



## The Most Savage Shock Jock of Them All

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Who is Michael Savage? On its surface the question seems obvious: he's a 66-year-old nationally syndicated conservative talk radio host whose program, *The Savage Nation*, airs five days a week from its home base of KNEW in San Francisco. He's the founder of the Paul Revere Society, which, according to its mission statement, aims to "take back our borders, our language, and our traditional culture from the liberal left corroding our great nation." He's a former MSNBC cable television talk host who was fired after four months on the job after he told a phone caller, "You should only get AIDS and die, you pig." He's also the third most popular radio talk show host in America, whose weekly audience of more than eight million listeners is surpassed only by Limbaugh and Hannity.

Dig deeper, however, and the question of who Savage is, and how truly savage he is, becomes far more complicated. "Savage" isn't his real name; it seems to speak to his heightened sense of masculinity, his aggression, and his antipathy toward minorities. Born Michael Alan Weiner, "Savage" is the child of Russian-Jewish immigrants. He earned two master's degrees and a Ph.D. in nutritional ethnomedicine from that liberal bastion the University of California, Berkeley. He's written two dozen books, five as Michael Savage and an additional 19 under his given name, on medicine, the subjects of which range from maintaining a healthy diet to breaking a cocaine habit. But by any name, he professes to know what's good for you.

Before the vitriolic monologist emerged, there was another, kinder and gentler Michael. This one roamed Greenwich Village and the Bay Area in the early 1970s, kept a weathered copy of *On the Road* in his back pocket, and lay on the beach with the renowned beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti whenever he wasn't working on stand-up comedy routines. He guarded Timothy Leary's LSD supply, and he even once posed naked in a photograph with Ginsberg, a well-known and very public homosexual, which he distributed among friends in an attempt to prove himself part of the counterculture. At some point, however, more than 25 years ago, something took a sinister turn and, like Prince Hal rejecting Falstaff, Savage suddenly disavowed his former friends. In a 2006 interview for *SF Weekly*, Savage explained, "I was once a child; I am now a man." In the same interview, he said of Ginsberg, "I looked at him almost like a rabbinic figure. Little did I know that he was the fucking devil." For Savage, rejecting his old friends was simply a part of growing up.

The moralist, the healer, and the hedonist -- there's a tension between his three identities, which interact like a trio of siblings elbowing each other for seconds at the dinner table. As one listens to his conservative radio talk personality, one is moved to question whether it's his true self, not because

Savage isn't consistent in his views, but because the views are so grotesque it's difficult to believe that anyone-let alone a former beatnik-could espouse them with a straight face. While it's more than passing strange for a homophobic, conservative radio host to work out of San Francisco, Savage continues to broadcast nationally from his base in the city he likes to call "San Fran Sicko."

Savage is so extreme that even many of his fellow right-wing talk radio personalities don't like him. Bill O'Reilly calls him a "smear merchant," while Neal Boortz refers to Savage as "the Antichrist." Although Talkers Magazine recently bestowed its annual Freedom of Speech award upon Savage, publisher Michael Harrison says he thinks the man is "an asshole." Liberal advocacy organizations such as GLAAD and ACLU have censured him. Liberal media watchdog groups have compiled long lists of the especially inflammatory remarks Savage has made-many of which must be heard or seen in print to be believed. Collectively they justify the cautionary statement that is read by an announcer before each edition of The Savage Nation.

Why do so many different people dislike Savage and his Nation? Perhaps it's because Savage dislikes so many different people. In his book *The Savage Nation: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on Our Borders, Language and Culture*, he writes, "I was raised on neglect, anger, and hate. I was raised the old-fashioned way." Despite claiming to have originated the term "compassionate conservative" (and threatening to sue George W. Bush for appropriating it), Savage is usually far more passionate than compassionate. On the issue of illegal immigration, he said:

"We, the people, are being displaced by the people of Mexico. This is an invasion by any other name. Everybody with a brain understands that. Everybody who understands reality understands we are being pushed out of our own country."

On CNN news anchors:

"Wolf Blitzer, a Jew who was born in Israel, [is] probably the most despicable man in the media next to Larry King, who takes a close runner-up by the hair of a nose. The two of them together look like the type that would have pushed Jewish children into the oven to stay alive one more day to entertain the Nazis."

On homosexuality:

"The radical homosexual agenda will not stop until religion is outlawed in this country. Make no mistake about it. They're all not nice decorators

They threaten your very survival

Gay marriage is just the tip of the iceberg. They want full and total subjugation of this society to their agenda."

