

Kate Ellis: Okay. Can you say your name and when you were born?

Olivia Williams Cook: My name?

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: Is Olivia—what am I— C. Cook.

Kate Ellis: Cook. And actually, I'm going to just— I'm just going to say this is Kate Ellis on August fifth, 1994 with Mrs. Cook, also known as Lady Charlotte.

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right.

Kate Ellis: As I said a minute ago, I want to start with the family forms. Actually, I'll cut this for a moment. What schools did you attend?

Olivia Williams Cook: At first, attended a little private school.

Kate Ellis: What was that called?

Olivia Williams Cook: Back in kindergarten. I can't even remember the name of it now.

Kate Ellis: Okay.

Olivia Williams Cook: From there, I went onto McDonogh 24 public school.

Kate Ellis: McDonogh 24?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. [indistinct 00:01:22] grammar school there, left there and I attended New Orleans University.

Kate Ellis: New Orleans University.

Olivia Williams Cook: Uh-huh.

Kate Ellis: So you graduated from McDonogh 24?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. At eighth grade.

Kate Ellis: Okay. Eighth grade. And then New Orleans University?

Olivia Williams Cook: We had the high school and college.

Kate Ellis: Okay. High school and college.

Olivia Williams Cook: Uh-huh.

Kate Ellis: So did you graduate with a college degree?

Olivia Williams Cook: Wait now. Left from there before I graduated and I attended Straight College, that's where I graduated.

Kate Ellis: Okay. So Straight College—

Olivia Williams Cook: And from there, I attended Xavier University.

Kate Ellis: Okay.

Olivia Williams Cook: That's where I pursued tutoring in music, you know?

Kate Ellis: You were trained in tutoring music and teaching music there?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. And then I also had classes in music.

Kate Ellis: Okay. So you studied music—

Olivia Williams Cook: Studied that, yeah. To tell you truthfully, I studied at all three, New Orleans University, music there, I had music here, and music there.

Kate Ellis: Okay. I'm going to put that in here. Studied music at all. Okay. Did you graduate with a degree from Xavier?

Olivia Williams Cook: Xavier University.

Kate Ellis: What was the degree, a BA?

Olivia Williams Cook: A BS.

Kate Ellis: A BS. In music?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: What year was that?

Olivia Williams Cook: [indistinct 00:03:38].

Kate Ellis: Really? Was it—

Olivia Williams Cook: It was a long time.

Kate Ellis: Let me ask it this way, were you in your twenties when you graduated?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Uh-huh.

Kate Ellis: Like early twenties? Because I can just put an approximate—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Uh—huh.

Kate Ellis: I'll just say, if you were born—I'm going to say approximately 1925.

Olivia Williams Cook: Around '25, something like—

Kate Ellis: Okay. Now I need your work history, which means—It says current and most important previous jobs.

Olivia Williams Cook: After the graduation, first I opened up a studio at my home and I taught music. And from there, I ventured on out to playing professionally, you know? Three types, the classical, the jazz, and the liturgical.

Kate Ellis: That's what you were performing?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yes.

Kate Ellis: Okay. Did you perform all over?

Olivia Williams Cook: I've been overseas.

Kate Ellis: Okay.

Olivia Williams Cook: I've been overseas. I've been to Hawaii, which is now—At that time, it wasn't—Hawaii is United States now, but it wasn't then.

Kate Ellis: It wasn't then?

Olivia Williams Cook: No, no.

Kate Ellis: Okay. Would you say that you've been a musician and a music teacher since you got out of college?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: Because that's what I'm going to say here.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. [indistinct 00:05:44].

Kate Ellis: Do you still perform?

Olivia Williams Cook: Sometimes, I don't do it like—I was working—I worked on Bourbon Street for years and years, even when they had the striptease.

Kate Ellis: You worked on Bourbon Street?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yes, on Bourbon Street. At that time, the segregation was such that they wanted the Colored bands but they put you behind the sheet.

Kate Ellis: So you would play in what you call the Colored bands and you would be behind a screen, so you couldn't see—

Olivia Williams Cook: Until some years later, had one fella that had the Sugar Bowl and his name was Frank Panna.

