

Peter Waples-Crowe interviewed by Daniel Browning, Melbourne, February 2023

Daniel Browning: [00:00:00] Something under way, and then you just stop. If you just like, I don't want to do this anymore, you can. That's what you can do this. It's reaping recorded. And it's not my story. It's yours. Okay, so, Peter, it's the 28th of January and I'm in Melbourne, and I'd like you to introduce yourself as you would like to be like, as you would like the world in the future to hear you self introduce.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:00:28] Thanks, Daniel. Thanks for having me on the show. My name is Peter Crow and I and Eric. I am Ngarigu from the high countries of New South Wales, but I find myself living here in Naarm for the last about 20 years. I identify, you know, I used to say I was a gay man, but I actually prefer queer. I think it's become my preferred term. I know sometimes there's issues around it in some of our elders and stuff, but I think it's good to challenge that as well. So I don't know if I probably as queer my pronouns are he in they, I think I've, you know. At my age have learnt from the amazing young people in the community as well. It's that intergenerational conversation that means a lot to me. And back in the day, do I have to say, hold on. But, you know, we didn't have a much selection of who we were and they were all quite derogative. And so, yeah, I embrace queer fully.

Daniel Browning: [00:00:00] How much for how much longer I can stay there. So I will have to move back to Sydney at some point. All right, Peter, sorry. The question about your visual artist.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:00:10] Yeah, I'm a visual artist. Um. You know, I've always done art forever and ever. So. Yeah. I also work in like I'm an Aboriginal health worker as well, so study public health as well. So I do that and you aren't as well. I think that they both combined and they feed off each other well being similar to me. Um. Yeah. And I get to be creative in my health work as well and do lots of visual stuff and work with younger Queer Mob as well to design things. And it's fun. I really enjoy it.

Daniel Browning: [00:00:51] I remember some of your work on this one here. This the dingo? Yeah. Tell me about your relationship with the dingo. So why is he. Why is that a metaphor for Peter Waples-Crowe.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:01:06] The dingo has always been in my work since I was a young fellow. And. Yeah, people would sometimes comment that, Oh, Peter, you've got no red dogs in their work at the moment or something like that. So it's just been constantly in there, but now it's become a symbol of um. Myself as a queer native. Yeah. For a while I was going through and I have other nicknames like Wolf and All the Wild Dogs. I just love wild dogs, and I think I really love their connection to in many cultures as protectors of the underworld or the next connection of life as well. So I describe myself as really a spiritual person. I've probably always been like that. So now the dog, especially the Alpine dingo, which is under threat, it roams. My home country is an endemic to that, but it's seen as a pest and it gets in the way of progress, which is like farming and. It's not afforded the same protections as other natives. Often as a queer mob, I've felt that as well. And I'm not protected as well or don't have the same rights.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:02:19] You know, we've got marriage rights now in a broader sense and. But we didn't have them for a long time. But just that sense of protection and safety that you often don't feel. So that's the Alpine dingo has become. A metaphor for that, the dingo as well. Also an outsider creature. You know, I'm Aboriginal, but sometimes I feel on the outside of that culture because of my queerness and. Uh. Yeah, I think there's lots of metaphors for it now, and so it's become just a symbol for me. People call me the dingo man or something didn't go ahead or I've had other nicknames as well, but I just really love. The dingo spirit as well. And sometimes I feel like I need to roam on my own, you know? I'm actually quite comfortable in my own company. And we've had dingoes in the past have had relationships with mobs as well, you know. And so, yeah, sometimes I'm with the mob, sometimes I'm roaming alone. So that's why it's become Peter Whipple's crew. Really? Yeah.

Daniel Browning: [00:03:28] Now, many people who who are born with raised by their biological families who aren't adopted, have a linear story. But your story unfolds in a different way. Can you maybe give me a sense of what was told to you or. Or, you know. How you present in the world.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:03:49] Um. This year. I've just had a show about adoption, so I. And I find my closest friends, my dearest sisters and stuff, our other people who

are Aboriginal people who've been adopted as well. I don't know. There's a connection between us and a story that we both share. And, um. Yeah, I've just had a show adopted and I'm adopted and I grew up in the White Bulls. I kept that name because I was loved by especially by my mother, Peggy Maples, who sadly passed away when I was about 25 and. Yeah, my story. But I didn't know I was Aboriginal. I didn't really get told that. But through my art and now reflected through some of my adopted cousins that I was, you know, always constantly doing blackfella art and symbols. And so it's funny that the spirit is within you. So and then there was a while there that I couldn't do that, you know. I think there was different times because of the age I am, you know, when cultural misappropriation or appropriation and issues like that. So I left some of that design behind when I went to art school and, you know, turned things into a more European style.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:05:15] But the truth will unfold and. I'd have to go and meet some of my blood family. Uh. Which I did in my mid twenties. And one of the first things that my mother said was were tough because of our blackfella blood. So that just I just opened my spirit again, you know, when. Yeah, you know, maybe. Yeah. So, yeah, I think the rest of my life and I'm constantly honored is learning more about my culture. Um. It's down in the high country area of New South Wales, sort of borders with the Rajouri nation and yeah, na na goo I say na goo because yeah na regular na you go. You might have heard of as well. So but we're really the people of the high country and the snow people too, which I really love because often people don't think of us as mob as snow people. Snow mob, you know. Yeah, we we've got the desert mob and the salt water mob and fresh water mob and but we're the snow mob. And that's, you know, it's really precious to me and the dingoes and alpine dingo snow dingo as well Merry gang.

