

The Passion of Alan Berg Transcript

Tyler: *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.

[Sounds of old Yamaha manual dial tuner scrolling back through AM radio stations]

Noel: OK, Tyler, are you ready to try out our talk radio time machine?

Tyler: Yep. You got it set to 1984?

Noel: Yep. Here we go....

[Dial spinning back through 1980s-2000s radio show excerpts]

[indistinguishable muttering]

[Oooh]

[Spanish people have the worst taste in music, it's all like...]

[The Limbaugh institute for advanced, conservative...]

[See, although...]

[Time machine vortex sound lands on Alan Berg show on KOA fanfare]

[sounds of phones ringing, beeping noises, music continues]

[Alan Berg announcer audio excerpt]

Announcer: He's a prince! He's primitive! He's provocation! He's Alan Berg, and he's next on newstalk 85 KOA. Try your luck at talking with him now. Dial 861-8255, that's 861-T-A-L-K. And now, here's Alan Berg!

[End of announcer audio excerpt]

[Alan Berg: And thank you! And we're back for the final half hour of the show, so join us, we have lines up - this has just been an incredibly terrible day (laughs). Alright, 861-TALK 861-8255, Alan Berg on KOA. Line three, you're on the air.]

[Noel: Hey Alan? It's Noel and Tyler.]

[Tyler: We're calling from the future.]

[Alan Berg: Well - wait a minute - why are you listening?]

[Noel: Well we've been working on this story about talk radio and, american politics have become so polarized here in the future. Obviously, you're trying to entertain people, but don't you think the way that talk radio profits from outrage and controversy could have dangerous consequences? Do you ever worry that something bad could happen?]

[Alan Berg: I don't think that's true. I think it's sad that you can't address the issues that we're talking about rather than finding this a personal attack -- it is an attack --]

[Tyler: Wait but, can we just ask you something real quick?]

[Alan Berg: Well I know what you would say anyway, go ahead.]

[Tyler: Well it's just that you can come off as really offensive sometimes... and...]

[Alan Berg: (Interrupting) You've been whining on talk radio // why do you listen if it offends you, take a walk. Line 1 you're on KOA.]

[Music fades in]

Noel : From History Colorado Studios, this is Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains. I'm Noel Black.

Tyler : And I'm Tyler Hill.

Noel: On each episode, Tyler and I look back at overlooked stories from our home state of Colorado and the West.

Tyler: Stories that we can't believe we never heard.

Noel: Stories that help paint a more complex picture of this place we call home,

Tyler: And how we got to now.

Noel: As a heads up, there's a lot of language from talk radio in this episode that some people might find offensive.

Tyler: In January, 1984, Denver talk radio personality Alan Berg appeared in a segment on the CBS news program *60 Minutes*.

Noel: He was featured along with a cast of rising stars in the growing market of confrontational call-in radio hosts.

Tyler: Here he is talking to reporter Morley Safer about what he sees as the virtues of talk radio.

[Morley Safer *60 Minutes* excerpt]

Alan Berg: ...It's the last neighborhood in town. People don't talk to each other anymore. Talk radio is the last place for them to hear human voices. So many people are isolated today, they don't have a chance to communicate.

Morley Safer: But what are the people who listen to radio call-in shows actually hearing? Those who listen to Berg get a mixed bag of mayhem and malarky, political science and pop psychology, common low and *uncommon* sense, all of it laced with aggression, abuse, and sarcasm.

[Excerpt fades out]

[Music fades in]

Noel: On June 18th, 1984 -- only six months after the *60 Minutes* segment aired -- Berg was gunned down in his driveway as he stepped out of his black VW bug. He was holding a bag of DOGFOOD for his Airedale, FRED.

Tyler: 1984 would prove to be a momentous year for talk radio. Not only was Alan Berg murdered, but a relatively unknown DJ and sports commentator took to the AM airwaves in Sacramento, doing politics this time...

[Music fades out]

[Limbaugh audio excerpt]

Announcer: The Doctor of Democracy makes another housecall. This is a special edition of the Rush Limbaugh program: America held hostage.

[End of excerpt]

Jeffrey Berry: I think it's fair to say that Rush Limbaugh was, or is, the biggest influence in the creation of modern talk radio.

Noel : This is Jeffrey Berry, professor of political science at Tufts University in Boston. He and his colleague Sarah Sobieraj are the authors of a book called *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*. They study the history and political impact of talk radio.

Tyler: It's unclear if Limbaugh was aware of Alan Berg at the time he launched his show.

Noel: But Limbaugh was one of many talk radio hosts adopting a more abrasive style that Berg and others had started to popularize.

Tyler : Limbaugh may be one of the most well-known names in his field, but Berry says that inflammatory talk radio can be traced back all the way to the 1920s when Christian evangelists like Aimee Semple McPherson started using it to spread their message.

Noel: THEN, in the 1930s, things took a turn towards the political.

Jeffrey Berry: Well using the radio for political purposes precedes what we think of as talk radio. So you go back to Father Coughlin

[Father Coughlin radio audio excerpt]

We are Christian insofar as we believe in Christ's principle of love your neighbor as yourself. And with that principle, I challenge every Jew in this nation to tell me that he does not believe in it.