And in conclusion:

"Why should we have constant sympathy for people who are freaks in every society? I'm sick and tired of the whole country begging, bending over backwards for the junkie, the freak, the pervert, the illegal

immigrant. All of them are better than everybody else. Sick.”

Listening to a host for whom even George W. Bush is too liberal (Savage particularly lambastes the president on immigration issues) can be an intense experience. Yet millions of people do it. As New Yorker editor Ben Greenman says, “People who listen to Savage say that he’s a little extreme but that some of the things he says are also true. I think his show does encourage you to think for yourself, because he’s so weirdly contradictory.”

Savage’s three-hour program often consists of apoplectic rants-usually against a particular group or groups of people allegedly doing damage to America-that end with an animalistic, Network-like cry of “I can’t take this anymore!” During calmer times, Savage ends his monologues with a huffy “That’s just the way I see it.” Sometimes Savage exhibits a rare and startling tenderness, for instance in his fond recollections of the film director Elia Kazan (famous not only for *On the Waterfront* but also for naming names to the House Un-American Activities Committee).

And every so often Savage changes the subject, mentioning a great barber he’s been to recently or a good movie he’s just seen. There is something almost hypnotic about the up-and-down anger on the program; even though Savage’s views are not always internally coherent, he is supremely confident and comfortable in expressing them. His ability to steer the course without having to resort to logic to support his points is a trait more often seen in politicians than commentators. Indeed, Savage briefly (if laughably) mulled a run for the 2008 presidency on the grounds that since neither the Democrats nor the Republicans were to be trusted, a nonpolitician like him might be exactly what the country needed.

Savage’s main sources of anger these days are illegal immigrants, Islamic terrorists (a near-redundancy for him), and homosexuals. Unlike his parents, who legally emigrated to the United States, arriving in Ellis Island, illegal immigrants assault fundamental American values-or so Savage claims. They not only compromise the security of the border and bring drugs, crime, and disease with them, but they threaten the American way of life-or at least the white male way of life. In reference to Arabs, Savage has said that the “racist, fascist bigots” should be converted to Christianity because “Christianity has been one of the great salvations on planet Earth. It’s the only thing that can probably turn them into human beings.”

The shift in Savage’s attitudes toward homosexuality may be the most revealing of his complex persona. When he was younger, his father mocked Savage’s sexuality. “Michael would have on tight black jeans and a boat-necked sweater, and his dad would say, ‘I don’t like the way you’re dressed. You look like a fag,’” childhood friend Alan Zaitz has said. In his first and only novel, *Vital Signs*, the protagonist (a fortyish Jew named Samuel Trueblood who shares many of Savage’s biographical details) says, “I choose to override my desires for men when they swell in me, waiting out the passions like a storm, below decks.” There are Savage’s years with Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, including a note to Ginsberg that read, “Watched a tourist from New Zealand taking pictures of Fijian people in the marketplace [and] thought of inserting my camera’s lens in your A-hole to photograph the walls of your rectum.” These days, his attitude is outright hostility, with, for instance, his continual assertion of a “homosexual mafia” trying to control the state of world affairs. Savage has also said that gay parenting is “child abuse” and that the sight of a gay couple “makes me want to puke.”

In an interview with the right-wing Web site NewsMax.com, Savage said, “I guess people love my

show because of my hard edge combined with humor and education. Those who listen to me say they hear a bit of Plato, Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, Moses, Jesus, and Frankenstein.” Frankenstein aside, that’s not bad company, and hyperbole notwithstanding, there are still many members of the conservative faith who swear by him. He has been married to the same woman for 40 years and has two children, a daughter, who is a teacher, and a son, who is the creator of the RockStar Energy Drink. His wild popularity allows him to make increasingly outrageous statements: Victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami deserved the devastation because they were harboring terrorists; Democratic presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama was trained in a madrassa. One consistent quality of Savage’s vitriol is that he spares no one he feels is contributing to the problem. The Republican Party and the Catholic Church, both of which wanted to help illegal aliens, were equally subject to his wrath.

Over and over again, one wonders where Savage’s interest lies, why he is so angry and why he seems to take it all so personally. “It really is a mystery. I have no idea what happened to Michael Weiner,” says Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whom Savage has gleefully denounced after his Bay Area days as the owner of “that once-famous communist bookstore,” City Lights. “We were his friends, and as far as I know, we never did anything to him.”

Filmmaker and journalist Rory O’Connor is now completing AlterNet’s first-ever book, which is on the subject of right-wing radio talkers like O’Reilly, and will be available early in 2008. O’Connor also writes the Media Is A Plural blog.

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