Daniel Browning: [00:06:38] I guess Maori gangs The word for isn't the word for.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:06:41] Me. Yeah, for Wild Dog. Yeah. Marrigang's a word for a wild dog. And I've got the name Tribal name Naran, which is EMU. There's an alpine emu as well. So there are things that I have to look after as well. So I paint them as well and include them in self portraits. You know, it's been beautiful to reconnect, but my story has been about trying to reconnect and. Being queer has sometimes been an obstacle to that as well. And I guess. You know, early on it was a. It was the HIV and AIDS epidemic that I had to confront first, you know, and maybe my Aboriginality went

to a backburner and my queerness come to the fore and there were too many people dying and nothing being done. And so the activism of that era really informed my artwork as well. I think I'm an activist, but in a quiet way. I think my art I speak through more clearly than words. You know, I'm not my spirit sort of comes out in that, you know, I'm finding the art I'm making now. Even much clearer and I make it and then have to sit with it or see it on show.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:08:02] And then I can actually work out what symbols I'm using and what they mean. So I mean, yeah, it's a lot of it's intuitive and, um. So the dingo has just been there all along. But yeah, I think Venus and I ended up working in HIV and prevention and in the nineties I worked with the mob in Redfern. In what was called then the lane of shame because it was sort of like a shooting gallery where people came to inject drugs. I'd worked at Bates as well, so I find myself in all these, um. Yeah, I'm attracted to stigmatized health issues as well, you know, and minority being a minority being a. An outsider. I've sort of gravitated towards the stuff I wanted to do stuff in, you know as well, you know, to what I'm influenced by. Aboriginal activism in HIV and AIDS activism. And you know there's been works where they've combined and. Protests around LGBTI inclusion, and I think they're really important.

Daniel Browning: [00:09:25] Can we say like, where did you grow up? Because we'll get onto the Sydney, the Sydney era. But yeah, just this is as brief as you want to be about that kind of early part of your life and, and then how you found yourself to be in a place B in Sydney at the time that you were working in HIV prevention and health more generally.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:09:49] I grew up in Wollongong. It's a rural it's a coastal town about an hour and a half from Sydney through country, I think it is, but yeah, and I grew up in a working class family in housing commission, but I was loved and I think that's really important as well, you know, like. I got lots of hugs and love for my mother. So I think that's really important for any kid, you know, especially if you're adopted. Yeah, we often talk in the adopted, like I'd say the adopted club, the people who have been adopted sort of get the picture like we were always special that we were chosen and but I think it's just love anyway. So that's really important to any kid and. That tends to sort of shape your childhood no matter what, whether you've got access to a lot of things or not, you know, love's sort of important. So I grew up there and. He went to school there

and. Went to university and studied art, you know, and I was doing indigenous motifs early in the eighties and, um. Yeah, I did even did indigenous social justice issues for my HSC.

Daniel Browning: [00:11:09] This is before you knew.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:11:11] Just before I knew. So I don't see how it was read. You know, like now I think back and think, Oh, how would have that been read? But it was just and I was doing queer stuff as well, you know, like. So I haven't changed really. And I've come back to around to me and sometimes I think, you know, through the journey I've had through life, that I've come back to being happy, making that sort of art again, you know, where it all fuses together. And just being a queer indigenous person is amazing. And, um. Yeah. It's before I really knew. And yeah, and I was I think it was a different time. There's a lot more visibility now and back in the eighties and nineties. Well, Aboriginal art wasn't really a thing until the eighties or so. Really. Before that it was seen as artefacts or I don't know, cultural belongings we like to call them now. But yeah, it wasn't really seen as a thing, so I don't know how that was ranked and I don't think I did very well. But I think it's pretty amazing when I think of what I did and I love it. And I just think. I was more out in my art that I was in my real life, how people read me.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:12:31] It must have been so interesting. But yeah, I didn't seem to care. You know, I had this form with two men kissing, you know, But they were made out of trees and, you know, all this sort of stuff. And then the social justice issues discuss death in custody. You know, there was prison, there was tourism. And, you know, the I don't know, it was quite sophisticated, really, for someone who. It just shows that my family weren't negative, you know, they weren't racist towards it. You know, they let. They just let me do what I needed to do. And yes, I'm thankful for that as well. But then, yes, society tells you, you know, maybe you're not allowed to use this stuff, you know, And then I'd because I was adopted, who am I? You know, then you have to go on a whole quest, you know. I'm not really a Whipple's, but I honor that still in my name, you know, just because of the love that they gave me. And I've adopted the Crowe name, which is, you know, my great grandmother from the mountains, Aboriginal woman. And yeah, since I did that, maybe later in life, you know, it's made a lot of sense and brought me the two worlds together and yeah, so.

Daniel Browning: [00:13:51] I think it's really important to say if we were loved by a family, even if it's, you know, mob don't like it or you're, you feel like you're not being. Honest or you're being dishonest by saying that you were loved at home by your white family. And there's no shame in that.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:14:10] I think that I think sometimes people might try to make you feel like shame. And maybe I felt ashamed of it for a while. Like as an Aboriginal person, like, Oh my God, I got loved by my white family as well. You know, I'm. Yeah. And when the more I went on the journey discovering my Aboriginality then. Issues come up in some of my sisters and brothers in that family as well. You know, like what do we do? And some of the archetypes and. That we all live in the bush and or in the desert and the other ring. And then, you know, what am I going to do? But that queerness had brought that up in the family as well for me. So I didn't have a great coming out and I felt a lot of rejection and I. So it was just another thing to be rejected by in that family. So yeah, and then in my birth family, um. They are heavily affected by colonisation and stayed on country, which is very different. You know, we. Yeah. I'm only really reconciling all that stuff now and going, They did their best, you know, you had to hide your Aboriginality in a lot of ways to survive. I think Clay Coleman talks about it like saying The Hidden Generation and um. You know, claiming that that's a valid form of survival. You know, it was just a valid form and meant we didn't end up in some of the missions, but then we might have been lost a bit to Aboriginal history as well, you know, and the records aren't great. So that makes, you know, your authenticity can come into question and I. But I'm really proud of them. And, you know, they're with me now and the ancestors, I feel I'm, you know, on a spiritual level. So I often. Just think, yeah, it's fine. They don't, you know, they're not thinking I'm queer or they're not being homophobic. They're actually supporting me as this queer. Very good person. And yeah, I love it.