[Fanfare] [end of excerpt]

Jeffrey Berry: And it's important because what he did was try to inflame public opinion through the harsh rhetoric of the radio. So in a sense he is a forerunner.

Noel: In the 30s, DJ's like John J. Anthony and Barry Gray were pioneering the early versions of what would become the call-in format.

Tyler: Then, in the 1960s, a Disc Jockey and TV Host named Joe Pyne developed a more confrontational style of talk show.

[60 minutes Joe Pyne audio clip]

Joe Pyne: You want to walk away? Fine. You walk away.

Guest: I think this is a circus, and that you're a fool, and that you're not in any way...

Joe Pyne: You're a liar and a...

[Booing]

[End of audio clip]

Tyler: His call-in show was one of the most successful of those early programs and would eventually be syndicated on over 250 stations across the country.

Noel: By the time the late 70s and early 80s rolled around, music stations were migrating en masse to the FM side of the dial.

Tyler: That's because FM gave stations the ability to broadcast in stereo instead of mono.

Noel: This left AM stations in the lurch.

Lee Larson: What are we going to do now that music has moved to the, to the FM side which has stereo and all of that. We've gotta find something to do.

Tyler: This is Lee Larson. In the early 1980s, he was the general manager of Denver's KOA, one of the biggest AM stations in the Western US.

Lee Larson: and that's what birthed a lot of the talk formats of different - of different types. The sports talks and the psychology talks and the local affairs talks and then just the natural growth out of that was that, you know, the country was - was maturing the issues of the day always becoming more and more important on a national basis.

Noel: Andrew Horvitz, a sociologist from the State University of New York in New Paltz has done a lot of research on talk radio. He told us that it's always been pretty easy to make talk and call-in shows profitable.

Andrew Horvitz: Because unlike FM, unlike music, you would get something on AM that you would call an active listener or an engaged listener. Right. You paid attention to the shows, you stuck with the people through the discussions. You want to stick through those commercials to hear what wonderful slash outrageous slash wonderful slash outrageous, again depending on what side of things you're on. You know really what's going to be said, you stick to the commercials, and that makes you a very valuable radio demographic to go after.

Noel: AM stations across the country were discovering that outrage sells.

Tyler: Steve Kane in Miami, Gary D in Washington DC, Howard Stern in New York, and others were all pioneering a combative style of AM radio that was driving numbers through the roof.

Noel: In fact, during a one year stint at WWDC in Washington, Howard Stern more than tripled the station's ratings. And around that same time, Denver saw the rise of its own King of Call-In: a dapper, trash-talking, chain-smoking, coffee guzzling, hot-headed Jewish man from Chicago named Alan Berg.

[KOA Alan Berg audio clip]

Alan Berg: We're talking about masturbation, lesbianism, homosexuality, god and it's all one big mess.

[end of clip]

Noel: For those who knew him best, Berg was something of spectacular mess himself. Here's his ex-wife, Judith Berg, fellow talk shows hosts Ken Hamblin and Peter Boyles, and longtime KOA Producer Anath White:

Judith Berg-Halpern: Well he was very thin and very tall.

Ken Hamblin: Alan was tall and lanky. He had bangs and gray hair. He had a beard and a mustache and he had a dog.

Anath White: ...adored his Airedale, Fred.

Judith Berg-Halpern: Everybody loved Fred.

Ken Hamblin: Yeah. Fred. And Berg and Fred were - were twins.

Peter Boyles: I best describe him as a muppet. He was an impeccable dresser. I never - I never saw him, whether it was my home, or out for dinner, or working together, he came in with a tie on, always...

Anath White: ...all the kitchen cabinets were full of boxes of his excellent shoes. There was almost no food in there except dog food, but - but shoes.

Peter Boyles: ...close my eyes I see him with a cigarette in one hand and a cup of black coffee on the other hand.

Ken Hamblin: Berg was a terrible, terrible smoker. And I would say, Could you please have Mr. Berg not leave ashes all over the studio. Well he was a chain smoker to the max.

Peter Boyles: He would light the cigarette off the cigarette.

Anath White: ...along with a cup of coffee because he drank something like 40 cups of coffee a day. And a cigarette in the other hand and you know in that scratchy, loud-ish, impossible to miss voice.

[KOA Alan Berg audio clip]

Alan Berg: My dear, anybody who's programmed like you is persay a racist.

[woman call-in guest arguing]

Alan Berg: Honey, you are committable. Goodbye. 761-364...

[clip ends]

[music fades in then out]

Stephen Singular: Alan Berg was raised on the South Side of Chicago, he was born in 1934. So he is one of those guys in between the wars, came of age in the 50s.

Tyler: This is Stephen Singular, author of *Talked to Death*, a biography about Alan Berg.

Stephen Singular: He had very significant issues I think around race, and part of it I think was that he - he had conflict with his father - his father was a dentist. I think he told me he was an "unforgivable dentist." Classic Bergian phrase, and I think he felt that his father was something of a racist. And I think that's what made him ultra sensitive about issues of race bigotry, etcetera as he got older.

Tyler: Racism would always bother Alan. And his on-air provocations and pot-stirring often centered around advocating for the underdog or calling out hypocrisy where race, class, and sexuality were concerned.

