

Clip #1: 0:40 - 40:17

Nathan Alexander: So I'm Nathan Alexander, he/him/his, I moved to Champaign in 2017, and I do drag under the name Annie Hart, and was involved in helping organize a few shows and other community stuff.

Liv Borawski: Amazing. Well thank you for being here today. I'm super duper excited. um, I guess the biggest thing I think we're going to start with background. So, do you want to maybe talk about why you decided to get involved in drag and when you started sort of your involvement?

Nathan Alexander: Sure. So, I started... God, when did I start? Um, so I grew up in Carbondale, and the drag bar down there, which at the time was called Traz, T R A Z, would do drag shows and the drag queens there, I always kind of viewed as a little bit of protective. Where like, you know, the gay bar was a space where young individuals were kind of, discovering sexuality, and sometimes there was. You didn't really know how to get out of a situation you weren't really feeling and so I would always gravitate towards the drag queens because they would turn it into a joke and kind of like, be a safe space where like bad shit wouldn't happen. And I, I really liked that and I kind of have. I probably have a little bit of that kind of protective aspect, especially when I'm in drag where like you're always looking out for the community. And, and you're just kind of like, You're, you're creating that safe haven for other people. Um, I started drag probably in 2011. So, I was out in Oregon at the time. Once I turned, 18, and went to college I kind of said, peace out, the Midwest because it wasn't great for LGBTQ identities. Um, it's doing much better now. And so I was on the west coast, and I kind of got into it because it's a creative outlet. And I've always been very like, interested in fabrics and textures and how to create things. So like I knit, I weave. And I've, I found it a very interesting and creative process as well as kind of like, almost an emotional one as well where you spend time focusing on what you want to convey, how you want to look and it's a lot of energy that you direct on yourself as well. Which, it's kind of hard to structure in that kind of self care aspects sometimes. So, I wound up traveling for work a lot. I did field work as an ecologist, so I was moving around every three months and I kind of had a box of drag in my trunk. And I met my drag mom, Asia Vegas, in Carbondale. And you know she kind of really helped get me together and get the makeup. So in drag there's a lot of family connections, where somebody who's been doing drag will adopt somebody and kind of teach them the ropes and not just about drag but about queer culture and kind of references and how to navigate specific situations. And so, she wound up adopting me and kind of introduced me to the whole concept of hot gluing dresses together, how to do contours, how to cover my eyebrows. Which, was an issue back in the day. And, yeah, that's probably where I like, first started like actually doing drag. She never officially adopted me because I was always drawn to kind of the punk and grunge side of drag and she was very much in the Vegas showgirl style. Where you know, she wanted to look, look like a real person. Or,

you know, like, just a person on the street. But with lavish outfits and feathers and stones where as I was much more into like completely restructuring the, the structure of my face to be like gaunt and like bony and all of that.

Liv Borawski: This is awesome. Thank you. That is very cool. I would love to keep a little bit more. Like, that's so cool I would love to hear a little bit more about like, like families and like, like I really find that aspect of drag like awesome and I didn't know about it until this class I would love to like hear more about like, I, we already heard like your stuff but like your experiences too because I know, like. Oftentimes, this becomes like your new family if for example like family members within like the like biological families not very accepting where you are part of a community that isn't as accepting of queer culture so I would love to hear more about that.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah, um queer families are like one of the things that really draws me to drag as well because it's such a support network. So my drag family right now: it consists of my drag sister, Charlie Darling, out on the west coast. And so, you know, we kind of met in 2014-2015. And we just kind of really clicked and our styles of drag, were very different but kind of complimentary. So, Charlie was from Montana, small town Montana. High school dropout because you know, they cut the arts department in their high school.

Liv Borawski: Unfortunate, that's very unfortunate.

