

This interview was held on 10/26/2024 at 4pm in the basement of the Beth Israel Synagogue. The interviewer is Cheyenne Antell (CA), the collections coordinator at the Portage County Historical Society. The interviewee is Zac Gajda (ZG), a local musician and band promoter who is involved mainly with the local music scene.

CA (00:00): I'm Cheyenne Antell with the Portage County Historical Society, would you mind introducing yourself?

ZG (00:08): I'm Zac Gajda, I'm not with the society.

CA (00:15): What do you do currently for work, hobbies? Anything that ties you to music?

ZG (00:19): I don't work with anything music related. I work for the Red Cross, which is still pretty cool. They help the community. I play in a bunch of bands and I book a lot of shows and I've been doing it for quite a while.

CA (00:34): If you've been playing for bands and booking shows for quite a while, let's go back to the beginning. What got you started in music?

ZG (00:42): My love for music came from my dad and my mom at first. My dad was a huge metalhead growing up. My mom was very much not; she's a country influence, which is how I got into both. I remember that my dad gave me a Marilyn Manson Antichrist Superstar cassette tape when I was 8 years old; that was my first piece of music and it all went downhill from there. As far as playing music, I did piano lessons when I was 5. My grandma made me do it and I wasn't super into it. Then I got my first bass when I was 12 and I started learning a bunch of old metal songs and what we would call "scene kid music" back then.

CA (01:36): Did you ask for a bass or was it a random gift?

ZG (01:39): I did, yeah. I asked for a bass and they bought me a Thunderbird, which I still have, actually. I have 3 different Thunderbirds. They're kind of my favorite. Then I got my first guitar when I was 15 and I learned from there.

CA (01:53): Did you ever do any sort of tutoring or lessons, or were you a self-taught musician?

ZG (01:58): With bass and guitar it was all self-taught. I would get small tidbits from friends who knew more than I did, but I never took formal lessons. I transferred over what I knew from piano, and that helped. I did some choir in high school, some theater.

CA (02:21): Well-rounded arts!

ZG (02:22): Yeah!

CA (02:24): Were you a Portage County resident growing up?

ZG (02:26): I was not, no. I was born in Wausau and lived there on the weekdays. On the weekends I lived in Mosinee until I was 15. Then I moved to Houston, Texas, for a few years. I came up to Point for college for one year. Dropped out because I'm a degenerate, I guess, and then moved back to Houston for a few years. I moved back here at the end of 2020.

CA (02:56): That's quite the travel, what brought you to Houston?

ZG (02:59): My mom's from there, originally, so I went down there for high school when I was 15. She still lives there and my dad is still in Wausau. I go between each place pretty often.

CA (03:09): Knowing you were already starting to learn guitar and bass by the time you went to Texas, were you involved in any sort of music down there?

ZG (03:18): Yes, and no. There's this trend with high schoolers where you say you're in a band but you don't actually do anything, you just tell the girls "hey, I'm in a band". I was in a couple of those bands down there and they never progressed into anything.

CA (03:32): Did you have any fun band names?

ZG (03:33): No, oh jeez, I don't want to. They're all embarrassing!

CA (03:38): That's ok, we can leave the past behind.

ZG (03:40): The first real band I ever did anything with was actually in Stevens Point. We were called Teenagers. We were a melodic hardcore band. This was around 2014.

CA (03:55): With Teenagers, were you able to book any local venues?

ZG (04:00): We played all over the state and all the surrounding states, except I don't think we ever played Michigan. Our guitarist had his own venue in Stevens Point called the Veggie House. It was a house over by Lot Q on Fourth Avenue. One of the townhouses over there. He would book us over there a lot and would book a whole bunch of other bands. Bands that have gotten huge now played there when they were small. Reno Drive, Weathered, Vicki Mobands; they all played there. We played all over. Illinois, Minnesota.

CA (04:48): I heard a rumor that the Veggie House got that name because there was a band there called The Vegans.

ZG (04:55): Yup. That was Nic's other band before he joined Teenagers. It was him and two other dudes. They're all from Manitowoc originally and they had all moved here for college.

CA (05:05): It seems like the college really brought a lot of people in.

ZG (05:09): For sure, I think everyone that I'm still friends with in Stevens Point, whether I had met them at local shows or while working at the radio station, I had met them all through college. That was all music related.

CA (05:20): Teenagers is one of the first bands that I learned about here that was really traveling. A lot of them, you have your band and you go to Wausau or Mosinee or Marshfield, but you aren't leaving the state. What made you want to travel?

ZG (05:38): We were just doing it for fun. There was always the thought in the back of our heads that it would be cool to do something big with it. We liked playing and we made friends. An out-of-state band would come here and do a show trade with us. We would set one up for them, they'd set one up for us. We played a lot of the Chicago suburbs and played in Minneapolis a few times. After I left that band they went on even bigger tours, including Colorado.

CA (06:13): After you left Teenagers, what was next for you?