Noel: And Berg had the brains to back up his bluster.

Tyler: In 1951, when he was just 17 years old, he studied psychology at the University of Colorado in Boulder. 5 years later, he got a law degree from DePaul in Chicago, and became one of the youngest people to ever pass the Illinois bar exam.

Noel: After he passed the bar, Berg took work in Chicago as a criminal defense lawyer.

Tyler: And things were going well. In 1958 he married Judith Halpern, his college sweetheart from Denver. And at that time, he was making really good money.

Noel: But his success had a dark side. Here's Judith.

Judith Berg-Halpern: His clients were Mafioso's, if I may use that word. And it became very easy for people to get to Alan Berg and he could fix everything. And Chicago was so crooked. And it was just a bad scene there politically.

Stephen Singular: He could go in the courtroom and he could defend somebody who had done something awful and he could succeed and get them off or their sentence reduced. But he didn't like himself doing it. He didn't like the hypocrisy within himself.

Noel: Around that time, says Singular, Alan discovered martinis.

Stephen Singular: He was not a good drunk. He was a - kind of a nasty drunk - he didn't like what he was doing. He didn't like the fact that he was succeeding at it and he started to drink more and more and he started to pass out and just sort of go downhill. He's very bright. He was talented. But he was somewhat out of control.

Tyler: Not long after he started drinking more, Alan was diagnosed with epilepsy.

Noel: His then-wife Judith convinced him to quit his law practice and move back to Denver in the hopes that his health would improve.

Tyler: He went to rehab, got sober, and, always the clothes horse, opened up a clothing store.

Stephen Singular: and the customers would come in and he would talk their ear off. One day a man came in name Laurence Gross. Lawrence had a show on a local radio station and he thought Berg was just the fastest on his feet with a gift of gab and could talk about anything and he said, you know, you ought to come on the radio with me some day, you know, you might be good at this.

Noel: And It turned out he was.

Stephen Singular: He went on the Lawrence grow show and they were talking about you know how to walk your dog or cut your flowers or something and he starts in on the two major things that always work on talk radio which is religion and sex or race being the third. And he just blew Gross out of the water. And people started calling in and Denver didn't have anything remotely like this. I mean, they'd never seen or heard anything like Alan Berg. He had incredible energy, incredible verbal gifts, and he was funny.

Noel: The years Alan spent arguing criminal defense cases had inadvertently prepared him for a career in talk radio.

Tyler: He started making regular guest appearances on Laurence Gross's show.

Noel: And before long, he got his own slot.

Stephen Singular: He was safe behind that microphone. He would sit in there. He smoked packs of cigarettes a day. And he was still he would start fires in the trash cans he would start fires on his desk. He was just absolutely chaotic. He would bat them the microphone away. But, but this was his calling.

[KOA Alan Berg tape under Stephen Singular]

Call-in Guest: I know. And I know for a fact there are eight in ten generations that aren't on welfare.

Alan Berg: You dont think it has anything to do with repression and discrimination insecurity?

Call-in Guest: Oh, well, it doesn't seem to be that...

Alan Berg: Oh, of course not dear, you're as dumb as the rest. That's - I can't take it anymore, I can't take it... Sellout. Blacks couldn't get jobs... couldn't get jobs, Civil rights commission comes along. We have a fairer guy there, Reagan bounces him out to get a token black guy on there, who probably never saw a black person in a ghetto in his whole life, or understands the problem. I'll be back with you tomorrow with more grief and hey maybe a laugh or two...

[Tape fades out]

Noel: But in 1976, just as Alan was starting to make a name for himself, his epilepsy caught up with him. He had an especially bad seizure that wouldn't stop.

Stephen Singular: They took him to the E.R. room and he was diagnosed with a brain tumor -- a very significant brain tumor. And they said we have only one option here and it is essentially to cut off the top of your head, go in and take out the tumor, and you know, you'll - you'll never probably work again, you know, you're lucky if you'll be able to talk, And they went in - about a month later he's back on the radio talking like a magpie.

[KOA Alan Berg tape]

Alan Berg: Says that you 'aint doing the right thing here, you haven't got what the people want, and you don't know what you're doing with it. And you're a loser. And that's it. Line 2, you're on KOA.

Call-in Guest: What side of the bed did you get up on this morning?

Alan Berg: Eh! I'm in a great mood, what're you talking about?

Call-in Guest: Well, you blew my argument. I called in...

[Tape fades out]

Stephen Singular: ...he went through I think what he would have acknowledged was kind of a bad period in which he started becoming more and more aggressive and some would say, more and more obnoxious on the radio and he started hanging up on everybody and making snide comments and doing all the things that he knew how to do. And they had a poll in Denver and they say we want you to vote for the most popular and the least popular media personality in Denver. And he won both awards.

[Music]

Tyler: As he built his career and developed his persona as a talk show host, Alan had a string of gigs at various small stations around Denver.

Noel: First at KGMC, replacing Laurence Gross who took a job in San Diego.

Tyler: Then KGMC changed to KWBZ,

Noel: And Alan moved to KHOW shortly after.

Tyler: He was fired from KHOW, and then went BACK to KWBZ,

Noel: ... until THAT station changed to an all-music format.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: He considered a job in Oklahoma City, but Peter Boyles told us that when he went there for an audition, things didn't exactly go...according to plan.