Nathan Alexander: But he wound up moving to the West Coast and kind of bounced around the West Coast for a long time and was kind of had a lot of overlaps and kind of radical fairy culture. And so, the type of drag that I kind of got introduced to through Charlie was kind of more free-spirited, it wasn't the pageant drag that we had here. And so, you kind of just formed these connections where like it wound up that I would spend like half the week at Charlie's trailer, and then, you know, the other half of the week at my place doing work. And it was just kind of a very sibling relationship where we could rely on each other for anything. So, if I had to get ready, she was always there to help, or if I, if they had to get ready, I was always there. And also, you'll notice that my pronouns get real weird in drag because it changes depending on how they're presenting at the time and so I oftenenerally it's a free for all for it.

Liv Borawski: I do appreciate you discussing that. I think that, like I would love to hear more about like, um, like, adopting within like drag families. And also, so when you get adopted, do you get adopted, like you spoke about how your drag Mom, how they have a different style performance so that's why you didn't become officially adopted. So, could you tell me a little bit more about that.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah. So, adoption depends on the drag queen too. And the way I approach it is probably a little bit different than some of the people with the larger drag families or the drag dynasties. But, so normally when an adoption happens, the performer will take the last name of the house, or of the lineage.

Liv Borawski: You talked about that when you came to class last time, I remember you guys saying that there's three big families in like the area. Right?

Nathan Alexander: Yeah, there's the Carringtons, the ShareALikes, and the Manns, I believe. Manns with two n's. And especially if you're established in one location for a while, the house can kind of propagate that way. Because, as the matriarch ages up and her children age up, her children will then get children of their own. And it's a way of, you know, working in a supportive environment to create drag, create ideas. And it also goes beyond that where, if there's any personal issues or something like that, your drag family is generally the people that will show up for you no matter what. Like, with my drag sister, for instance, his mom was in the hospital, and he doesn't have a credit card and so I was kind of helping pay for a lot of the, you know, like flowers or anything like that, and then trying to figure out, unemployment you know. I'm, I'm working with them on that and it's just a very kind of mutually supportive environment where you can just be vulnerable and people will be there to help.

Liv Borawski: Oh sorry, go ahead.

Nathan Alexander: Oh, I was just gonna say, I currently have to drag kids, but they don't have my last name. And so my drag child, my first child was Alicia Lovejoy who I adopted in 2015, 2016. Around that time, and, I was in Arcata at the time and her approach to drag is very much rooted in Mexican culture. So, I actually met her because I was her TA, I was teaching a wildlife ecology course, and this happened a few times but students would wind up coming to my drag show and I wouldn't have said anything. And then a few weeks later, they would come out to me and Alicia asked if she had to change majors because she was gay and a predominantly kind of hetero normative and male field. I'm in wildlife ecology. So it's getting more queer now but, um, you know, at the time I didn't know of any other wildlife people that were gay. There were a decent number of lesbians.

Liv Borawski: Yeah, there's something like that. I've seen before and also like I think also wildlife ecology so cool and I'm, I could understand why would not be perceived as a part of queer culture, especially with like the stereotypical like macho man like nice wilderness aesthetics I totally get that but that that was actually really interesting and I find it interesting that they thought about switching majors because of that.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah. And so you know I kind of worked with them both in kind of a professional sense where it was like, No, this is how you're going to get yourself together in this field. And then drag was her creative outlet and, you know, honestly, better queen than I am. And just like it was the place where she could be herself. My other drag child is somebody that I adopted after they have been doing drag for a while, I put Alicia in drag the first time she ever was. But my second child is a drag king, Andy Rogynous. And so, I actually hired somebody from Arcata to, to come out and be my field tech on my research for wildlife. And while they were here. We kind of worked on their drag. You know, they already had a fairly strong concept of who they were and all of that, but, I think that I was able to provide a little bit more of that kind of like family connection and development. And so I adopted them into the family and so now we have, you know, a group chat on Instagram called fagalicious. Where you know we check in with each other all the time if we need anything we just text each other and it's just kind of you know it's it's, we're now across the continent, but we're they're still there for each other.

