

**Van Wagner**

April 11, 2023

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:00:03] All right. So today is the 11th of April, 2023. My name is Eleonora Anedda, and I'm IDCL oral historian and curriculum specialist. I'm on a Zoom call with Van. Van, would you like to introduce yourself and say where you're joining this call from?

**Van Wagner** [00:00:23] Yeah. Hi, Ele. I'm Van Wagner. I'm IDCL's community archive director, and I'm taking the call from Austin, Texas today.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:00:32] All right. I'm instead located in Sardinia, Italy, so we're a bit far away, but we were able to connect. And also, as you said, we work together. So Van, just to start, would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood?

**Van Wagner** [00:00:53] Yeah. So I come from a military family. I was born in Landstuhl, Germany, at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, which is a large US overseas hospital. That was when my dad was stationed in Germany, and we moved back to the States before I really have any memories. So the first place we lived when we came back was Abilene, Texas, and that was because my dad moved there while he was still in the Air Force. There's a - is or was, I'm not actually sure - a base there called Dyess. And that's where I have my first memories is in Texas, even though most of my growing up wasn't there. So I have little memories of our house there and playing with my toys, family coming over to the house. I think I had a rosy memory of Abilene, because it's a dusty, small town kind of place. But as a kid, I remember the playground and the zoo and all that.

**Van Wagner** [00:02:05] And when I was five, it was my fifth birthday, we moved to Georgia because my dad had retired from the Air Force. He got a job at a place called Gulfstream Aerospace as a mechanic, so we moved to Savannah, Georgia, and we lived around that area until I graduated college. Various places. But Savannah, Georgia is a pretty cool place. It's a pretty cool town. And I have a lot of memories of the downtown area and how lovely it is there, all the historic buildings and the old trees. Also, we spent a lot of time on the beach when I was growing up, so a lot of memories of the water since it's a coastal town, and we had a boat, so we would go out to sandbars and the islands off the coast a lot.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:03:07] All right. I have so many questions. I'll try to - [laughs]

**Van Wagner** [00:03:11] I don't have anywhere to be.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:03:14] All right. So you said you're from a military family. So is there anyone else in your family who's - apart from your dad, I mean.

**Van Wagner** [00:03:23] Yeah. So my parents actually met in the military. They were both mechanics in the Air Force. They worked on C-130s, which are cargo planes. My mom was in for four years and my dad was in for twenty. My mom's older brother was also in, he was a stealth pilot. And my cousin was in, he was a linguist, translator, in intelligence. Oh, they were all Air Force. My grandfather was in the Army briefly, I think. I think he was drafted. He was in just after World War Two.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:04:06] And what is it like for you to be part of a military family?

**Van Wagner** [00:04:11] It's interesting. It's a strange place to occupy, I think, given who I am now, because growing up, there was a lot of pride in that, that I was taught to have, and a lot of patriotism that I imbibed and was very serious about as a child and as a teen. And now as I've gotten older, and I've been more disillusioned with what the US military does in the world and the hero worship that, in its own way, dehumanizes people in the military and doesn't take their internal humanity and also the things that the military expects [of] them into more detailed account, I've grown apart from that identity. And it's been interesting to try and reconcile that. I remember in college once I was at an event, and I felt very upset when I saw people not standing for the national anthem. And it took me a little bit, and also seeing Colin Kaepernick's protests to understand where that was coming from and why that was actually something that I would wind up having a lot of respect for, the idea of just the simple visual protest.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:05:51] And do you have any brothers or sisters?

**Van Wagner** [00:05:55] It's just me. Just me and the dogs.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:05:58] All right. I'm an only child, too, so I understand. Okay. So you said that you grew up for a little bit in Texas, and then shortly after you left for Georgia. Do you remember how moving was and also if you felt any differences between Texas and Georgia?