ZG (06:17): I went back down south for a bit. I worked and put music on hold since I didn't have time for it. When I moved back up here I started a deathcore band. We recorded two songs and never released any of them. Then I made a doom band right at the beginning of Covid, and that died because of Covid. Covid got rid of a lot of things.

CA (06:49): It's tough to do band practices with that.

ZG (06:51): Yeah, our drummer was in Illinois and he got stuck there during Covid. He's back now, life goes on, you do other things.

CA (07:03): After Covid, were you able to get any of those bands back together or did you start new ventures?

ZG (07:08): I started new stuff; everyone had already moved on to other things. Now I'm in a punk band called Elk Startled by Thunder. That's been pretty fun. I lived with the guitarist for a few months before I joined. They needed a fill-in bassist for a show or two and I meshed well so they added me on second guitar. Then I got a hardcore band now. I've been writing a lot with a few other people and we've got a full EP written, we just need to record it and start playing shows. That'll be cool. We've got a country band brewing too.

CA (07:49): You have a country band brewing?

ZG (07:53): Yeah, I like to put my hands in every pot I can.

CA (07:55): Is that one ready for a debut yet?

ZG (07:59): No, no. That one is still just a little baby.

CA (08:04): When you're in these bands, are you someone who is booking the shows, writing the music? What else do you do for the bands?

ZG (08:14): It depends on the band. With Elk I don't write anything besides my own part; Bailey and Nathan write probably 95% of the music. I stay in my lane with that one since punk's not something I'm super versed in. I like them to do it since they're a lot more experienced. I do all the booking and graphic design work for that one. For my hardcore band it's pretty much equal writing.

CA (08:48): For your hardcore band, what is the name?

ZG (08:50): We're called Lilac. It's my favorite flower. It was actually the name of my deathcore band that I recorded with but we never released anything, so I'm reusing it.

CA (09:02): You're not reusing it if the other one hadn't been official. Now this lilac can finally bloom.

ZG (09:09): Yes, that's a nice phrase.

CA (09:14): So you've been in the house show scene, you've traveled, you've been part of booking venues like the Annex downtown, how has the scene changed for you, related to finding places to play?

ZG (09:30): Venues are always the hardest part of booking. I can find 6 bands for a bill in a half hour. Everyone wants to play. Finding a good spot to do it is always the issue. The first show I ever booked was 2015, up at a place that didn't have a name because it only did like, three shows ever. It was in this barn that got converted into a house. It's in northern Point; if you're coming down 39 you'll see a Hershner's sign on the way and there's a red barn right there. That was a house that we did a show in. In the beginning I booked out of necessity. Like, "hey, we need a show this day, let's set something up". Then I got really lucky later on that there's good venues now. Hell's Disco has been around for 10 years and Veggie House was around for 4. They actually started the same year but Nic had to move to Minneapolis so that didn't last so long. Then you get places like the Annex downtown that have been good to work with. It's super nice there. They're more of a *venue* venue, as opposed to a house venue.

CA (10:46): Different vibe.

ZG (10:47): For sure, and there's pros and cons to both. I like the intimacy of a house venue but it's nice to get paid. If you're an out-of-town band you at least want gas money and with a house show that's not guaranteed.

CA (11:04): House shows do a lot of "pay what you can".

ZG (11:04): Yeah. Going back to when you asked how it changed, when I first started to go to shows in Point back in 2014 there were a lot of emo bands, hardcore, and post hardcore. Now it's very punk. Everyone here wants to start a punk band! It's super cool if you're into that sort of thing. I'm not super big into it myself, but, you know, different strokes. It's cool seeing the different waves of what's popular and what's not popular. It fluctuates with being in bands, too. 2014-2017 was super popular. Everyone wanted to do stuff and then it died off. There weren't a lot of shows for a few years, and now it seems like a lot of the college kids are getting into being in bands. A lot of the old heads are doing more than they were for a few years. My first show I ever saw was in 2008 in Mosinee. It was a bunch of metalcore bands in a hockey rink. 2008-2011 was all metalcore bands. It's cool to see the trends.

CA (12:29): It's fun to see people who had those music experiences now helping the younger generation have those experiences too. Giving them a little boost into a house show.

ZG (12:42): When you're a young kid in the scene you need to make an old head friend. They'll show you around. And one day you'll be the old head friend.

CA (12:50): It's terrifying when you wake up and you've become the old friend!

ZG (12:54): You're the old head, your back hurts.

CA (12:58): Besides the scene supporting each other, how have you found that music has a place in Portage County?

ZG (13:05): I think Portage County is one of the better areas for music. Wausau has bands. They have bar venues. But it's never felt as close knit as the Stevens Point and Plover area. Everyone here knows each other, for better or worse. There's a few other areas that are as close knit as we are. La Crosse is very close. We book a lot of their bands out here and they book us out there; it's cool to have a relationship. Sometimes you go to a big city and it's very clique-y. It's all about who you know, and it needs to be the right people to get in there. That's been getting better recently. But it's cool to have a close knit group like we have in Portage County.

CA (14:02): This can lead to more comfort for new bands, too.

ZG (14:08): Definitely, you have the ability to start something without feeling like “if we start a band, they'll just make fun of us!”