Liv Borawski: Yeah, I love that. Right now we're speaking about a sense of community and then I guess my one other question about families adoption is when you are involved in drag, are you more than likely to be in a family, are there some people that just work independently and never joined like that cohort, I'm sure like people probably want to because of the sense of like community and trust and that's what I'm getting from this as overall. It's like, like a home away from home that might turn into your like, like your. I don't know, say like you're not permanent bubble but like your, your main bubble of you know what I mean.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah. Um, I mean people approach drag for so many different reasons. So, you know, there I think there are definitely performers that are not associated with families. I wasn't associated really with a family for like the first, what is it, five years or so four years. And it wasn't until, Charlie and Alicia that I kind of really established my close knit, you know I have my drag mom and we were close, But we kind of drifted a little bit apart. Um, but, you know, I think one of the common things that happens is people start trying to experiment in drag. And then you start going to the bars with that experimentation and I think that's kind of a, an important part of it because you're going to look completely busted, like the first time I was in drag, like, I probably had double eyebrows, because my bushy ones were still showing through and I tried to paint them on with like a permanent marker up here, because this was back before, you know, drag race and all of that and all the tutorials. But once you kind of showed that interest and kind of that, sustained perseverance, normally one of the older queens, who had been doing that for a while, would kind of take you aside and like try to help you get together and a supportive manner and that's kind of how I think most families develop or, most people get adopted.

Liv Borawski: Awesome. Well, that's like a great insight on that. the media especially like mainstream media. Because I know like now there's like a bunch of shows on Netflix I'm like

you can watch it and like you can watch people like become like these iconic individuals or I like you speak about how when you first got started that was less prevalent. So I would love to like speak about that and maybe once we go there we can also talk about how it has maybe changed like queer culture like today, like, but we'll go into that later. So first let's talk about that aspect I'm getting ahead of myself.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah, I mean, it's a complicated question too because one. There's more opportunities, and less stigma associated with it. There's more resources, there's makeup that is specifically by drag queens for drag queens now. And I don't know, it's such an interesting development. On the flip side though, you get people like specifically with Drag Race which has been kind of the main way that people have been introduced to drag. I personally believe that there's been a conflation of like reality TV drama and drag drama.

Liv Borawski: Yes, I can definitely see that,

Nathan Alexander: Where sometimes, you know, you get these younger performers or younger people in gay culture or queer culture. You know, that's been their main exposure to it and so they feel a need to be caddy sometimes, and, you know, there's a way to be like, drag queen caddy and then there's like reality TV caddy, and there's sometimes a huge crossover,

Liv Borawski: No, I totally get it you can totally see that in like even like reality TV shows like The Bachelor like you see these girls after the show and they're like, super normal and you're like what the heck was going on on the internet and why did you feel the need to portray someone you aren't. But I guess like that could also maybe speak to like some possible stereotypes about the drug community because I would say, like, a lot of times, reality TV is based on stereotypes rather than like actual factual information or there's like a facts sprinkled in like a bunch of like flowery activity.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah, one of the things that I kind of felt like drag race did was that they tried to represent a lot of like diverse versions of drag so they would have like comedy queens or like pageant queens, but they would kind of. I mean, this is just what I feel like they were doing,

Liv Borawski: Go for it. Everything you speak about your own personal experience so feel like go, you're welcome to create some things I critique things all the time when I speak about my own because end of the day I'm looking at it it's my experience it's not like you're speaking on behalf of an entire community. You're literally speaking about yourself.

Nathan Alexander: Um, but I do think that they were trying to like select kind of more palatable versions from those cultures. So like, especially in the alternative culture. Like now Dragula has

emerged, which is kind of more of the type of drag, I had seen around and like, it's just kind of a different you know it's not going to be prime time when kids can watch because it's just not that.

Liv Borawski: Yeah, it's something completely different.

Nathan Alexander: Oh, I was just going to share with the one example of like drag queen caddy where it's like fun and everybody is participating in it and it's like a joke. and it's not just being me. Like, I got a random text from my drag daughter one day. It was just a picture of a dead seagull that she found on the beach. And she just said, thinking of you.

Liv Borawski: Where, you know, you'd say with your like best friends. No that's like normal roast my friends all the time too.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah.