Daniel Browning: [00:16:19] I think we have to just accept that they love us and we are loved by them. I said to you before. They're all constantly around me and it's not a hard concept for black fellas to understand, but they, they kind of tell you in their own way without using the voice necessarily. You hear and feel their presence and they. They guide you. They guide your hand.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:16:40] Yeah, I think I was. Yeah, just last night I was having a really a processing dream, you know, There was lots of things in there. I woke up feeling like I was had processed something, you know? And the other thing is, here in, um, in the city, you know, I'm living quite in the city and. I get rainbow lorikeets visitors, which is lovely, but the crows there are sort of a family emblem, so they always keep me grounded as well. And I always know I'm in the right place when I see a crow come by or land near me or and they often do. So it's like I hear the ancestors presenting themselves and it's probably why I'm really into kin creatures of our countries. And well, that's why the dingo as well. Because if the dingo isn't doing well, then the country is not doing well. And if our kin and they're not just we're all related and all connected, you know. So that's why I probably focus on animals a lot as well. And I love painting them more than human beings. Yeah.

Daniel Browning: [00:17:41] Human beings are trouble. I mean, we can I mean, I guess this idea of the totem and I resist the idea that we all, if you don't know, don't have that cultural knowledge. What I think tend to do is I have found my totems and I know that those they're relations of mine and our kinship system teaches us this, teaches us the totem is something, something you have to protect. And you can have a personal totem. Who's going to who's going to stop me? There's no council that says, Oh, you can't have a totem. I've done it. And I've said to people who don't have one. You choose one. You can be cultural in your in your own way. So he's kind of totemic the dingo and the crow.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:18:26] Look, it's I say it's like the totem that's found me, you know, like it's always been my work. Why have I always done it? I haven't questioned it. It's always, Yeah. Painted the red Dog for such a long time. And I know they come in lots of colours and I paint all different kinds of colours but yeah. Why.

Daniel Browning: [00:18:46] Why is he red, huh? Why has he.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:18:48] Red. I don't know. You know, I did a project in the nineties when I was working for the AIDS Council of New South Wales in Wollongong, you know, the Red Dog project as well. And I'd actually been to Mexico and the colour my dogs, you know, there's these red effigy dogs, there's ceramic and they sort of to represent the dog which has a body temperature three degrees warmer than the

human. So it kept the human soul warm on the next journey and became its companion. So I mean the Red Dog show was about that. You know, the Red Dog. The more like a dingo, but being a companion to all the. The young men whose families and young people whose families had died. Decided to turn their back on them. And yeah, so and I'd had that experience with a partner and the guy he was connecting to, you know, like not, not the partner, but a friend who he was caring for, you know, and the family really turn their back. And the word was that people died of cancer, not of AIDS. And yeah, they were just really ashamed of their it was horrible. You know, there was some really horrible times in the nineties. Yeah.

Daniel Browning: [00:20:11] So you left left Wollongong. What did you get on the train? How did you do it? Was there a day that you kind of left?

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:20:19] No, I think I'd. Yeah. Then I don't know. I've lived in Wollongong, then I went to Sydney and.

Daniel Browning: [00:20:31] 1990.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:20:33] More around, I went overseas, you know, I think I, there was a point in 1990 when I went, I just sold everything I could and I just went for an adventure for a backpack, you know, and landed in a friend of mine and artist friend. I was doing the artist life, you know, in Wollongong at the end. Um. You know, I just wasn't happy, you know, like, maybe I didn't. Maybe all that. You're suppressing the indigenous stuff and, um. Not being really comfortable with it. You know, That's why it's so nice to be myself now and to be me fully and to be back doing stuff for the spirit. And I love it, you know, it's just yeah, it's been a bit of a torture sometimes, you know, in my life, you know, trying to. Reconnect and make sense of it all. In a colonized country, you know, a product of colonization, you know? So, um. Anyway, there was just a point in time when I went overseas and I was I was had a lot of internalized homophobia as well because it wasn't very supported. And yeah, so I talk about that now in my health work, but I'm a sort of example of it where it turned into something horrible, where you really hated yourself, you know. So and maybe my natural thing is to internalize things. I don't know. I don't try to. Like even when I work now in with my job, you know, I'm not out to hurt any more. I don't want to do any more damage than it's been done. You know, it's always been my motto, you know? So I'm. I don't know. I just suffered from internalized

homophobia for a long time, so I couldn't. Yeah, I don't know. I think the trip I just went and became the person I needed to be and then came back to Wollongong. After that I worked at the AIDS Council and. Met Michael. Then we moved to Sydney.

Daniel Browning: [00:22:40] Here's Michael.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:22:41] Michael was my partner. First partner, Michael Gibbons. He was living with HIV. So we lived in a sorry, discordant relationship in the Nineties, which was a very different sort of landscape to now. Um. Yeah. People said some people said you've got a death wish and all this sort of stuff. And it was horrible. You know, some of the horrible things that. Yeah. And I guess at that time too, you know, um. Yeah, I lost contact with a bit of my family because of really bad homophobia around AIDS as well. You know, like.