**Van Wagner** [00:06:22] Well, I think when a lot of kids move, they have that issue of missing their friends, because my whole life up until that point was constrained to this small circle. And so I was going somewhere totally new. I remember it was the morning of my fifth birthday that we left, and we were staying the night with some friends because we had already moved out of our house, and we needed to have a place. And early that morning we woke up to say goodbye, and they woke up their little son who was my age. And I struck a pose and said, "Brendan, I'm five now." And he was crying, poor thing. It was 5 a.m., and his friend was moving away, and he was tired. And so that was my first memory of our move. I remember my parents driving across the rest of the country, calling each other on walkie talkies, because we didn't have cell phones. And then we lived in several apartments first around the Savannah area before we got our first house, which was on an island in the marsh.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:07:37] And do you have any memories or experiences or stories that you'd like to share about your time at school?

**Van Wagner** [00:07:49] Time at school? Yeah. So let me think of some. Growing up, I was a quiet, unpopular, nerdy kid. And so I always had other friends who were quiet, unpopular, nerdy kids, but you don't get too many that way. And so I remember games I would play with my friends would be a lot of imagination games. I wanted to play pretend well after a lot of my friends grew out of it. And I also was - I don't know if this is something you're familiar with or something you have in Italy, but we have these things called gifted and talented programs. They might be called different things in different parts of the country. I don't have an education background as far as my post-secondary education, so I don't really know what the common stance on these is these days. But I was in those programs from a pretty young age, and I think some of the things we did in those programs were really fun kinds of enrichment, like puzzles and riddles and building little things. It was pretty fun for someone who likes that sort of logic brain game activity. And so I was in those programs a lot. And then by high school, I was in the honors and AP classes, to sometimes greater and sometimes lesser success.

**Van Wagner** [00:09:41] But I think the most impactful things from high school, when I was really forming into an adult, were that I was in the school band, and I was in literature classes with really great teachers. I feel like you hear that a lot. A lot of people like to talk about their really influential English teachers. But I was in the school band because I had played piano since I was five or six, and so it was a natural transition to playing instruments. And I played bassoon in the school band, and I was also in the marching band. And I was really fortunate, because our school was not by any means a wealthy school. By that point we were living in a more rural county. But our school band was really good. Our marching band won state championship three years in a row while I was there, and we had a lot of other opportunities to go and travel throughout the state and play at festivals like at the University of Georgia. I made a lot of friends there and it was very enriching. And then of course, my English classes. I had this really lovely English teacher in eleventh grade called Mrs. Crapse. She like to say that she married for love and not last names. She was a very warm person and very willing to indulge my curiosity in writing and the various tricks and meanings and symbolisms in the books we are reading.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:11:25] Is there a book that you remember you particularly enjoyed?

**Van Wagner** [00:11:29] Yeah, I really liked *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. There was one scene in it where suddenly the author goes from telling the story of the main character, who's a Black woman in the US south, and just for a page has this description of buzzards having a funeral for a dead mule or a donkey. And it was just this weird, sudden, surreal moment in the book that seemed to come out of nowhere. I was really fascinated with that passage.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:12:02] All right. So another thing that I wanted to ask you, and I'm glad that you brought it up, is music. So my question is, where did your love for music come from?

**Van Wagner** [00:12:21] So my grandma played music since she was very little, and she was actually a church organist for years and years. My mom and her two siblings would accompany her to the church at night for her to practice. And my mom says that she remembers sitting in the pews and grandma would be playing some terrifying, powerful organ piece, and they'd be just quaking in the dark of the church as [imitates organ]. And so grandma said that if they wanted to teach me an instrument, I had better start young. And so I started playing piano around five or six. And I was in lessons until maybe high school, at which point I was too involved with the band to be doing that as much. But I continued playing. I played piano and some any songs that we needed it in, in band or in the jazz ensemble that we had.

**Van Wagner** [00:13:19] And after high school, when I went to college, I was in a pretty low place at the beginning of college. And then halfway through sophomore year, I decided I would try to join the piano studio there. And I did. I did that. And my studio professor was just the most wonderful person and instructor. She was such a compassionate and understanding person, and it came through not only in her personality but in her ability to teach, so insightful about what her individual students needed or tended to do. And I got really involved in my studio, and I was practicing just every day at that point for an hour or so, and it felt really good. It was really, I think, rewarding in a mental health kind of way, as well as in just a plain enrichment kind of way. And by the last semester of college, I participated in the university's first concerto competition, and I was a finalist. I wasn't even a music major. So that was a really good experience for me.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:14:38] I'm sure you must have been really proud. So there's something that - actually I think you wanted to say something?