Liv Borawski: No, I that's really interesting and I really do like think it's important to talk about it just because like as like queer culture and even like as multiple different aspects and like perspectives and like experiences become more mainstream. You could argue that like heteronormative society is picking and choosing what aspects of it they want to show. And like I think like as a part of like stuff becoming a part of like the, like, so like back to the question about drag like as it becomes a part of the new normal have like have you noticed any differences within like the communities you've been a part of or like actively like still check up on? Like has there been going to cut you came from the Midwest small town, middle, like, like that's how I was like, I'm like I'm from the Midwest too but um, I guess I'm younger I grew up in a little bit of a different culture, I don't know where you grew up personally I grew up in the city so I'd love to speak about that.

Nathan Alexander: I grew up in Carbondale. Um, so where did you grow up?

Liv Borawski: Chicago.

Nathan Alexander: Okay yeah, Chicago was a great drag big city.

Liv Borawski: Yeah no, I I really do once COVID ends I really do start want to start seeing stuff and I'll be 21 soon. That'll be prime time to enter, whatever I want to do whatever I want to go to a bunch of performances. So I'm really excited actually that's like something I'm looking for, like, my first ever like LGBTQ event was the pride of like the summer I came

out as bisexual and it was like amazing and to see all the drag queens.

Nathan Alexander: What year was that?

Liv Borawski: It was 2019. Okay. Right before the pandemic and I think it was awesome like I saw the drag queens on the floats and I was in such awe. They looked like amazing, like absolutely incredible and I was like, This is so cool.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah, I planned that partly.

Liv Borawski: Oh my god I love that. When I say, um, for a while like I personally struggled with my identity to see someone like be so open and like just like be out there and like, I don't know practice something that they love like I think that really speaks like, on behalf of like, like, a sense of community and how really can impact someone to make them feel like a lot better.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah. Um, and one of the things with like 2019 in particular was like we had Caravan of Glam that you're and they're from the west coast so like Portland, Seattle area. And that was kind of the drag, I was familiar with, and, you know, a lot of the drag that had been in the prides previously were associated with Drag Race and I kind of wanted to start moving back towards more, you know, away from the drag race kind of constructs and I, I really love Caravan of Glam because you know they alternate who's currently going on tour with them or whatever but they just bring what I consider such interesting perspectives on it.

Liv Borawski: So, yeah, no, it was absolutely amazing. So really, hats off to you. I cannot wait till there will be the next Pride and I'll be able to go have fun and just like it was, it was definitely an experience to remember and I, I am so excited to be going to it, whenever the heck, the world decides that. Yes, really I really hope so soon like the stuff about this like I'm fully virtual so I'm not even able to see like some of like the stuff that's brought into class and like that's like the one aspect that I really do miss being able to like interact with people in person and like I guess over the internet you're able to see the faces but in person you also recovered so like, so it's a good it'll be it'll go back to normal soon, So I guess like now that we're. We talked a little bit about that a little about that. So, um, I'm assuming I don't know if you are like you're still performing right now even though COVID is happening? No? So can, so can you speak a little bit more about that because I know that, um, I interviewed a drag queen. Like about like a month and a half ago and they like perform on live, so that's like a whole other aspect of drag now because it's on the internet and you know.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah, was it was it Raven?

Liv Borawski: Yes.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah, she just got adopted.

Liv Borawski: No way oh my gosh.

Nathan Alexander: Like, two weekends ago.

Liv Borawski: That makes me so happy.

Nathan Alexander: I forget who she got adopted by, but, um, yeah. So one, I kind of stopped performing when I moved here because I had bounced around a lot with my drag. And I was really... I tried a few like talent nights here and I'm just old and I was like I don't I, I'm not super interested in cutting my teeth into a new town like...

Liv Borawski: Now I totally can understand that.

Nathan Alexander: So now it's a rare occasion that I do it. Um, but I love the queens here and I'm friends with most of them. I feel like, um, yeah so sorry...

Liv Borawski: You're completely fine, we were talking about like online, like..

Nathan Alexander: Oh, yeah.

Liv Borawski: Since the pandemic because I think that's super important to cover because um, we can speak about like when things were normal but like that hasn't been our reality for quite some time.