Peter Boyles: he gets to Oklahoma and he throws the mic switch and somebody calls the radio show (laughs) and said I need everybody to know that in Denver, Colorado this man called Jesus Christ a black homosexual. (laughs) That game's over.

[Music fades in and then out]

Noel: Berg came back to Denver. And that's when he ended up at KOA, which at 50,000 watts, was one of the most powerful radio stations in the country.

Tyler: KOA was, and still is, what's called a "Clear Channel" station.

Noel: NOT to be confused with the Clear Channel BROADCASTING company.

Tyler: It's part of a group of 60 frequencies across the country that in 1941, were given high-power signals, and special permission to have their frequency cleared from ALL other broadcast channels.

Noel: They were the original emergency broadcast system, and the idea was that from anywhere in the country, listeners could have access to at least 2 clear channel stations in the event of an emergency.

Tyler: When Alan Berg was on KOA in the 1980s, his show reached a massive part of the Western U.S. Especially at night when AM radio waves are reflected off the ionosphere.

Noel: At the time, you could hear KOA in parts of 30 states, and as far as Los Angeles, even in Canada.

Tyler: And you still can.

Noel: But the commercial success of Berg's provocations would come with a price.

[Music 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.

[Music fades out to Tyler narrating]

Tyler: By the time Alan Berg got to KOA in 1981, his show had settled into a rhythm.

Noel: He would dance back and forth between frivolous, hot-button topical items and impassioned engagement around issues like race, religion and sexuality.

Tyler: Sometimes all within the same show.

Lee Larson: Alan’s approach was, was different because he was talking about the issues of the day, but he would mix that with some of the funniest, craziest, goofiest observations that he had on society.

Tyler: Former KOA General Manager Lee Larson says Alan was always happy to play devil’s advocate.

Lee Larson: he was one of the first talk show hosts / was aware of that would also sort of take whatever side of an argument he needed to, to be able to engage with a caller. And he went on the air with this approach of that this was just outrageous and just unacceptable. But it was kind of what I would call a shtick.

[KOA Alan Berg audio clip]

Call-in Guest: I'm pretty upset about what the government is doing as far as bringing in all the refugees. You know, like people -

Alan Berg: Like, they're showing a work ethic that's better than most Americans? God bless 'em!

Call in Guest: Well, no, I-

Alan Berg: We'll make ya shape up and do something and work, and earn something, and not want a free ride. SWEETHEART. Line 1, (laughing) you're on KOA.

[End of audio clip]

Noel: But, says producer Anath White, who worked with Berg , he could also play a schtick to make a larger point.

Anath White: One of the topics that he liked to do every year was an annual thing. He did his suntan show. and he would start out talking about why did white people always go out and get out in the sun and try to turn their skin dark. And then he would hit you with. I think it's because white people secretly want to be black and there would be people that would call in and just be outraged. I don't want to be black Alan blah blah blah.

[Alan Berg clip]

Alan Berg: I think the most continuing prerogative ... the show I came up with the idea, oh some eight years ago. An idea about suntanning and the reason people didn't like themselves white, so they really didn't like themselves white, maybe... wanting to be black. That show has been a continued craziness for the last eight years. But it's a funny thing because people have a hard time laughing at themselves which is something I have a problem with in talk radio. It's too serious. People take everything too seriously, they don't laugh at themselves and that to me is more a solution to more problems than anything I know. Better communication. If we can share some humor, than any other dialogue we have...

[End of Alan Berg clip]

Noel: To the people that knew Alan well and worked with him closely, there was a fine line between trying to get ratings and the issues that he really cared about.

Anath White: One of the things that drove Alan was that, the sense of injustice that the country has about racial issues and all of that human, all the human rights kinds of topics. So when he did this suntan show - he underneath all of that was the topic of racism and race, and trying to talk about that too.

Noel: To friend and colleague Peter Boyles, who still works as a conservative talk radio host at Denver station KNUS, Berg was like a professional wrestler.

Peter Boyles: One of the highlights of my life was I got to work in professional wrestling. I had to do the ring and I got to do television. And I always say that I learned how to do radio from the legendary Bobby the Brain Heenan, and Alan Berg.

Noel: Here's a clip of Professional Wrestling Announcer Bobby The Brain.

[Bobby the Brain Tape]

Bobby the Brain: My whole life everybody's been jealous of me! Everybody's been worried about me my whole life! They done this to me, they done this to me. Don't call me weasel either, pal. No- you called me weasel now didn't you? No I didn't try to weasel out...

[Fade out of tape]

Tyler: Boyles says that Berg had many of the same theatrical instincts.

Boyles: He knew how to do it. He's like a pro wrestler. He knew how to build the heat. How to press the buttons, and that was important.

Noel: And the pro-wrestling metaphor was especially apt when it came to Alan Berg's particular style of radio. Peter explained to us the difference between what those in the wrestling business call a "SHOOT" and a "WORK."

Tyler: A shoot being something REAL, and a work being something...NOT so real. Peter Boyles says that Alan had issues that he genuinely cared about: racism and antisemitism being some of the big ones.