**Van Wagner** [00:14:50] No, I'm good.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:14:52] So I wanted to ask, where did you go to college? And also, what did you study?

**Van Wagner** [00:14:58] I went to a place called Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, studied religion or religious studies, however you want to phrase it. I picked San Antonio because, well, I had lived in Texas as a child, so I felt like I was most comfortable or more comfortable, at least, going back there. Trinity had a beautiful campus, and it had a small student body, so I was more comfortable in that setting than I think I would have been at a larger university. And like I said, I had a rough couple of years in the beginning. I was very homesick, and I'm very shy, and I don't talk to people easily. So I had a really difficult time making any friends, and I felt very lonely the first couple of years.

**Van Wagner** [00:15:49] But do you mind if I dive into this? By the second year, I found a couple of friends, and they convinced me to join a student organization that they were going to join. And one of those friends is my current partner. And so we all joined an organization called the Swashbucklers. And it was a community living organization. So we all lived in the same dorm, and that dorm was a designated substance free dorm, so we wouldn't have to deal with any drunk parties in our dorm. It was a deliberate community space where we had hall meetings every week, and we would have regular events.

**Van Wagner** [00:16:41] One of our events was Krispy Kreme, the donut place, used to do Talk Like a Pirate Day, where they would give you a free donut if you came in and talked like a pirate and a dozen free donuts if you came in dressed like a pirate. And so we were the Swashbucklers. So every year we would get in our cars, we would all load up together, and we would take pilgrimages to Krispy Kreme dressed like thrift store pirates. And we would grab hundreds of donuts. So the last year I was there, we counted 717 donuts. It was ridiculous. We had a big ol' time. We could not eat all those donuts, and if we did, we would have probably died. We would place them around campus with recruitment fliers and stuff. And another event we did was Haunted Hall, where we turned our whole dorm hall into a haunted house. I don't know if you've been to one of those before, but yeah, it was just a haunted house where all the different dorm rooms would have a different theme. Oh, here's the creepy doll room. We turned the lounge into a maze using big, black trash bags that we hung from the ceiling. It was a really fun, creative endeavor. So yes, great time with the student organization there.

**Van Wagner** [00:17:57] And then as far as my religion major went, it was another point in my life where I had a really great supportive network of mentors. Trinity University is known for undergraduate research opportunities, and I had several research opportunities while I was in college. The first one was I did research on a synagogue in present day Syria at the site of Dura Europos, which has these preserved murals in it. And then I also at one point did a research project on the Alamo and the history of that and how the religious language has been used about it. But the most impactful, for me, research project that I did was I was part of an ethnography project that was documenting how Islam was being talked about during the 2016 presidential campaigns. And so I learned how to do ethnography interviewing, and I did a lot of cataloging of our survey data and all that. And

that was, I think, really a great learning experience, but also really useful for where my future career went. It's pretty defining.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:19:26] I have a question about the religious studies and why you got into that. But first, you want to just explain what you were just talking about now, so your career path?

**Van Wagner** [00:19:38] Yeah. Having ethnography experience, having this particular one, impacted me in a few ways. One of them was it helped me first get into grad school, and when I was there, I used that data to write my thesis, which you shouldn't read. It's not that good. But I used it. But having that ethnography experience helped me get a job while I was in grad school at the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, where I was just a student assistant, but it was my first exposure to archives and oral history. And from there I was able to, after I graduated, get my current job here because I had both of those types of interviewing and cataloging experiences.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:20:34] Yeah. And so my other question was related to your choice for religious studies and wanting to study that in college. And so I wanted to ask you if could talk a little bit about that, and also, what is your and your family's connection to religion?

