

Partners - PJ Vogt & Alex Goldman

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PJ: Yeah, we were fighting really badly.

Alex: My name is Alex Goldman, and I am a co-host of the Reply All podcast.

PJ: My name is PJ Vogt. I am also a co-host of the Reply All podcast.

Hrishikesh: PJ Vogt and Alex Goldman have been working together for over a decade. Their podcast, Reply All, launched in November 2014. Not only is it one of my favorite podcasts, it's one of the most popular and beloved podcasts in the world, with over 100 million downloads so far. As co-hosts, they're constantly berating and teasing each other, all while doing incredible reporting and story-telling. Individual episodes they've made are now being adapted into Hollywood movies. And their show is the centerpiece of the podcast network they're on, Gimlet Media. But when they first met, their careers were just getting started.

PJ: We were working at On the Media at WNYC, which was sort of a weekly news analysis show.

Alex: I was 30, which would have made you 24... 23, 24.

PJ: Alex was the new intern, and I was a staff producer on a trial basis. Like every week I would find out if I still had the job that I was doing. I had been doing it like a year when Alex showed up as an intern.

Alex: January 4th, 2010

PJ: You remember the day that you started the internship?

Alex: It was the beginning of a new life, brother. I was introduced to him at the same time as everyone else. He was just one of many tall, svelte public radio men. And that I was like a short stout homunculus.

PJ: After he interned, he was like, "Listen, I want to work in radio. I know there's not even a temp position here for me, but I can survive off my savings and by being a mover on the weekends. Can I just stick around and work for free?" And so he did. And I just remember... a very short period of us having a normal, formal office relationship, and then very quickly it progressing into something that looks much more like how it does now, just very juvenile idiocy, pranks on each other, just quickly.

Alex: I learned pretty quickly that he was a little nuts. The thing that I recall, and I have a picture of it still, is you left a note on my desk one time that you just wrote, hand-wrote, and it said, "You got loved by a ghost."

PJ: I remember that.

Alex: It's like a short story. And I was like, "Oh, this guy's a real fucking weirdo."

PJ: Yeah, we had this whole running joke about a supposed romance novel called

Both (PJ and Alex): A Year in Damascus.

PJ: And we were just always talking about A Year in Damascus and things that happened in that book, which did not exist. Alex and I were both struggling as producers in complementary ways. I didn't have very good attention to detail, so I could come up with lots of ideas, I could pitch tons of stories, but I was always getting in trouble because I would leave some little t uncrossed. And Alex was really good at detail-oriented stuff, and he read a lot and found a lot of stuff, but you would sometimes have a hard time formulating a pitch.

Alex: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

PJ: And so I would help him with his pitches, and he would help me figure out how to cover my ass on just getting shit done, and so we were backstopping each other pretty early, and I think we bonded over that.

Alex: That sounds right. I think PJ had a much clearer idea of what he wanted to do in radio than I did.

PJ: But I wasn't doing work that I was excited about and wasn't happy about, and I couldn't figure out... I didn't think I could learn how to do work that I was excited about. And so I was going to bartend. And so when this contest came up, I think Alex was the one who was like, "We should really submit something."

Alex: WNYC had a content contest. They said, "Anybody who's interested can pitch a show." And for us, it sounded like, "Oh, this is a lot closer to what we want to be doing than the thing we're doing right now."

PJ: May as well try.

Alex: So we wrote a pitch for TLDR, which is sort of the proto-Reply All,

PJ: It was totally wrong. It was like topical interviews about things that happen on the internet.

Alex: And so the content contest came. We submitted. We were among the five finalists.

PJ: We were fifth place.

Alex: I mean, they didn't put them in order.

PJ: They didn't?

Alex: No.

PJ: But we didn't get made.

Alex: So our show didn't get made, and we were like, "Meh. Well, good effort." I guess you were going to go be a bartender. I was just going to work at On the Media for forever. And then our senior producer pulled us into an office and said, "I don't have any budget to give you guys more money or more time to make this thing, but if we can come up with a way to do it, I want you guys to blog on our website and make your podcast on the side."

PJ: Yeah, nights and weekends we would make the show. But the nice thing was there was no pressure, there was no input. It could come out when we wanted it to come out. It just felt like no one was going to hear it, which was very liberating. It just felt like something we got to make for, really, ourselves.

Alex: One of us would produce the interview, the other person would be the host. We would go back and forth and do edits on it.

PJ: Yeah, we were just sort of playing every position.

Alex: But we didn't really interact on the air, because we wanted to make a show that... We wanted to make these little bespoke, beautiful stories. And I think that our actual interaction is so raucous and weird, it felt bizarre to put on the radio.