Nathan Alexander: So, yeah, so I think that the online component of drag has actually been really interesting, because some performers. Just go to the 10s for it. Like locally there's Spank Knightly... Who is a drag King, and their online performances are like edited like all of that, like. Well, good camera, very amazing like integration of concepts and makeup and performance. Me, I don't have the skills. I did one virtual show for the rainbow cafe pride down in Carbondale, because I always try to like support the Carbondale pride as I can. It started in 2018. And so I did like one show for that and I was just sitting here in this this very chair with like a backdrop and one advantage was. I just had bolts of fabric, because I had gained the COVID weight. So I was able to just like a drape a fabric around me and like cinch it in with like a belt and it looked like a dress but the back was completely open.

Liv Borawski: Now that's, like, I think it's so crazy because I'm like there's a lot of talk about like how it takes a lot more time to like because I guess like when you normally performing like you practice you go but now like you're performing you're practicing your editing. You're like you were putting an extra time to make sure it looks good because camera angles do not always

look good and you got to find what's flattering you like a video like that stuff like is absolutely crazy to me.

Nathan Alexander: Well, and for me, I completely rearranged my apartment, because I have a one bedroom. And, you know, it's set up for work and living, and at the time I was also sewing masks for COVID. And so, I just didn't have the space to really like, create a performance area.

Liv Borawski: No, I, I totally understand that and I just think like, um, I don't know, I just find it really interesting because I personally I think like it's awesome that people are still able to do it despite it being covered but I know like also like it can affect like, like I'm thinking like, when it comes like economically to like it's economically consuming to be doing a product that, not necessarily as many people not that they're not gravitating towards it, but like, maybe, like it's not as readily available or like they're stressed about stuff so like that's like the unfortunate part about the pandemic. Is that now as a result of it like certain aspects of drag have been turned upside down. And, but like you speak about how like they're able to edit which is super cool.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah. And like, you know, one of the big tenants that I really love about drag is like that adaptations. So I'm a big fan of like creating outfits out of recycled goods or garbage. So like, I took plastic bags and knitted a top out of them was just like grocery bags. And, you know, that adaptive ability or being able to see opportunity out of like garbage is something that I really appreciate and kind of drag concepts and and I kind of think this is another example of that where, you know, all of a sudden, a lot of performers didn't have physical opportunities anymore. But there were those with the ability to kind of turn it into this other type of performance space.

Liv Borawski: Yeah, though, and I think that like, that's awesome like I think like the part about adaptability is super duper important, especially like I could argue in like a sense, like in a community where like you're becoming more mainstream but you also still have like, not necessarily like individuality, but you still have like those aspects that like all of society doesn't necessarily understand yet, so I'm like really curious to talk a little bit about like, not necessarily society but like, just like how like your drag, like you speak about like community, and like how you feel that, like, because you've lived in a lot of different places or from what I'm understanding. Which place do you feel was like, not necessarily the most accepting but

like the place where you felt like you could like do drag like the most like free flowing and like? Like, I guess it also comes like connections but like. Could you speak more about that?

Nathan Alexander: Yeah. So, so I move around a lot for field work, or I used to, and, you know, one of the things that was always true whenever you'd move is that you'd always miss something about like where you just for, like, the landscape or something like that. But where you move to

was kind of like equally interesting in a new way. And I think that's very true for drag scenes as well so like the drag scene here, or the one I grew up with in Carbondale was kind of more pageant focused I felt like, where it was like rhinestone gowns and like big jewelry earrings. But I think that there was also like you got a sense of the history associated with the drag scene presence here. I think Arcata California, which is like Northern California. It was where it was much more free form. But I kind of felt like it was missing that history aspect. And so, the performances in Arcata where they tried to be very inclusive. Where like pretty much if you wanted to perform you could perform. And some of the performances I saw there were just completely bizarre in the best way. Like, I, I saw somebody dressed as a hamster doing burlesque and their drag king name was Noma Steaks. And, like, it was just fantastic and weird and perfect. So I really did appreciate that. But at the same time, you didn't necessarily have people who knew about like Stormé DeLarverie or, you know, all of the, the history associated with drag. And it was kind of a younger scene, generally to, like, like I was one of the old queens.