**Van Wagner** [00:20:58] Mm hmm. Well, as far as the religion major goes, I don't think anybody saw that one coming. My family is not particularly religious. We're just vaguely Christian, culturally Christian. A lot of people in the States often are. I grew up going to church on mostly just Christmas and Easter with my mom. My mom wanted to expose me to that, but she didn't want to force me to be Christian if I didn't want to be. She wanted me to make my own choice, which I think is a great sentiment. It's also very hard to let someone make their own choice when you live in rural Georgia, and you don't have that many options for exposure. My dad was never really interested in religion. He never wanted to come to any of the services with us.

**Van Wagner** [00:21:52] But my main religious exposure growing up was to the pervasive conservative Christianity that was around me. So a lot of Baptists, but not necessarily all Baptists. It was more conservative White culture that all these different churches and communities were being influenced by. And so I was surrounded by that, but I wasn't really part of that because I didn't have a church group. I didn't have a youth group and. I had a lot of doubts about it. Growing up in that environment, I didn't really have exposure to other ways to be, so I didn't really understand things like the nuances of the pervasive racism and homophobia of that area. But I did know that when I saw those things, they made me uncomfortable. I didn't really have another option than to just watch or just be there next to it, because I didn't really know. I didn't understand.

**Van Wagner** [00:22:59] But when I got to school, I was able to ask questions about that and go to classes that would help me answer those questions. I remember the first class I took at Trinity in the religion department was Perspectives on Ethics in Religion. And it was taught with a bunch of different scenarios of how different groups might respond to a given situation. And that just broadened my perspective a little and really made me want to dive in to more of those classes. And I thought it was really eye-opening to learn about things like the ancient history of the Bible and the world that it was made in and how it came together in pieces, because that really flew in the face of the modern conservative interpretations of a perfect Bible, a perfect sola scriptura faith that I had been surrounded by when I grew up.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:24:14] It's interesting that you've mentioned that a few things changed when you went to college. So this is one of them. Are there other experiences or things you want to share that you think took a turn maybe when you were in college?

**Van Wagner** [00:24:34] Things that took a turn in college. Well, like I said, I met my partner, and we've been together for nine years now. And he is Jewish, and I had never met - well, strike that. I had met one single Jewish person in high school, but I had never been close to a Jewish person before. And I learned a lot, not just about Judaism, but about my Christian cultural assumptions of what religion is through him. And I have no idea that such a thing as an ethno-religion might exist or that someone could be culturally Jewish and very proud of that and very into that without necessarily believing in God. And so that was really fantastic. And I've been able to be exposed to his family's traditions over the years.

**Van Wagner** [00:25:29] Let's see, other things that changed. College was when I started exploring things like gender expression and identity. Of course, growing up in that conservative environment, I had always felt this really heavy pressure to be a girl in all the senses of the word and to practice femininity and all those little pieces, to shave and wear dresses and find your style and be ladylike in whatever sense you can. And I was always, like I said, the outsider nerd kid. So I was never very good at those things. Did not have a natural inclination for them. So I was able to explore that more, and I was surrounded by a lot of other queer kids on campus, because my student organization, we probably had more queer kids than the LGBT organization on campus, and we all lived together, so it was an absolute trainwreck.

**Van Wagner** [00:26:37] But let me think, anything else that changed in that period. I think the main thing that really changed was just my mental health state. I think I had probably been depressed for a lot longer than I knew. And being able to come into finally a space of people like me and be accepted and experience a vibrant social dynamic and have all these enriching research and musical opportunities and have all these supportive mentors that I had was just a big change. It really made me a mentally healthier a person overall.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:27:24] Yeah, absolutely. And thank you for sharing this. I also wanted to say that we're recording this during Passover.

**Van Wagner** [00:27:33] Mm hmm.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:27:34] And so is there anything special that you did with your partner?

**Van Wagner** [00:27:37] Oh, yeah. His mom hosts a big Seder, so we had seventeen or eighteen people over at her house. And we went around the table doing the readings, and the little kids ran after the matzah - what's it called? The afikomen. They ran after the afikomen. And we had a big feast. It was great. He has a big family, and they're all very connected, which is the exact opposite of how I grew up. Very quiet household at all times, and then at all times at his house, someone is probably screaming, usually out of joy. His sister is actually pregnant. She'll be giving birth any day now, and so that's another screaming Stein on the way.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:28:33] So do you want to talk a little bit more about these differences? So you're in San Antonio now, right?