Peter Boyles: Well he had hot buttons. But when he would do like, white people really want to be black, he was putting you on. But he puts you on because in some ways ... a great story, he came in one afternoon. He would always do afternoon, didn't want to get up, and I'm doing mornings. And he comes in and says, I want to talk to you. And I said, "what"? He said, "I'm going on air today and say I'm gay". I said, I'm looking at him - "What - what's up your sleeve?". So he goes on the show and he goes, "I want everybody to know I'm gay". And people call him, "I always knew you were gay!" (laughs) And he - he goes, "Folks! It's just a word. I'm not gay. But it's a word where -" You know, he does this whole, he's working. You know, and it's not a shoot, it's a WORK.

Tyler: So in other words, the WORK was coming out as gay. While the SHOOT was to draw attention to homophobia.

Noel: These kinds of over-the-top, comical provocations became Berg's trademark on-air.

Tyler: But just like in wrestling, once the show was over, Berg was able to take off the mask. Here's former KOA talk show host Ken Hamblin again.

Ken Hamblin: I found Alan to be, off the air, he was a sweetheart. He was the most gentle, considerate, caring guy you ever wanted to meet. I mean if you knew Alan off the - off the air you'd love him. As we all did.

Tyler: Anath White agrees. She told us about how she felt when she first learned she'd be working with Alan.

Anath White: I was nervous, thinking, my goodness is he going to be, like, gruff and mean and, you know, lose his temper with me, and you know, be outrageous like his reputation was... and instead he was gentlemanly and wondering what did I need and right away that was kind of the tone he set. What he was like on the air versus what he was like off mike were very different things and he was quite easy to work with pretty much all of the time.

Tyler: And SHE thinks that even in his most provocative moments, there was some level of intention behind the shtick.

Anath White: Even when he was being outrageous, where you would think, oh my gosh I can't believe he just said that! He was *usually* doing it with a twinkle in his eye.

Noel: In this excerpt taken from the 60 minutes segment we played earlier, you can see Alan smiling as he berates Judith. She told us that she used to call in on slow days to help them out.

[60 minutes Alan Berg clip]

Alan Berg: ...remember when I left you - you never shut up. I am fed up with you! You never let me get in a word edge-wise! This is my ex-wife. Get out of here.

[Judith arguing unintelligibly]

[clip fades out]

Anath White: He enjoyed kind of stirring the pot and occasionally he would even shock me by what I would think oh my goodness I can't believe he just, you know, said that or went there. But most of the time, you know, I know he's been labeled as a shock jock and that was so NOT true about him. When he really mixed it up with somebody it was most of all about things taht he really did care about. He took on people who were bigotted, antisemetic, racist, but he wanted to engage with the people who held those views, and challenge them.

Noel: But some people couldn't make those kinds of distinctions. And it was easy for them to mistake Alan's persona for reality. Peter Boyles says that there's a name for those kinds of people in the wrestling business.

Peter Boyles: Those people are called Marks. And they don't call them fans, they call them marks. And they believe it's real. And that was the part about Alan. Was - Alan was wrestling. They were marking, and, there are people that believe all kinds of stuff. Belief is far more powerful than knowledge.

Tyler: One of those MARKS was a frequent caller TO Alan's show.

[Alan Berg Clip with David Lane]

David Lane: I think the Jews are still firmly in control of the soviet union, I think theyre responsible for the murder of 50 million white Christians.

Alan Berg: You think so, huh?

David Lane: Yes, I do, and I think -

Alan Berg: I think you're sick, I think you're pathetic, I think your ability to reason ... any logic is...

David Lane: Why don't you put a Nazi on your program and then you'll have somebody that can -

Alan Berg: You are nazi by your very own admission, thanks so much, and that's right you heard it. Ok. 861...

[fade out of clip]

Noel: According to Anath White, that caller was a neo-Nazi named David Lane.

Anath White: David Lane had been listening to Alan Berg for years and years and was known to lay on his bed listening and scream at the radio but continue to listen, sometimes calling in and, you know, arguing with Alan.

[Music]

Noel: And on June 18, 1984, Lane and three other members of a white nationalist group called "The Order" assassinated Alan Berg.

[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

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[Music fades in then out to Tyler narrating]

Noel: Here again are Ken Hamblin, Peter Boyles, Judith Berg-Halpern, Anath Whyte, biographer Stephen Singular, and former Denver Post journalist Kevin Flynn describing the night Alan Berg was murdered.

Ken Hamblin: We had gone to lunch. I had had lunch with him at noon.

Peter Boyles: and we were gonna have dinner that night. And... he called me and he said Judy's in town. His ex-wife. He said I got to take care of Judy, go have dinner with Judy... Said I love you man. I said I'll see you tomorrow.. I love ya.

Judith Berg-Halpern: on the way home we bought - he bought dog food.

Stephen Singular: They ate dinner in Lakewood. Stopped and bought a bag of dog food and a pack of cigarettes I think.

Kevin Flynn: When they pulled into the driveway in the little Volkswagen bug the plan was that they would stop. Get out. They would go upstairs to Alan's unit in that condo, the little condo building, and they call his mom Ruth back in Chicago because her birthday was the next day.

Judith Berg-Halpern: and then we were going to go call his mother but he thought that was too late.