Liv Borawski: No, that that's really interesting and thank you for sharing that I have like one more big question that I was hoping to answer and like we spoke about this in class but I think it's really important for me able to document it through oral histories if you could speak more about like the library and like the drag queens reading at the libraries. I know that you helped with organization that. I'd love to hear more about that. I really think that it should be documented in like a, like an oral history format as well so yeah.

Nathan Alexander: Okay, so that that occurred pretty much when I was still at the UP Center at that time. And so that was 2018. I believe that we started that. Um, and so drag queens story hour was a program initiated in San Francisco, by a group of drag queens and essentially they created this model that you can just take and they're like just call it this and credit us with this and you can do it in your community, without even telling us you're doing it. I probably had limited involvement in it, it was mostly Taylor and Chandler at the time, who were really pushing for it. So Chandler was a local drag performer. Taylor was a mom, in town from, I think she was from California. And she's in California now again. But uh you know i met with the library a few times and with the drag queens and all that and we kind of set it up for a June Pride Month thing and I think we pushed it back to July. And it was part of like the Urbana First Friday events the first time. And so, yeah, the first the first performance of it was really exciting. I didn't do any of the reading. But we had local drag queens and yeah we did have a drag King, as well, Xavi Cado, I think, read for the first one, if I remember correctly. And the room was just packed and it wasn't just kids either like it was Urbana First Fridays, and like in the back row there was just kind of like the line of older queers from the community, like some with like tears in their eyes because, you know, It's having a. First of all, not all drag is for kids, but having that opportunity to engage kids creatively and have that type of community representation at that young of an age I think really works a lot to destigmatize, a lot of the issues we we see in society. And you know, one of the things that I personally really appreciated about

it at the time, was that Carol kind of took it and Karma kind of became the drag queen organizer for it. And I was able to kind of just step back and it's just been a program that's persisted without my involvement which has been really nice to see.

Liv Borawski: Ya no, um, I think like exposure is key. Especially when you're talking about like issues and I think like also this representation allows people to like feel like they also because oftentimes like when you feel like you are like in a minority group within society you feel underrepresented and you feel as if you are different and you are wrong for being different, so I think like discussing that exposures, absolutely amazing.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah. And like, honestly, I think kids are welcome to dress up for it too and as a kid, you know, if there. If there was a pink tutu or somewhere I was always gravitated to it and wanted to wear it and, you know, but. So I think it's a great opportunity.

Liv Borawski: No, no, you're good I know for sure. My internets being a little glitchy so I really do apologize. Um, I don't know if you can hear me or not.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah, I can hear you.

Liv Borawski: Do you have anything else you want to add we're 40 minutes on time, I do not want to keep you for too long. Everyone. Okay, awesome everyone has a busy day is busy schedules. So, is there anything you would like to add that you think is super important to record an oral history.

Nathan Alexander: Um, you know, I think that one thing that it's important to kind of record for this time, in particular is kind of like the loss of venues for drag performance as well. You know, we saw C Street close. And then, Peach of the Midwest, in particular, really put in a lot of effort to try to find venues, often at personal cost to herself. And I think it's just important to have that kind of documentation that it's it's needed in the community. And, you know, we're still trying to struggle to find good venues and opportunities, even coming out of the pandemic.

Liv Borawski: Yeah no, and I think like also when you speak about like, just because it's normal doesn't necessarily mean you're going to ever stop fighting because there's always going to be someone who's going to use something and they're going to say like this, this and this and depending on how they're raised they're going to argue that their way is right when they're away like marginalizes so many people and they just don't realize it.

Nathan Alexander: Yeah, well I mean the main thing for like the drag venues is there's a few places that will do them but like, there's just kind of a lack of performance stages in general, a lot of restaurants have taken out performance spaces. And so it's, I don't think it necessarily always

that the venues, don't want drag performances, but it's just kind of like, there's not a great performance space and it's not a regular performance space. And so there's been a lot of kind of hodgepodge together, performance areas, which is very time consuming.