PJ: We were at WNYC. The conversations we would have about TLDR, we'd be like, "We have this show. We want things to be able to work on it full-time or to hire a producer." And we would talk to management there; they'd say stuff like, "Well, how do you know your downloads are even real?" Which felt very strange. The decision to go from WNYC to Gimlet was-

Alex: It wasn't even really a decision.

PJ: Yeah.

PJ: Hey guys this is PJ and Alex. You may have heard rumors that we're about to start a new podcast, and you're right.

Alex: It's called *Reply All*. It'll be here very soon. And you can get it on this feed, right here. We'll see you guys soon. We're excited...

PJ: So right in the beginning, it was me and Alex, and then-

Alex: I think the fundamental shift happened because, after 11 episodes, I had a kid.

PJ: Yeah. We were really in the beginning of the thing, and it was sort of like losing Alex for a while was tough. Yeah, that was hard.

Alex: And then we hired Sruthi. And then we hired Tim. And then, rather than just the two of us, it became a team, and that is very different. And I don't know. I just kind of continued on in the same way that I do. And PJ was like, "Oh no, there's actually stuff that needs to be thought about now that we didn't think about before."

PJ: You don't really have to think that much about hierarchy or leadership structure when there's two people and too much work to do. It's just like we always have to do all of it. But then we had more people, and so you had to figure out how it was going to work.

Alex: There was a very long period of time, up until *Reply All* started, where basically we both did the exact same thing. You would do a little bit more of x, I would do a little bit more of y, but basically we were equals. And I don't think that's the case anymore. And I think that it's changed in a way where you are more the lead... It's not even like you're more, you are the leader of the show, and I'm the host of

the show. And I was really resistant to that for a long time. I really hated the idea of us being different things. And that was a painful process.

PJ: Yeah, we had a really hard time. I felt like there was this thing I really loved doing and was hard, but I was good at it. And for a while, Alex would feel insecure, and so he wouldn't want to acknowledge that I was doing it, and that would hurt my feelings. But then I would get resentful that he wasn't acknowledging it, so I would just be a bossy little jerk. Just like, "I'm making decisions, because you won't recognize that I'm making decisions," and would make worse decisions because Alex is really smart, and I would just be like... I was insecure at figuring out how to try to lead.

PJ: The more people who show up with different strengths, the more you have to figure out, "What am I good at, and what am I not good at? Or what are other people better at?" Alex is exceptionally good at a lot of parts of this that... No one can do a lot of what he does, like reporting on mike, just his ability to be a human being in front of a microphone and to be human to other people in a non-performy, very present way, is just a rare thing. Most people can't do that. But you don't feel like the things that you do that you're good at are important, or you don't see how you're good at them.

Alex: There was a period of time where I felt like there was a part of the show that existed through frosted glass, and I was just banging on the window trying to see it. And there were reasons why I couldn't, or why I shouldn't. But I just felt like, "This is my show. I made this show. I want every part of it. I'm hungry for every part of this things. And if there's anything I'm not involved in, then it's not mine anymore, and I hate it." And now you'd have to give me trillions of dollars to want to do that stuff. God, the thought of it is terrible. But there was a period there. There was a really touch-and-go period where I wasn't sure we were going to make it.

PJ: Yeah, we were fighting really badly.

Alex: Summer of 2017.

PJ: Yeah.

Alex: 2015 and 2016 we did 70-something episodes. And it was just like we were fighting to stay above water.

PJ: Yeah, and even though it was hard, that kind of helped.

Alex: Yeah, there was a certain camaraderie to it. And then the show got big enough that we could actually slow down a little bit, and it was in those spare moments that we started developing our resentment of one another. And I mean, it's crazy to say that, because the show absolutely would have died at the pace it was going. There was no way to keep it going that way. But also slowing it down was what allowed us to start getting mad at each other all the time, I think.

PJ: I thought a lot about bands and how bands break up, and how bands manage egos, and how you're like, "Why would you screw something up that is that easy and fun?" How easy it is to put up a scoreboard, and how hard it is to take it down.

Alex: Oh, it really was. It really was a case of tallying in a way that I still do to much smaller degrees with Sarah, my wife. I'll be like, "Okay, well I did the dishes. I cleaned up the toys. The least she could do is take out the recycling." But it was like every day at my job, I was like, "Well I did x, y, and z, and now PJ's not doing so and so. Why is he the person who gets to do blah, blah, blah? Why does he get this responsibility, when I'm actually out here doing blah." You know? And it's so unhealthy. It's so ridiculous. It doesn't get you anywhere; there's no reward for it.

PJ: One of the things that actually helped was that, because we did have all these people who showed up who were smart, people who could explain stuff to us and be like, "Don't say that. You're going to make Alex feel bad." And they could kind

of push through my stubborn defensiveness in a way where he couldn't do that because he was feeling his own things. And then you start to feel, you're like, "Oh, cool. Now we're the hosts that everyone has to triangulate feelings around." You're like, you don't really want that.