Daniel Browning: [00:23:21] Which family.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:23:22] Was it? My adopted family. Yeah. Yeah. So and then, you know, reconnecting to mob with a queer identity was difficult as well with homophobia and. Yeah, the lens of Christianity sometimes really strong in some mobs and. Yeah. So, um. Yeah, a tussle. It was a tussle. Just trying to find myself and be myself.

Daniel Browning: [00:23:46] But can I ask, was that was there a moment that was revealed to you that you were adopted, or did you were you always aware of it?

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:23:52] I was always aware I was adopted. So I think that's a better way for me. You just know it straight away. You know? I didn't. And out of respect of the parents, I didn't really do anything till Mum died. And I think I've be watching this show on ABC called Find My Family, which is all about adopted people in England. But there's a lot of common stories about respecting. You didn't want to hurt your adopted family because I don't know why you just have all these internal things going on. But I started more of my journey after Mum died when I was about mid twenties, so yeah. And yeah, but I was pretty lost for a long time, so.

Daniel Browning: [00:24:35] And how did you how did you start that process of, of learning more about your adoption.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:24:41] The. You couldn't really access. I don't think it was till the nineties that he started to be able to access some of your records. Yeah. But there was already enough clues around with a name and.

Daniel Browning: [00:25:00] You had a name. You had a birth name?

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:25:02] Yeah. Yeah, the Wildsmith name. So, um. Who is my mother? Lorraine Wildsmith. Yeah. Um.

Daniel Browning: [00:25:16] I mean, that's more than some people have.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:25:18] It's more it's heaps. I had more clues and a lot of people have, you know. And really we started. Thinking we're going to ring find that name in the phone book because it used to be phone books. So you could look up that name in New South Wales phone book or wherever. We heard they were down in that hills area and yeah, we checked it, tell on that. So yeah, through the phone book. Which. Yeah, but then I don't know. Then you've had this whole life being raised in the maples and then. Yeah. And you're an outsider to your birth blood family. So another symbol of the outsider. The dingo. You know, this dingo coming back. Yeah. And, and you've had your formative years or a big chunk of your life. Raising another family. Yeah. So it's it's a mind blower.

Daniel Browning: [00:26:20] And you live with it every day. It becomes part of your reality, but it needs to be unpacked and the way. Affects you. You don't even know how deep, deep that goes.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:26:32] You don't know how deep it goes. And look at. Some adopted people. I don't know. I felt I needed to know a bit more like who I was, you know? Um. And I think I've spent my whole life doing that, you know? I think I'm in a happier place now and than I have been for a long time. And. Oh, I didn't know what to say, Daniel. I just think it's very complex and, um. It's been a my life's been an adventure, you know, like of that of self, like, not selfish, but just where do I fit in and

where do I belong and how do I fit here? And you know, now I'm queer. Now I'm Aboriginal. This is not now I am. I've always been Aboriginal. That's the point. You know, I'm not Aboriginal now. And I took that. I wanted to understand what that really meant, you know, not like. Oh, we've got black blood. What does that mean? You know? So just a little phrase like that. It triggered me off because, you know, I'd been so attracted to. Yeah, my mother said. And it had been I'd been so attracted to indigenous stuff in art and even at high school and stuff, all the not just here with Ma, but, you know, South America. See, that's another link to Mexico, like the Aztecs and all that. I was really into that and indigenous culture there. Um. Yeah. And I've had great experiences in life linking with other indigenous mobs. So, yeah, the Turtle Island mob. And I've been to health conferences, you know, and just connection and yeah, it's been great. You know, I just think bless it, I've danced in a powwow, you know, and, um. Down a sweat lodge and. I wouldn't have imagined that ever, you know, growing up in you and Indira. So, um. Just you never know what's going to be around the corner. So, um. I think I've gone off track now.

Daniel Browning: [00:28:48] That's what oral histories do they go over? You know, it's not the time is not linear, it's not linear. The story, the human, our stories are not linear. And I find myself darting all over the place because life isn't like that. It's not really doesn't follow it one track. So you were drawn to, like you said, this kind of area of health, which was the most stigmatized. So, you know, working in shooting galleries where we're taking drugs with just what happened. So. Redfern working on the block. And you said something really beautiful about. Reviving about reviving a person who'd had another blackfella who'd had an overdose. Yeah.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:29:35] Yeah, we used to do that on a regular basis, so I was. There's. I don't know. Know when I look back, you know, no one would. We were working in a lane, out of sight, out of mind. You know, I. Working with the drug users and providing clean equipment. We're trying to get people to you know, in a weird way, it was sometimes that fixed needle and syringe programs, people come in and get clean syringes and then disappear. But here in. A shooting gallery. You can actually watch people inject in their technique and you can see where, you know, sometimes people there's a swab used an alcohol swab to swab the skin. Well, the mob were actually using it, after which promoted bleeding, you know, And so then blood was the blood borne virus was away. Hiv and hep C, you know, spread more quickly and through the

injecting drug use population. So, yeah, we could do campaigns around that, you know, you know, it was just I don't know, it was sort of a. A real privilege. But it was. Yeah, it was also, um. Like people would OD if the heroin was too good and you'd have to keep them alive. And yeah. Now people carry around some of the similar thing to Narcan, which revives and revives people. Blocks of receptors and stuff. So but in that day we had to in the nineties you had to keep people alive. So manually manually. Yeah. Keep them alive and.

Daniel Browning: [00:31:13] The ambulance.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:31:14] Could get there, you know. So I feel like. I really give him back in that time. And, um. Yeah, I do that for a couple of years, but I think I inherited a lot of trauma from it as well. Know, so, you know, there was a lot of racism going on and.