Kevin Flynn: So he puts the car in reverse, backs out, drops Judith off,

Judith Berg-Halpern: We hugged and kissed and he said I'll talk to you tomorrow.

Kevin Flynn: Then he came back.

[Music fades in]

Judith Berg-Halpern: The fickle fingers of fate.

Anath White: I was home late that night and I got a phone call from Phyllis one of the other producers.

Peter Boyles: I was at home and the phone rang. It was Barry Fey, the old rock promoter.

Anath White: ... seems like it was about nine thirty, and she was she sounded very dramatic

Peter Boyles: And Barry said, they killed Alan, you know, and I'm thinking, the ratings came in, which he had great ratings so meaning that you could kill the numbers, you know, because you know our business...

Ken Hamblin: and Rick Barber walked into the studio. He didn't say anything. He came and he sat down to a microphone at the table.

Peter Boyles: I turned on channel 4, and they were in the street, there on Adams, showing a live shot and they say, he's gone, Alan's dead.

Anath White: and she said Anath, Alan is dead. And it was just, what? How- you know, just silence.

Hamblin: He turned on the mic and he said Alan Berg was shot and all of a sudden I found myself falling down into a black void.

Anath White: You know and as I describe that to you I can visualize it again. That long thin body sprawled out on the ground and all these, big I suppose police lights, all around

Judith Berg-Halpern: It was like a bad dream. And I thought I was going to faint.

Peter Boyles: and I don't even know what to say.

Anath White: Ken was on talking about it and he actually addressed the killers.

Ken Hamblin: ...talk show hosts are a dime a dozen... If Alan Berg was anything before you blew him away, he was nothing. And you made him immortal. You made him a part of me. And you gave value to everything that ever justified your sick act tonight.

Anath White: The real of it was... Just-just about... impossible to take in. Except there was Alan sprawled outside of his VW in his car port area of his condo townhouse. With his beloved Airedale upstairs, holding a sack of dog food. I mean it was - impossible to believe and also just horrendous.

[Music fades in]

Tyler: Berg's murder, the investigation, and the trial that followed is it's own long story, and if you want to know more about it, there's a podcast mini-series called "The Order of Death".

Noel: In short, David Lane and three other members of a white nationalist group called "The Order" believed that Alan Berg was part of a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world. The Order believed that killing him would eventually lead to the creation of an all-white state. Several members of The Order eventually went to prison for charges mostly unrelated to Berg's murder.

Tyler: Here's Mark Potok. He works at a place called The Center for Analysis of the Radical Right, and used to work at the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Mark Potok: I mean I think that the Order was the first of the truly revolutionary extreme-right racialist organizations in this country.

Noel: What he means by truly revolutionary, is that prior to the Order, most white nationalist violence and terrorism in the U.S. was what he calls a "restorationist." Groups like the KKK, he

says, wanted to return to the, QUOTE, UNQUOTE “good old days” of formal segregation, if not slavery.

Tyler: The Order, on the other hand, wanted an all-out RACE WAR.

Mark Potok: And in effect it opened a new era, an era which we are still living in today. You know today, it's not so shocking to see the murders say of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville Virginia in 2017 or to see the mass murder of black churchgoers carried out by Dylann Roof in Charleston South Carolina. Those kinds of things, while not precisely every day, are very common now on the radical right, simply murdering a bunch of people either because you want to get attention or you think that they are somehow your enemies or representative of your enemies.

Noel: The Order's influence on the modern day radical right, he says, can't be underestimated.

Tyler: For example, while in prison, Order member and Denver native David Lane, went on to become one of the most prominent Neo-Nazis in America. And he still has an outsized influence on white nationalists today.

[Music fades in then out]

Noel: It would be easy to end the story here -- to draw a faint line between Alan Berg's murder by a radicalized group of angry white supremacists and incidents of white supremacist violence like Charlottesville and other recent attacks.

Tyler: But we want to go back to something talk show host Peter Boyles said earlier in the episode.

Peter Boyles: they don't call them fans, they call them marks, and they believe it's real. And that was the part about Alan was... Alan was wrestling. They were marking, and yeah there are people that believe all kinds of stuff. Belief is far more powerful than knowledge.

[Music fades in]

[Alan Berg clip]

Alan Berg: I can't conceive that everything I've said in all these years preceding this night, you never agreed with. That's *inconceivable* to me. I don't agree with myself most of the time.

[Clip fades out]

Noel: If Berg's death marked a turning point for the radical right, it also marked a turning point for American political discourse.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: With Berg's murder, these provocations that political talk show hosts may have seen as more-or-less innocent fun became more than just WRESTLING.

Noel: The pretend outrage that drove ratings and advertising revenue had an audience of angry marks for whom the outrage was real.

Tyler: Even though talk radio didn't INVENT confrontational political discourse, it's definitely one of the early forces that commercialized it.

Noel: And that blurry line between sales-driven provocation and real-life consequences is, in some ways, built into the very DNA of political talk radio.

Tyler: Here are Jeffrey Berry and Andrew Horvitz, radio experts that we heard from earlier.

Jeffrey Berry: There's always been anger, an angry element of our population, in terms of politics. That's part of freedom. It's part of a democracy that people can say what they want. So what we've emphasized in our research is that increasingly pedaling outrage became a for-profit business.