**Van Wagner** [00:28:39] I'm in Austin.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:28:41] Sorry, Austin. And your parents are still in Georgia?

**Van Wagner** [00:28:48] No, actually. That's a weird story too. They, my senior year in college, decided that they were gonna sell the house because my dad was offered a voluntary severance package from his workplace, and they were going to sell the house, retire, and buy a trailer and travel the country, staying in the national parks and military bases and just see the sights and visit the family. So they did that for several years. And then a couple of years ago they decided it was time to settle down. So they fell in love with a farmhouse from the 1800s in Pennsylvania, and they live there now.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:29:24] I'd like to meet your parents. They sound very -

**Van Wagner** [00:29:27] They're very interesting.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:29:29] Yeah, they sound very interesting people. And do they do everything together?

**Van Wagner** [00:29:34] No, they're actually very different. So my dad's very mechanically minded. He wants to work on his projects. I think he's helped his neighbors already with working on tractors and stuff. And my mom, she's very artistic, and she has been a fiber artist since I was a little kid. And so she weaves and spins and knits and makes all manner of beautiful fiber creations.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:30:00] So let me go back a little bit. You're done with college, you've started working, and then I know that you went to Yale.

**Van Wagner** [00:30:14] Yes. That's why I did grad school. I did another religious studies degree there, specializing in history, specifically history of Christianity, because Yale's a Christian seminary. Great degree. I mean, great program, right? I was really excited to be learning that material. Super lonely time. I came out of college, I was so popular, I had so many friends, and I was having a great time and I was like, "Heck yeah, I can do this. I can go up to Yale. I'm gonna make friends. I'm gonna have a great time." I made zero friends. Goose egg. And it was really weird. It wasn't that I didn't put in the effort. I invited people over. I went to various functions. But people had made their cliques really early, and I wasn't in any of them. So I was very lonely there, and Charlie wasn't with me. It was just me. I was very lucky to have found a roommate who I had a lot in common with, and so we had a nice time together, at least, at the apartment.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:31:17] Yeah, I know what you mean. I did two abroad experiences as well, and one was incredible and then the other one was absolutely horrible. And I had the same experience as you in London. Even though I was putting in the effort, I didn't make any friends at all. And I absolutely attribute it to the culture, the fact that they were British. I'm not totally sure it was it, but I had a completely different experience when I moved to the US, and everyone was friendly, and it didn't matter that a person had twenty friends already. They were very happy to include one more person in the party. It was not my experience at all, not even in Italy. Everyone, you grew up with your own friends, and then at a certain point you stop wanting to expand that circle. And I was so happy when that wasn't true in New York.

**Van Wagner** [00:32:20] That's interesting. Yeah, that makes sense. That seems very American.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:32:23] Right? Is it? All right. So then after Yale, you moved back to Texas, right?

**Van Wagner** [00:32:34] I came back to Austin to live with Charlie. We were like, "Where are we gonna live?" And then his brother said, "I'm thinking of buying a duplex." Problem solved. We now live in a duplex with his brother on the other side, and we live really close to his family. Both his brother and sister are now in town, along with several extended family members. So we're never hurting for company, and it's been cool living here. I never thought I'd live in Austin, but this is where Charlie grew up, so he knows a lot of places that he likes to go to and activities he likes to do here.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:33:15] And I think this is a good moment for me to ask you, what is your relationship to Texas?

**Van Wagner** [00:33:23] My relationship to Texas.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:33:26] Like with Texas.

**Van Wagner** [00:33:32] Well, I consider myself Texan for the very boring reason that I legally live here and have a Texas driver's license. I think there's a lot of really beautiful things about the state. Obviously, the natural world here is super diverse and expansive. Being in San Antonio, there was a lot of Mexican and Tejano cultural influence that was there, that really made the city a very vibrant place culturally. And then in Austin there's a great music scene, there's a great art scene, of course, but it's also super expensive here, and a bit more homogenous culturally, at least where I am, a bit more White. But we do have a lot of - I think there's been a lot of diversity growth over the past couple of decades in this city. So you see a lot more people who don't look like you these days than I think you did when Charlie was growing up, and also have a lot more opportunities to experience things like food culture.