Daniel Browning: [00:31:33] From the what.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:31:34] Was it. It was that time there was yeah, people were had enough and the mob and the police were, you know, really full on and it was just full on, you know. Um. But. Yeah, we did our job down there. And you were? Yeah, you were in. You had little shifts down there, and sometimes you worked in the mobile site, and sometimes you worked over at Newtown as well in a bus, and you did deliveries to people. You know, I was all they were all health promotion strategies to try to prevent blood borne viruses amongst injecting drug users and make sure people had clean equipment and didn't share really.

Daniel Browning: [00:32:17] The thing we call harm minimisation. Just acknowledging that people are going to use drugs, how do you save their lives? Yeah. Prevent the, you know, prevent other disease.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:32:27] Prevent harm and. You know, rotating sites and anything, you know, all all the different aspects of harm reduction. Yeah, I'm really harm reduction is like taking a realistic approach to the world. We can't put our head in the sand. Pretend this doesn't happen. No, move it here. But yeah, just work. It was great. And then people can access services sometimes. And then they might think about, you

know, reducing their heroin or getting onto treatment options or. Yeah, I think they're really important in space, but they were seen as like the scummy as part.

Daniel Browning: [00:33:06] Of hell NSP.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:33:08] And its P needle and syringe program. Yeah, but they're really important. Been a big part of my. Work. Even here in the Aboriginal community here in Victoria. I did a lot of work around Hep C, you know, it's a very stigmatized area because it's associated with injecting drug use. So then it's like, oh, you know, I'm. But if you take it home, it's like, no, people do inject drugs. We've got to got to reduce the harm that happens. So, um. Yeah. And that. You are really focused on that. I think, you know I too were was injecting drugs and have and points in my life and. Um. I think it was important to me, you know as well to help the mob and help my mob. Now I work in Queer mob stuff, which is, you know, I'm always working in the areas that I identify really strongly with, I guess in. Does that make you a peer worker? I'm not sure. You know, like the crosses over, but. Um. And even in working in HIV prevention and care and treatment and stuff. That was, again, a reaction maybe to my own life, you know. And then then I found people working in sexual health and blood borne viruses. There was a lot of queer mob working in that space because we were passionate about it because we'd seen people pass away. We've seen, you know, a generation of people die from this disease, and we wanted to do something about it and felt passionate about it. So yeah, that was really important as well.

Daniel Browning: [00:34:54] I always think on, you know. You know, the advent of HIV and the AIDS epidemic pandemic, that time is often forgotten or people don't talk about it because there's a lot of trauma associated with it. And those people aren't here. The generation that are gone aren't here to speak for themselves. So, I mean, we have to acknowledge them and we have to say this happened. I remember the fear of being you know, this always attended my my coming out was attended by fear, fear of death. So we were stalked by this specter, this unseen talk about the pandemic now. But we had true fear and there was no real knowledge or support or or we were in it alone.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:35:42] Yeah, I agree. I echo that entirely. A generation of us. That's what we had to come out to. You know, the coming out story involved. Oh, no. If you came out, you'll get AIDS and you'll die. You know, like that was what people

thought at that time. And then I also heard. The most vile, homophobic phobic stuff, you know, like and then that Fred Nile and you know that you deserve this. I think it really impacted on me as well, you know, as a young queer person, you know. So, um. I thought it was horrific, the homophobia. And we should not forget about that. So it we seem to deem to be we know it was not just among gay men, but, you know, there's a bit of a hangover still. And that's the stigma of that time. And, you know, we're. I just think I've come back in. I used to work for like an AIDS council in New South Wales, in Wollongong, in my home town, which was pretty amazing, you know, in a lot of ways. Um. And I used to be a beet outreach worker as well. That was another area of work where you worked at. At sexual health and STI and HIV prevention amongst men who had sex with men who didn't really identify as gay or. Yeah. Yeah. I think I've covered the lines in the parks and the toilet blocks, and I made a health career out of it. It was been pretty amazing. Yeah, but a lot of people just. I know it's a hidden world that people don't know it's happening, you know?

Daniel Browning: [00:37:25] So they want to pretend doesn't exist.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:37:27] Yeah, just pretend it doesn't exist. But I'm like, Yeah, I'm right there in it.

Daniel Browning: [00:37:32] You're drawn to those, like, high intensity and dangerous places oftentimes. Yeah.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:37:39] They are dangerous places as well. But sometimes that's a bit of the appeal as well to be a bit on the edge. You know.

Daniel Browning: [00:37:49] Many health workers wouldn't volunteer to work in those places, but you're drawn to the perhaps it's the area of greatest need or higher stigma.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:37:57] Yeah, I think that's it. And I. That's always feeling like an outsider. Maybe I felt in there that was my place, you know? So that's where the, you know, and the dingos following me in my art. And I was often commenting on beats and stuff in my art in the early days and that. Yeah. So sometimes as the outsider. Yes. Where are you going to go? Naturally, you're going to gravitate towards the areas of the fringes. And, you know, even in mob, the drug users are fringe of the mob and you

know, LGBTI community can be on the fringe of the mob, you know, So that's where you'll find me in the margins.

Daniel Browning: [00:38:38] Um. Look, I think your health work is so important. And I guess though in Sydney at that time in the nineties, you know, I guess there was a sense of hope after we started to see people, fewer people dying in hospices unaided and unsupported by their birth families. There was a sense of not of hope but of just there were ways we could prevent this. What do you remember of Sydney in that period of time? I'm sure you had a lot of fun. And what was what was what was the vibe? What was the atmosphere like?

