United States, East Germany, and the Soviet Union, none of them seemed especially interested in finding the cause of Dean Reed's death.

**Noel:** Years later, the East Germans informed the public that they had found an alleged suicide note written in German on the back of a screenplay. It's authenticity has been widely debated.

**[Dean Reed Audio Clip]**

**Dean Reed:** I have never and because of a certain reason, if I happen to die, if somebody happens to shoot me one of these days, I don't want it to be in any way a doubt in any person's mind, that I was an opportunist. I was never an opportunist. I lost millions of dollars because of what I believe in but I gained millions of friends throughout the world who respect me and admire me and I hope, love me, and I think that's more important.

**[End of Clip]**

**[Audio Clip from fall of Berlin Wall]**

**[Crowd clapping]**

**Ronald Reagan:** Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!

**[Crowd clapping, celebrating]**

**[Audio fades out]**

**Tyler:** It's been 30 years since the Berlin Wall fell and the great ideological struggle of the Cold War began to thaw. But most people in the United States still don't know who Dean Reed is.

**Noel:** For all his fame abroad, Dean Reed the singer, actor, heartthrob, and activist never made it home. Despite his longing to return to Colorado, the deal he made with a mysterious hitchhiker when he was a 19-year-old kid bound for Hollywood, had proven to be a sort of Devil's bargain after all.

**Tyler:** Reed had built his name behind the iron curtain, and it stayed there.

**Noel:** In much the same way he'd run 110 miles against a donkey on a twenty-five-cent bet as a young man in Colorado, Reed's life was an almost-unbelievable journey. Whether heroic or

foolhardy, he lived it with an undeniable sense of showmanship and a commitment to principle over profit.

**Tyler:** Dean Reed may never be a household name in the U.S., or even in his hometown of Denver, Colorado. He never had the chance to share his music or his message with those he wanted to hear it back home. But the socialist values and ideals he cared about are once again part of the mainstream political conversation in the United States today.

**Noel:** And for Dean Reed, it was always the message itself that mattered most.

**[Audio fades in]**

**[crowd chanting]**

**[Dean Reed's "Nobody Knows me Back in my Hometown]**

Well back in Colorado in those days when I was young,  
I had my hopes and dreams of fame, like most everyone,  
So I left home with songs to sing and fame I finally found,  
But nobody knows me back in my hometown,  
Nobody knows me back in my hometown.

My name is known in half the world, I'm called a superstar,  
I've shook the hands of presidents, I've traveled near and far,  
But deep inside I feel the hurt that sometimes gets me down

**[Audio fades out]**

**[Lost Highways music fades in]**

**Credits:**

**Tyler:** *Lost Highways* is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios.

It is made possible by a generous grant from the Sturm Family Foundation, with particular thanks to Stephen Sturm and Emily Sturm.

**Noel:** If you enjoyed this podcast and want to support it, PLEASE become a member of History Colorado. You can get 20% off your membership at [historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount](http://historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount). Plus, you get all kinds of great benefits like free admission to our 8 museums around the state.

**Tyler:** And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

**Noel:** Very special thanks to Susan Schulten, our history advisor on this episode, and to Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, our editor. And to Conor Bourgal, who composed our theme and the music.

**Tyler:** And to Will Roberts, who let us use the raw material from his documentary

*American Rebel* for the episode. And Kaitlin Benz, who digitized that material for us.

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Emily Sturm

Chief Creative Officer, Jason Hanson

Thomas Andrews

Jonathan Futa

Charlie Woolley

Susan Schulten

Tom Romero

and Cara DeGette

**Noel:** Finally, thanks as always, to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black

**Tyler:** And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.

**[Music fades out]**