CA (14:21): If you could ask people in Portage County to support the music scene more, how would you want them to?

ZG (14:30): I get that some people don't want to go to house shows, and that's fine. It's a different vibe and a lot of people aren't into it. But there's a certain group of people that only go to shows that their band is booked on. They never go to support anybody else, and that feels sort of scummy, but that's how it's always been, unfortunately. I would love to see an end to that. My friends laugh about this, but I'll go to a bunch of shows where I don't know or like the bands. But my friends are there and I want to support them. So I'll sit and listen to music that I'm not a fan of because I want to support my friends. It would be nice to see more people do that. I get that not everyone is a masochist with their own music tastes, though.

CA (15:16): If they haven't broken into the scene at all, how would you recommend that they get involved?

ZG (15:22): The easiest way is to talk to people. Talk to some kid who you think looks like they go to shows.

CA (15:29): “you look like a degenerate, come here!”

ZG (15:33): Yes, and we're usually very nice! The scarier we dress, the nicer we are. That's how I got into shows. I happened to know some guy who was playing in a band and he told me to come out and see him play in a hockey rink. I went, and it was super cool. I was in 8th grade and they were seniors and I thought “ohh they're so cool!”

CA (15:56): They're so old and mature!

ZG (15:59): and way cooler than me, you know? But yeah, you need to go meet somebody, if you can. There are online resources too, like the Point Punks Instagram page. We post every show that we are either directly involved in or have been asked to post about. That could be a good place to start looking.

CA (16:23): You still have your two bands going. Do you have any future plans for those?

ZG (16:31): Yes, Elk's hopefully going to record some new stuff, and my new band will be recording soon once we finalize everything. I'd like to start playing a lot more shows with that one. I want to go all over the place. I've already had some offers for shows, which is cool. That was just through networking. That's the thing about being in a band. It's 30% your music and 70% who you know, unfortunately. You have to know people to get the shows.

CA (17:07): I can see what you mean, how knowing everyone in a community can either make or break your chance.

ZG (17:13): Exactly, the bands you see who play the most are the ones who know the most people. Whether you think that's right or not is up to you, but if you talk to people, they'll remember you when they're booking a show later and are figuring out who they want on it. They'll pick the bands they've been talking to a lot. If you don't show up to shows, people will forget your band exists. I always try to go out and get bands that haven't played a lot of shows to help give them a chance, but you have to market yourself.

CA (17:51): Knowing that you're involved in two genres of music, punk and hardcore, has seeing different bands and performances influenced your music and how you do shows?

ZG (18:08): Most definitely. Every time I go to a show I'm thinking like, "oh I like how they did that riff, I should try and do something similar". Not trying to rip them off, of course, but being influenced by them. That comes with anything I'm watching. If someone is talented and creative, they'll inspire others to be as well. You need to go explore genres you don't normally listen to. I try to book shows so they aren't one monotonous genre. You can do a 3-band show where it's 3 of the same genre, but if you're doing a 4 or 5-band show and all of them sound the exact same, it'll get boring. Spice it up!

CA (19:00): You're bringing in people who only know one of those genres or bands and you're making them mix.

ZG (19:06): If you get one new person to be inspired by another band they saw, you did a good job. If "Jeff" comes to a show and he's only heard indie bands his whole life and he sees a black metal band and is awe struck by them, you just introduced a man to a whole new genre. That's really cool.

CA (19:27): So it's more than just you getting inspired, it's also watching everyone else be inspired.

ZG (19:33): For sure.

CA (19:34): That must really fuel your "want" to keep doing it, since you can see the impact.

ZG (19:39): The more shows I go to, the more I want to play shows.

CA (19:45): What else should we know about your involvement in Portage County music?

ZG (19:52): I book shows and if you want to play one, just message me. I don't want people to ever think that they can't reach out to any of the promoters in town to ask for a show. I can't guarantee that they'll be able to get you a show every time, but you can ask.

CA (20:10): How do people find promoters?

ZG (20:13): Usually the best way is to go to shows. Find the guy that looks the most stressed out, or the guy who's talking to everyone, and that's probably the guy running it. Talk to that guy or the sound guy. Sound guys are usually very quiet, maybe they don't have a lot of friends. But yeah, the sound guy or the stressed-out guy, those are the ones running it. Say "hey, I'm in this band, we want to play a show" and they'll keep you in mind. As long as you're not being a dickhead.

CA (20:51): That's an important part. Do you have any plans for your future, besides these two bands, for your music? Are you going to start any new ventures?

ZG (20:57): Nothing concrete. I like to go with the flow. I never planned on joining Elk, it just happened.

CA (21:13): Music is organic, it can be hard to plan.

ZG (21:14): The more you try and plan it, the less it works out, too.

CA (21:20): Is there anything else we should know about your music? Any stories from shows that you want to share?

ZG (21:31): Not that I can think of, I'm sure I'll remember something as soon as I get home.

CA (21:36): Thank you so much for this interview! I appreciate it.

ZG (21:38): Thanks for having me!