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:39:15] I'm drawn to 1996 or the Mardi Gras. You know, it was just massive. And, you know, we used to really look forward. I know it's, well, pride, but it felt like Sydney was world pride back then as well. You know, in the nineties, a lot of people came to the Mardi Gras celebrations. And I just remember 96, I think it was an anniversary or something, but I just remember that party and I remember Sidney used to bows and, um. There'd be all these new people in the city. And, you know, it was hot. New people. New people, Yeah. And it was just. Yeah, that's. I. I just loved it, you know? I had a lot of fun and I spent a lot of the nineties in a lot of clubs and with my posse of crew of people and different groups, I often think that was my dingo to, you know, exploring different subcultures within the queer community. And that's the dingo in me as well. You know, maybe not saying forever and ever in a subculture, but enjoying it for a while and then I need to wander off now and yeah, so.

Daniel Browning: [00:40:33] That dingoes is following us in this throughout this conversation. I mean, I had to ask a question about him because he interests me as a metaphor for something else. I knew he was some kind of like a personal totem, but I thought there was a really important part of the story that would help us in this in what we're doing. So I'm glad I asked that question first. So how did you did you walk away from Sydney? Was there a moment where you turn your back on on, on, on that? Or did you just you found yourself moving towards gravitating to Melbourne?

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:41:08] Well, I. From the block. I got onto a public health program. It was a big leap, you know, and I'm not sure how I got on there and on an Aboriginal public health program with a bunch of young sister Lisa, and we supported

each other and moved to Newcastle for a year to do to study. Then I came back to Sydney. Then I ended up on your country, on your own country, doing a placement in Lismore Public Health Office and ended up staying there for a couple of years. I really loved it up. Now there's such a vibrant community and bunch of young country. It's just it's beautiful. Lots of animals everywhere, you know, really. And I had a really special time there. I'm. But I felt it was all a bit transient as well. I don't know. And there are stories and the truth of them, but you go there to heal and there's a lot of all these things about the coast in that Northern Rivers area and.

Daniel Browning: [00:42:21] I believe in the the power of the place.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:42:24] I believe in it, too. Yeah, I could really believe in it. Like, I really think I have a deep connection to your country, and it really took care of me. Um. I had a really incredible meltdown when I first got there, like mentally and. But then I found out I wasn't sort of alone that a lot of people have. And it's just interesting when you you know, we talk about social emotional wellbeing and mental health. Yeah. I don't think people realised how unwell I was or something and I was wondering whether it was a rebound from the drug use that I'd done in Sydney or the years and but yeah, now I've got a diagnosis of bipolar type two so you know, it came. And it took me a while to settle that down. Maybe I always had this thing and maybe I was self-medicating on some of the drugs. And and even now I think about some of the party days, and maybe I wasn't as comfortable in the spaces that I thought I was. And I needed to be more, you know, on substances to get through. And yeah, I think more anxious than I ever was more give credit to. I think it was a really. Now, there was a lot of things to deal with in my life.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:43:41] You know, trying to reconnect wasn't always the easiest reconnection to the community. And I think we've talked a bit about that, you know, the complicated nature, of course, we're complicated, you know, and we're diverse. You know, it's like, yeah, sometimes, yeah, the binaries, you know, this and that, it's more it's yeah, it's not just about binaries, you know. Um. Anyway, I got there and had that, and then I stayed for two years, you know, so that was really cool. And, um. But then I came back down to Melbourne early. 2000s. I'm. 2003. Got a job at that show. I'd come out with a a master's in public health, so I really wanted to come and work in the community and think about indigenous ways of doing public health. In the

early 2000. And I thought working in a community controlled sector would be better, which is a whole Aboriginal community controlled sector across the country. For me to do that. So I ended up working for vitro, and then I ended up meeting my next partner, who's just passed away about a year ago. Ian Kenny You know, I was with him for about 17 years till now, so he's been a really big part of Melbourne and, you know, being was lovely.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:45:05] Um. So. Yeah, I've just been working away at. I stayed at Vetch for about 11 years. Yeah. And I didn't do a lot of art, you know, I had the Victorian Indigenous Art Awards that I focused on each year and I tried to bring a bit of queer into them as well. That was my other activism, you know, like put a bit of a queer bent on the entry award and I did really well. Like I'm out of the ten years I think I made the finals nine times or something. And that's pretty amazing for somebody to not really consistently doing art. Yeah, I'm honored by that. And I won a few prizes and I did a picture on the dingo year. I think that was 215 with sows, the dingo and all these texts. Two works because I love changing mediums. I think it's I don't know, I've got a love hate with the art world and sometimes I just want to keep not being commodified and just keep doing different things. And yeah, I'm still an independent artist and I sort of like that as well. I mean, it's sometimes you think, would you benefit from being in the system a bit more? But, you know, I don't know. You've just got to weight up and my health job I really love as well so it's a nice balance I'm.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:46:24] And I don't know where I'm going. I'm drifting off, but, um. Yeah, I think. As an activist. You know, my aunt always has something queer going on in it, so I think I did one around pronouns one year and, um. Way before we even have discussions and stuff like that, because you meet different people, you know, like there was a trans no non non-binary person that I met and we talked about binaries in and like binaries of all kinds, you know. Go down the rabbit hole and. Look. Yeah. Um. I'm really thankful for all the. The explosion in identity and the rainbow. You know, I sort of as an older queer, I just yeah, I think even me reclaiming queer as been a nod to the next generation reclaiming it as well you know away from yeah I was called a queer see I was called you know I've had that used against me in a horrible ways, but my activist nature wants to claim that back as well. So even though it might be problematic with some of the elders in the community who see it as derogative, I think it's important to just say no. It's a word of activism. Yeah.