Andrew Horvitz: People get very, very excited and I don't think that people who are espousing all of this vitriol sometimes are really understanding the full impact that their words can hold, especially when they speak from the positions of power that they do. So, danger danger danger.

Noel: And again, Rush Limbaugh, first came on the air in 1984, the same year Alan Berg was assassinated.

[Rush Limbaugh audio clip]

Rush Limbaugh: A little history lesson for you. If any race of people should not have guilt about slavery it's caucasians.

[End of audio clip]

Andrew Horvitz: But, yeah, there's - there's a danger in that you're to put a little less of an articulate way of saying it, Those are fighting words. And Limbaugh was like you know, he's like a goddamn Jedi Knight when it comes to it, for - for better or worse.

Tyler: Limbaugh wasn't the first to use outrageous broadcasts for political power, but Horvitz and Berry say in some ways he popularized the use of controversial entertainment as a political tool in the United States.

Noel: It was Limbaugh, says Jeffrey Berry, who opened the door to the same style of sabre-rattling political entertainment...on television and, later, on the internet.

Jeffrey Berry: Fox and MSNBC came onto the cable scene, provocative Web sites from the Daily Caller on the right, to the Daily Kos on the left, emerged in great numbers. And now with social media all of the preceding, you know, what goes on talk radio, gets recycled through Twitter and Facebook.

Tyler: Andrew Horvitz says that TODAY, the line between politics, entertainment, and reality is blurrier than ever.

Andrew Horvitz: Oh I would say Trump is our talk radio president. He's our reality television president. But I think there is a big tie between you know, the - the kind of reality television

where it was just that blatant, no holds barred competition. A lot of that translated from the rhetoric, I think, you would have gotten from talk radio, right?

[Fade in audio clip from “The Apprentice”]

[laughter]

Donald Trump: You know, Tarek, These people are laughing at you, I mean, I’m starting to laugh at you...

Summer Zervos: I’m sorry. You know what - Let me, let me just say something really quick.

Donald Trump: Why should you interrupt me when I’m knocking the hell out of him? By interrupting me when I’m knocking him, what are you doing to yourself?

Summer Zervos: Because I’m being truthful, and I’ll always be truthful. By saying...

Donald Trump: How stupid is that, right?

Summer Zervos: It’s not stupid.

Donald Trump: Here I am getting ready, practically to fire this guy. And you keep interrupting me and stopping me from doing it, and in the end what Carolyn said to you was true. She said what have you done, and you couldn’t answer it. You know what, Summer? You’re fired!

[End audio clip]

Andrew Horvitz: The problem is the media and I’m gonna hesitate to use the word “mainstream” because this is really journalism, more broadly, they’re... They weren’t designed to handle somebody like him.

Jeffrey Berry: President Trump understands how to use outrage. And he uses it to command media attention. And it works, not only pleases conservatives, but it’s catnip for cable TV and

talk radio which want to, find that discussing it builds an audience, and brings the audience back, makes their audience angry. So Anger sells.

Noel: Andrew Horvitz says that regardless of what you think of Trump's policies, he's a master of dominating news cycles by saying outrageous things.

Andrew Horvitz: But those are great headlines. If you were a publisher why would you *not* run those. I mean, you know, that's going to sell papers and your other option is if you *don't* run those and every other outlet is talking about said comments, you're going to be out of that, you know, part of - you're gonna be out of that discussion which means you know, whatever that means for your circulation size and your readers and your ratings and all of that.

Tyler: And it's important to point out that the mainstream media has been lamenting this change in the discourse while simultaneously cashing in on it for decades.

Noel: Listen to CBS Reporter Morley Safer interviewing Alan Berg for *60 Minutes* in January 1984, just 6 months before Alan was murdered.

[60 minutes clip]

Morley Safer: Isn't there something a little dangerous about this kind of broadcasting?

Alan Berg: There is a danger. I agree with you. That's the danger that we exhibit in all, free, all rights of free expression, be a columnist who writes newspapers...

Morley Safer: Yeah, indeed. But - but you say yourself you often go on there, you don't know quite what you're going to say.

Alan Berg: Hopefully my legal training will prevent me from saying the one thing that will kill me. I've come awfully close.

[End of clip]

[Music fades in then out]

Noel: Everyone from *Fox News* to the *New York Times* gets a pay day in a culture of outrage as entertainment.

Tyler: A *Forbes* article from April 2018 points out that cable news, as well as the supposedly more “respectable” network outlets, have all seen ratings bumps since Trump’s announcement that he was running for President.

Noel: and an article in *The Atlantic* says that print publications like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *The New Yorker* also saw an increase in subscriptions after Trump’s election. Not to mention online publications like *Slate* and *Vox*, which have settled into a routine of almost-constant Trump coverage.

Tyler: Peter Boyles, told us politicians AND the MEDIA both benefit from making marks of their audience.

Noel: So is Donald Trump on some level a professional wrestler?

Peter Boyles: Oh sure. They all are. No politician I know that I've really had any affection for... Jack Kennedy wrestled pro, Reagan got it. Berg had it. Ocasio Cortez, got it. I'm not a fan but she got it. She hit the scene. She knew how to do it, the media loved her, she can say whatever she wants to say but she has the spotlight. Trump pimps these people intentionally to get them to react and then everybody goes bad crap.