**Van Wagner** [00:34:42] But Texas as a state is hard to live in as a queer person who's partnered with a Jewish person, cause there's a lot of Christian nationalism at a governmental level, conservative Christian nationalism that really puts a damper on just living your life. And there's a lot of people in power who want to control who you are and what you can be in a way that can make it hard to feel safe sometimes. And I don't by any means have the worst of this. I live a very privileged life here, very cozy, bolstered, of course, by the fact that I'm White, and my partner's family are very comfortable as well. But I'm at a place with my presentation where sometimes I do have to ask myself questions for the sake of my safety when I'm in public. Like, "Oh, I'm wearing a dress and my voice is getting pretty deep. Should I pitch my voice up today so no one harasses me or something?" Or, "Should I just wear slacks to this, because I think I'm gonna be perceived as such-and-such?" Or even the classic question of, "Which bathroom should I be using?" Now, this is a liberal city generally, and usually the places I go are places where I feel safe, but that's not always the case.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:36:26] Right, because sometimes, you're forced to maybe go to other places because you have to renew your driver's license or stuff like that, and so you cannot escape sort of the -



**Van Wagner** [00:36:38] Yeah, who am I in a public setting where I don't know that I can escape or don't know that I can be safe?

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:36:44] Right. Given that you've lived in other places as well, do you think that it would be different in other states?

**Van Wagner** [00:37:04] I think potentially. For one thing, I think there's this perception, and sometimes it's very true, that in big cities on the east and west coasts, like New York City or LA, there's more safety and more community to be had for people who don't fit the cisheteronormative standard in various ways. And Charlie has an aunt in New York City, and we visit her a lot. And there's a certain level of anonymity that's really comfortable there for both of us, I think. You are just another face in the crowd. You are never going to be the weirdest person on the street. You're never gonna stand out that much. And it can be really comfortable to just feel like there is less possibility of eyes being on you, and also in a more diverse setting than often is available to us in Texas. There's just less opportunity to not stand out. But at the same time. What can I say? I like it here. I think it's a beautiful place. I think there are some classic Southern values like neighborliness and welcoming that I wish went further in a lot of settings. You may have heard this slogan that a lot of progressive Southerners use, which is, "Y'all means all. And I think that has a lot of space that could be taken advantage of in more settings.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:39:06] And what is it about Austin or Texas that you particularly like?

**Van Wagner** [00:39:19] That's really hard to answer.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:39:22] And it doesn't have to be just about people. It could also be. About the land and landscape and what it looks like.

**Van Wagner** [00:39:32] Mm hmm. Well, we live on the edge of the hill country here, and that is beautiful country. And of course, you've got Lake Travis, which is beautiful to view from the car, maybe a little bit contaminated. I mean, it's such a diverse state in terms of landscape. I think there's no shortage of things to think are beautiful. But it's a really hard question to answer. I feel like so much of it is an internal experience of nostalgia and all the good connections I've made here, all the little pieces of memories that come from coming of age here and coming into a healthier mental state and being surrounded by family and learning so many things in this place. I think it's inseparable from my personal experiences and memory.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:40:34] And before we come into the closing statements of the interview, I wanted to ask, is there anything that feels important to share that maybe I haven't asked or something that we just haven't had the chance to talk about?

**Van Wagner** [00:40:54] Yeah. I don't know. I guess I'll talk about my life now, just what I'm doing and what it looks like, if that's all right. So after I moved back to Texas from grad school, I graduated in 2019, and I had a year where I just had a great time. My friends were here. I was able to spend time with them again. We have a history of playing board games and tabletop games together. And we started a game group at the local game tavern, and I was able to spend a lot of time with Charlie's family and had a really great time for a year. And I was taking off from school and work at that point in time. It's very nice to live a life where your partner is a software engineer, and you just don't have to worry about those things as much. I acknowledge that that's a very privileged position, but

here I am. And in that time, I participated in novel writing month, and I did all these enriching activities.