Alex: I do think that the people who we work with here, a lot of them have totally saved us.

PJ: One thing is that Alex Bloomberg was like, "You guys are seeing a management coach-"

Alex: Yeah, we went to therapy.

PJ: Which was definitely a couples counselor, who was really helpful. She was just really good at calming us down. Us being able to say, "Oh, the problem is that we had moved into different roles and we couldn't recognize it. And Alex was feeling insecure, and I was feeling resentful," and all that stuff. It's not like we sat down with a notebook and figured that out on our own.

Alex: No.

PJ: It was really helpful.

Alex: The way that we are in this relationship in the worst moments is the way that we are in romantic relationships at the worst moments.

PJ: Yeah.

Alex: PJ is a person who, when things start getting tough, he's like, "I am done. I want to walk away. I am not interested in doing this any more. I don't want to fight for this. It feels bad. I want to escape it. I'd rather blow this whole thing up." And I am a person who's like, "This is the last good thing I'm ever going to have in my life. I don't care how bad it gets, I will stay in it until there's nothing left."

PJ: Yeah. And I think she just helped us figure out the fights we were having were actually sort of with ourselves, and that we were just using each other as punching robots to pretend like they weren't fights with ourselves. And the weird thing is our on-air relationship is teasing each other, and so things have to be good to be able to do that. Because it's kind of like S&M. You're hurting the person, but with their consent and to boundaries that they've given you. If you listen to the show, the eras of the show where we are being meaner to each other, or where I'm being meaner to Alex, are usually eras where we're getting along really well.

Alex: I can tell PJ's mental health by how mean he's being to me. He was going through a pretty rough patch a few months ago, and it was just like a normal conversation. And then a couple weeks ago he came in, and I walked into his office, and he just turned to me and went, "Fuck you, I hate you." And I was like, "Oh, PJ's doing better."

PJ: Just for the record, because I get such a reputation for bullying Alex, when I stop doing it, he'll start trying to alley-oop me. He'll be like, "Oh man, I spilled cereal down my pants today," and he'll just wait for it.

Alex: We have a real Laurel and Hardy routine, and that's how we demonstrate our closeness to one another.

PJ: Yeah.

Alex: That's how we demonstrate our affection to one another, is that we like, "PJ, you won't believe it. I was wearing clown shoes yesterday; I kicked myself in the face." And if he can't do it or he's unwilling to do it, I'm like, "Oh, shit's bad. He's mad at me, or something is wrong in his life." Also again, PJ being very good at structure, if he points out the structure of the joke too much, I'm like, "Oh, something bad's going on."

PJ: What do you mean?

Alex: When I set you up for a joke, and you're like, "What you're trying to do here is x, y, and z," I'm like, "Oh, he knows what I'm up to. He's not game to do it, but he is game to just pop the balloon."

PJ: It's when I'm at like true depressed nihilism, where I'm just like, "We eat food, but it turns to shit."

Alex: I think one of my greatest strengths is that when I'm the angriest I am at a person, I always let them know I care about them.

PJ: Yeah.

Alex: And that fights are not... Fights don't make up our relationship; they're just a thing we do in order to keep a relationship going.

PJ: Yeah. I mean, it's funny. Sometimes what I'll think about is how weird it is that my relationship with Alex is really...

Alex: Spit it out, bud.

PJ: My most successful long-term relationship by a lot. We've had deeper, truer fights than I've had with anyone who I have stayed close with. He understands me in very fundamental ways. We have the ability that you try to get in a relationship where you know how hard they're trying. You know how to forgive them. It's a very... It's not a thing I would have thought a decade ago, when there was this new weird intern. I wouldn't have thought, "Oh, this is going to be a relationship that really defines a lot of my life," you know?

Alex: Yeah, we love each other.

PJ: Yeah.

Alex: And that's not a thing that has not been said out loud. I think it's said out loud fairly regularly.

PJ: I think we say I love you to each other more than people would assume that we do.

Alex: Yeah.

PJ: This really is a relationship. Do you remember the first time I said I love you?

Alex: No, I don't remember.

PJ: I don't either. It was-

Alex: Probably in a fight.

PJ: Yeah, probably in a fight.

Hrishikesh: PJ Vogt and Alex Goldman are partners. Go listen to their podcast, Reply All. You can follow them on Twitter @PJVogt and @AlexGoldmund. Thanks to Damiano Marchetti and Sruthi Pinnamaneni for their help recording my interview with PJ and Alex at Gimlet. Partners is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway. I produced, edited, and made the music for the show. Partners is a Mailchimp podcast, made in partnership with Radiotopia. Find out more at [Mailchimp.com/presents](https://mailchimp.com/presents), and at radiotopia.fm. Thanks for listening.