[RAW wrestling clip]

Vince McMahon: You want to challenge me to a match in Wrestlemania? Ha!

Donald Trump: Absolutely right. One hundred percent. I will kick your ass.

[Audience cheers]

[End wrestling clip]

[Music fades in]

Noel: Boyles says that while Alan Berg is by no means solely responsible for the kind of outrage entertainment that paved the way for everyone from Rush Limbaugh to Donald Trump, he definitely played his part.

Peter Boyles: He loved people. But boy when that guy threw that Mike switch, bang! You know, he was, we were - we were doing it for money. Yeah. Don't ever kid yourself it was - it was money.

Noel: The price we all pay, says Boyles, comes when outrage as commercial entertainment becomes reality as violence.

Peter Boyles: You know, I think it was some Aristotelian thing of, you know, little boys kill - kill frogs in sport, frogs die in earnest. And he's doing a radio show. And I remember saying that night that like Mike Harper Lee, they killed a mockingbird. They know they killed- They killed this guy that they thought was the voice of the Jewish occupation government or some insanity. If you knew him, he wasn't even close. I mean he... but that's who they thought he was.

[Music fades in then out]

Tyler: So, do you think we should call Alan one more time?

Noel: Let's do it.

[dial radio sounds, static]

[Announcer: You're listening to Alan Berg at newstalk 85 KOA, call in at 861-TALK]

[Alan Berg: Alan Berg on KOA, we have about four minutes remaining in the hour, 5 minutes till CBS news rain report coming up, then back with our final segment of the show. Lines are full right now, lets go to line 2. You're on KOA.]

[Noel: Hi Alan, it's Noel and Tyler calling again. From the future.]

[Alan Berg: I'm sorry, what?]

[Tyler: Noel and Tyler... From the future.]

[Alan Berg: Oh my god. What are you gonna do to me?]

[Tyler: Wait, before you hang up, we were just wondering if we could ask what you'd like people in the future to know about how talk radio works.

[Alan Berg: It's an entertainment business. We're in a mass media situation we're competing with thirty three stations, I think in this county, and you have to entertain the people with all kinds of wants from the people out there. But first and foremost you have to hold our attention. However you do that. There's different styles, there is no one style of doing talk radio. Well I do think mine is the best..]

[Noel: But it's not just entertainment, is it? Do you feel like you're *trying* to make people think?]

[Alan Berg: They want to vent feelings but they don't want to think. You ask somebody, why do you believe that. I don't know, why do you bother? I just - that's the way I believe. I don't know how to live it. That's - that's a tragic way to think in a lifetime.. They're like sheep, they pick up on idea, the Republicans are great, the Democrats are great, everyone is saying - well wait a minute let me examine this. What are they really doing? They have no information. They go to the polls. It's clown city. They think that they're

purely hype by the media, by advertising, what have you. They buy a president the same way they buy toothpaste. There is no difference.]

[Tyler: But do you think it's a problem that talk radio profits from provoking those people? Is there a way to succeed in this business without just pissing people off all the time?]

[Alan Berg: People do not want to talk about a good thing. If I came on the air today and I said well we can only discuss good things, I would never get a call. I get one or two calls and it would be so boring you'd cry. People really want to dislike something, they want to blame something in this world, they want to get angry at something, and mostly cause classic background and I see a current target. It's called pronouncements of blame. Reagan's fault. It's the mayor's fault. It's the police chief's fault. All is someone else's fault. It's my wife's fault. It's my kids fault. It's never their fault. All the - I never heard so many victims in my life. I end up being the victim.]

[time machine noises going forward through modern news clips]

[One hundred of the Clinton administration...]

[Now that's what I call being completely...]

[I don't like 'em puttin' chemicals in the water that turn the frickin' frogs gay...]

[A copy of Donald Trump's tax return...]

[Get him out of here! Get out...]

[We need to kill them... We need to [audio distorts, deeper] kill them... The radical muslim terroris...]

[The problem of anti-muslim attacks, they have been on the rise since...]

[The horrific scene in Charlottesville Virginia...]

[We have breaking news] [audio distorts, faster]

[Clips fade out]

[Music]

Credits:

Noel: Again, if you want to learn more about Alan Berg, the trial of the members of The Order, and the legacy of their ideology, check out the podcast “The Order of Death” by Denver-based producers Josh Mattison and Shannon Geis.

Tyler: *Lost Highways* is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios. It’s 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](https://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: Thanks to Eric Whitney, our editor for this episode, and to Conor Bourgal, who composed the music.

Tyler: And to Judith Berg, Jerry Bell, and KOA, all of whom helped provide archival audio for this episode. We also talked to Kevin Flynn for background information. He and his colleague Gary Gerhardt wrote a book called “The Silent Brotherhood: Inside America’s Racist Underground”.

Noel: Many thanks to our editorial team:

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Jonathan Futa

Charlie Wolley

Susan Schulten

Tom Romero

and Cara DeGette

Noel: Thanks for the entire staff of History Colorado. I'm Noel Black.

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

[Music fades out]