Daniel Browning: [00:47:48] Um, I would say to you that all those young people who feel that freedom to express their gender diversity or whatever it might be, um. Don't realize that the people like you and me, anyone who went through a really hard time, made the world that we are in today possible. So we are we are a big part of or unacknowledged part of that freedom.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:48:14] I totally agree. But I feel like recently, just even last year we had a show Rainbow of Tomorrow with all the young queer mom painting and they asked me to be in it as well. So I don't know. And I saw a lot of the young Queer Rainbow Mob. We say Rainbow Mob, you know, at the Share the Spirit, which was on Survivor Day the other day. And I don't know, I feel really.

Daniel Browning: [00:48:40] If you feel really acknowledged.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:48:41] Acknowledged, you know, I feel really acknowledged here in Anaheim and. I don't know. That makes me feel really proud. You know, you get your uncle name and your uncle name.

Daniel Browning: [00:48:56] Are you okay with uncle? Um.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:48:59] Yeah, it depends. I'm not. I'm not. I don't think I've got uncles and elders in my community, and I'm not. But maybe in the queer community. Maybe. Why not be it like a queer? A rainbow mob elder. You know, like and I talked to Uncle Larry from ton of room, and we were talking about that, you know, being community elders as well as not being traditional. So maybe all the little worlds and subcultures, you can have different you know, honoring on a on a systems.

Daniel Browning: [00:49:35] So we're you're working for Vito. You were working for VHA for some years. How did you feel? Did you go back to Sydney at that time? Were you did you have a strained relationship with the city? Yeah. How do you feel about Sydney? And it's the focus of world pride, it has to be said.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:49:53] It is the focus of all pride. And I did have some. I don't know. I did have some issues with it. Yeah. So I haven't really gravitated towards. I did a

project. Um. A theatre project last year in Sydney. And that was interesting. Um. Look, I really. You know, Sydney's a beautiful city. Yeah. I'm. I really had a lot of fun there, you know, and really had a good time in the nineties and, um. I think. Yeah. I feel like I can see. I just feel like we can honor some of the nineties parties and experiences like a world pride as well. You know, and it's great that it's coming to Sydney now and I'll be here. No, I still love Sydney. I like visiting it. I don't go there as much as I used to, but I often go back to Wollongong, you know, like and I had to make peace with a long, long, as you know, growing up there with my identity. Um. Hidden away from me. Yeah. So then I had to go back because then people think, Well, you know, it's interesting. I was doing indigenous art in high school. I don't know what people thought. I didn't ask them what they thought, you know, I just did it, you know, like it wasn't, I don't know, maybe a different time as well. And political awareness and, um. But yeah, I think I went back there deliberately. Not that to make peace.

Daniel Browning: [00:51:26] To make peace with it.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:51:27] To make peace, to make peace with the past. So that's been really good as well. I was even going to be travelling up, but I've decided not to do that. It's just yeah, I mean, I've had a year of. You know, dealing with the grief and some health issues, some eye issues and, um. I just. I don't know. I drove to Shepparton the other day and I thought, yeah, I went after Angel. I didn't last December I went up to Wollongong as well, you know, so. But I think I was just stoned, stunned by the death and grief that I just. Yeah, I was going to go back again this year, but I just decided to just have a rest for a while and set some more boundaries and just see where I'm going. And, but when I went to Wollongong, you know, when I'm there, this is ancestors, a bush turkey came into the place where I was staying and the people there had never seen a bush turkey. So and the bush turkey has some meaning around shared stuff and yeah, that bush turkey meant that, you know, it's just the ancestors coming and. It was okay, you know? So, um. Yeah. I don't know what to say.

Daniel Browning: [00:52:50] My last questions were just about, ah, about pride. And I don't think that word is just a word. It's hollow. And you can't just say I'm proud or you can't. You can pretend to the world that you can look proud. But what is it the lived concept of pride mean to you as a blackfella and as a queer?

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:53:13] Um. The concept of pride. I don't know. I'm proud that I'm here now. I'm proud that I'm here now. I'm here that I've. Had trials and great times, bad times and. But I'm still here and I'm making art. And yeah, I mean, we've got our own festival here in Melbourne, midsummer, which is on at the moment, and I've got some billboards and it's called Queer on Country, you know. So, um. Yeah. And I was. I'm just looking back at them. They're symbolic and they're talking. Yeah, I don't know. That's what Pride is to me, you know, just being kind as well. You know, being always trying to be really loving and try not to do harm, you know, when I don't. Yeah, Um. I know it's not all about. Wearing a rainbow or glitter or, you know. It's about respecting people. It's about, you know, I just want a world where we're. Really respected as well, you know, and. Respecting our differences and respecting their diversity and understanding that diversity. You know, I think there's a. A lot in that.

Daniel Browning: [00:54:45] Yes. Not just an abstract concept or a word. I mean, to me, it's you can't claim that word unless you have done what you've done. And it's come from, you know, risen through your pride or actually found your pride through trauma.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:54:59] Yeah, I think I found my pride through trauma. I'd acknowledge that. And. But I never gave up, you know, like, I just kept going. There's probably times when I could of, um. And madness point now. So I just, you know. Pride is a lifelong thing as well, you know, and. Yeah. If you're having a bad times can change, you know as well, you know, hold on and be resilient. I know we overused that word resilience, but just keep putting that foot in front of another and just keep walking forward and yeah, you never know what's around the corner. Um. I used to think, you know, as an artist, my art wasn't blackfella enough, you know, so. But what is that? You know, I always ask that question. What is blackfella art? I guess we all can, you know, um. Yeah. And then one day I won a prize at one of the art awards, and it was so amazing. But I don't know, I've just always made art as well. So if you've got a creative passion, just nurture it, you know, even if it you can't get dedicated to it full time, you know, just keep doing it and bits of it. And with the ebbs and flows of life, you know more. And sometimes you'll have more opportunity to do more of it. And I don't know, that's what I'd say to creativity. Um. Be aware just what's around you. Be mindful. Yeah, And just. Go forward? Yep.