**Van Wagner** [00:42:17] And then the pandemic hit. And I realized that I was without a job in the pandemic, all alone. Well, not all alone. I had Charlie, and we would have outside dinners with his family the first year of the pandemic sitting on their back patio with two different tables ten feet apart. And his brother was working somewhere else, so he actually had his own little card table off to the side, and we put him in a tent. And at that point, things were really difficult because, I mean, it's hard enough to find a job in good times. During the pandemic, it was really difficult to do that, and especially when you have two religion degrees. Nobody knows really what to do with that. I could have made a great office manager somewhere, but not with those degrees.

**Van Wagner** [00:43:11] And at that point. We were just getting by, and it took me until early 2021 to find this job. And so that was a pretty difficult mental health time, I think, for most people, myself included. But when things started to get better, and we were able to get vaccinated, that's when we started seeing our friends again and spending time together indoors. And not too long after that happened, one of our friends at the time who has since moved away, decided that she wanted to start playing instruments together. And we were gradually all inducted into a band. And so it was me and Charlie. I play the piano, and Charlie plays the bass. One of our friends from school who is a violin instructor, and the friend who started it, who has moved, who played the mandolin, and then a friend that she met just through Craigslist, I think, when he was looking for members for his band. And he played the guitar, and we started this band Mystery Beans, and we started playing all this folk music.

**Van Wagner** [00:44:31] And it was a great time to make something with our friends, especially after the isolation of pandemic. And it was really enriching. It was really affirming, because I didn't know that I would be able to keep up with everyone, because I think other people have more improv experience than I do. But it turned out that we made something really special, and we started doing little gigs around town at farmers markets, and there was a cidery that we went to that we would play at. Oh man, some of those gigs were rough. 107 degrees in the summer, just plunking away on my keys. The guitarist said he permanently stained his guitar with his sweat that day. But we had a really nice time, and we wound up kickstarting it and doing an album. And it was a really interesting process. And even though one of us moved away, the rest of us still get along great, and we practice together every weekend, and it's been really special being able to have music in my life collaboratively as an adult. I didn't know that I'd ever get that chance.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:45:50] Yeah. And I really hope that you keep up with that, because I did actually listen to the album and it brought back so many good memories because, I think at least the first two songs in the album, they remind me so much of the soundtrack of the movies for Charlie Brown and Snoopy. Sometimes that tone, that vibe. And I used to watch those when I was little, so when you talked about that and said that you had the album and I listened to it, it was like, "Oh, this reminds me so much of my childhood."

**Van Wagner** [00:46:29] Aw, that's so sweet.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:46:32] Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing that. So before we round up the interview, I wanted to ask, you know that the interview is going to be archived and actually, you are gonna be archiving that. Is there anything you want to say to future you, future Charlie, that you just want to keep on the record?

**Van Wagner** [00:47:06] I'm sure if I had thought about it beforehand, which I should have, I would have come up with all manner of things. But I'm going to go with first thought, best thought right now. And the first thought is have mercy on yourself. This is a lesson that I learned later than I should have. But you don't need to be all things. You don't need to be the best at all things. You don't even need to be your best all the time. Sometimes it's enough to just take care of yourself. I see sometimes people who are really in the movement and really do a lot of work for progressive change, and I really admire that. When they talk about how they wind down, they say, "Oh, I don't really. Everything I do, I'm always on my game." And whether or not that's true, I don't want to live that life. I don't have that capacity. I want to play music, and I want to play board games, and I want to go drink tea with my friends. And I want to be involved in those bigger pictures, but I also want to have a merciful expectation of myself, because when I'm able to do that, then I'm able to extend that to other people. And I don't want to presume to expect more of others or myself than is really reasonable, even in a world that needs expectations of change. I hope that makes sense.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:48:44] Yeah, absolutely. And that sounds like a wonderful life to me. All right, is there anything else you want to add? Last thoughts?

**Van Wagner** [00:48:55] I think I'm good for now.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:48:57] Right, okay. Then I think I'll go ahead and stop the recording.

**Van Wagner** [00:49:02] All right.