Daniel Browning: [00:56:48] And I love more deeply. We've all got to look within our own mob, within black mob, but also within queer queer spaces in queer community. I think there's no love. You aren't behaving in a loving or prideful way. I can't believe in the mirage that you're creating about pride or whatever it is identity. If you behave this way towards me.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:57:12] Yeah, I'd. Yeah. I don't know what to say to that.

Daniel Browning: [00:57:17] I just think. I just think sometimes we can't be proud if. If, if our communities aren't making us proud or just treating us in a way that doesn't earn it doesn't make us feel proud.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:57:29] Yeah. No, I agree. We need. We need to support each other, basically. Yeah, we do love more deeply. Try to look past your own. I don't know what it is with people. Judgment. Yeah, I think I did one of those hold up posted signs. Don't. I don't want to be judged because I felt I've been judged a lot, you know, my whole life. You know, I wish that word, that judgment word, would just disappear. But, yeah.

Daniel Browning: [00:57:59] The actual judgment would disappear.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:58:01] Judgment? Yeah. No, I agree. I don't mean that. But that word, the essence of it and just judgment. Yeah, it has to stop.

Daniel Browning: [00:58:11] So true freedom is the absence of judgment. So how are we all. How is any of us free if we judging others and and and treating them with disrespect? So pride for me is a very complex notion. So I'm not 100% I don't always support the idea of it without truly understanding what it means. Is there anything that you want to talk about? No, really. I feel like you've had they've all been long. They've all been an hour and a half, 2 hours, 3 hours. Can I just ask one question? And that is about, you know, in writing the story of your own life, which you have to do, you have to put it back together in a way that makes sense to you when your life is your your identity is diffracted or just your disconnected. So do you feel like you're still writing that story?

Peter Waples-Crowe: [00:59:07] Yeah, I feel like. I think I am writing that story and I actually feel good about myself. You know, at this time of an interview. Maybe I wouldn't have done this in the past because I felt too fractured. And I think one of my preferred method of art making is collage as well. So, I mean, it's been a bit of talk, you know, around it being a queer as we piece together our. Queer lives in a heteronormative sort of environment, you know, and look for elements and things that resonate with us as queer people. But it's also an adopted story and and connecting back to mob. And maybe that's why I'm drawn to collage as well and fracturing things. And, um. Fractures don't have to be a negative thing as well. Light comes in, fractures and yeah, fractures can be beautiful. So that's all I'd say. I'm. But. I think. Yeah, my works have become more simple and bold. And I was wondering, um, this year and, um. Well, maybe that's not true. Maybe they become more complex, but they're often quite fractured. You know, the film I've got at the moment, like a fractured look at the mountain through YouTube, finding old YouTube clips and stuff about the snowy mountain and comparing the playground that it's actually perceived to be with this long culture that we've had there. And and. The snow songs in a you know that I've done you know reclaiming language and that we we're doing so we're doing all this stuff because we were heavily colonized. You know it's a no.

Daniel Browning: [01:00:53] Song as is a actual the record of a song sung by, I think a McGarrigle woman or. Yeah.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [01:01:02] Yeah, it was. And back in 1839, I think was recorded. It was recorded and we've got to go and perform it. Yeah. On the country where it was performed. It was just so incredible. What I mean, how amazing is that.

Daniel Browning: [01:01:19] What is she singing about in the Snow song.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [01:01:20] They're calling a. The women are calling the snow on the moon full moon, too. And they're talking about the snow is an important part that it's needed in the environment. And we know that environment under climate change. And, um. Global warming is really suffering, you know, and it's really precious and fragile and the snow is part of it. Without a good snow season, the rest of the environment doesn't do well. So the songs actually. Calling for the snow to come. Yeah. And just please come, you know? So that was amazing to be part of that and. I'll always be grateful for

being invited to be part of that. I didn't sing it because I'm not a woman, but I played the clap sticks and stuff on on that song. And. And. There was actually some. The research was done through the Explorer's diaries and we found the exact location and there was actually an Aboriginal it was on an Aboriginal. There was a site there too, you know, and, and we had to negotiate with the non-Indigenous farmer to be able to do the song on the on their land. But they were really cool and they come and filmed as well. So um. Hopefully. And that song has now been spread amongst the Aboriginal orgs I'm part of as well, you know, so and performed a few times. So it's about reclaiming culture and um. Maybe my life's been about reclaiming myself, you know, fully and more authentic. And maybe I got tossed away from there for a reason to come back with a. Yeah, I don't see it as maybe I see it as some maybe I wouldn't have done as well, you know, on the country. Um. But, um. Yeah. I don't see my adoption as the worst thing that could have happened as well. So I know there's a lot of stories of people had bad adoptions and but it's not all the narratives. So some of them, like I said, I was loved and yeah, I'm not. I feel any shame about saying that. Yeah.

Daniel Browning: [01:03:42] Hey, thank you so much. I know it's hard to talk about stuff and hard to know what really oral history really means or how you put your life into a few sentences. But I really think that we've, um. Yeah. Thank you for your honesty and your candor and for letting me in and. And just talking to me.

Peter Waples-Crowe: [01:04:01] Thanks, Daniel. I appreciate it. And. Sending love to everyone out there.