Kate Ellis: Frank?

Olivia Williams Cook: Panna. At that time, he just wanted to be seen playing. In fact, he just—I don't know why he got the chance to—what he did, he put a couple musicians in the back with us, with the screen across them and he'd keep that much open where I would sit at the piano. Where people could see me.

Kate Ellis: That was what he thought would be—He was the owner of this club? What was he—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, he was the owner of the club.

Kate Ellis: And I guess you did what he wanted. You didn't have a lot of choice in that.

Olivia Williams Cook: No. Seemed to draw in more people, you know?

Kate Ellis: Uh-huh. How long did you work at the clubs in Bourbon Street?

Olivia Williams Cook: Oh my goodness, so many years. I told you from the striptease, all of them until about—Back and forth, at that time, that's way back then.

Kate Ellis: How far back?

Olivia Williams Cook: Around in the '70s, '60s, something like that. Up until about a year and a half ago, I stopped working on Bourbon Street.

Kate Ellis: Wait. You've worked on Bourbon Street most of your life?

Olivia Williams Cook: I worked in so many clubs anyway.

Kate Ellis: So can you tell me about that, what that was—First of all, tell me again because I don't think I heard you properly, when do you think you started on Bourbon Street?

Olivia Williams Cook: It must have been somewhere within the 60s, I'm sure.

Kate Ellis: That you started working on Bourbon Street?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Kate Ellis: Okay. And even in the '60s, they kept you—

Olivia Williams Cook: At that time, no. If they had a whole Colored band, we were out. But the Whites and the Coloreds couldn't work together. If I worked in the striptease joints, Colored men couldn't be seen. That's how it was. You understand?

Kate Ellis: I understand, yeah. I'm just thinking about my next question. What was it like to work in the striptease clubs?

Olivia Williams Cook: I had five children to raise. Fathers weren't very interested in raising them, so I had to work to take care of my children. That was my real priority, taking care of my children. I used to work seven, eight hours a night playing music. However, when I got home, most people, you know the idea they have about musicians. But I got through work and I didn't do all those other things, I'd come home.

Kate Ellis: You'd just come home. You didn't hang out, have a few drinks or do whatever.

Olivia Williams Cook: No, no.

Kate Ellis: Seven or eight hours a night playing, that sounds like a lot of time playing.

Olivia Williams Cook: You see what we used to do, at that time they'd alternate bands.

Kate Ellis: So they'd have a couple different bands.

Olivia Williams Cook: Bands, yeah. We'd actually work four hours but we had to sat there eight hours.

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry?

Olivia Williams Cook: We actually worked maybe four hours but we had to alternate. So you had to stay those eight hours.

Kate Ellis: What would you do in the breaks when you weren't playing?

Olivia Williams Cook: Usually I'd go somewhere and sit down and read a book or something like that. Drink a Coke or get a little sandwich. But all this other hanky panky stuff—

Kate Ellis: That wasn't for you.

Olivia Williams Cook: No.

Kate Ellis: Were the folks in the band into the hanky panky?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. They used to rib me.

Kate Ellis: They used to rib you?

Olivia Williams Cook: They'd rib me. A couple of the fellows would say, they got so high, they'd say what they were going to make me do.

Kate Ellis: And what would you say?

Olivia Williams Cook: Not a thing. I just brought my .38 revolver and put it in my pocket.

Kate Ellis: Did they know that you had a .38 revolver—

Olivia Williams Cook: After awhile, one, he got a little, really up there. I said, "Let me alone, honey. Don't do that." I said, "Get [indistinct 00:11:03]. Whatever you want to do, you do. I do what I want to do." You're going to do such and such and such. I said, "I'm not going to say I won't do it but somebody would have known you had a hold of me."

Kate Ellis: Somebody would've known that what?

Olivia Williams Cook: That you had some kind of—I don't know what you call it, but you have a hold of me, meaning that if he tried to do something—

Kate Ellis: He'd have to hold you back?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yes. I would've shot him.

Kate Ellis: Right, and you let him know that. Right.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, so one of the musicians who knew me said, "Y'all don't worry nobody. Y'all better let her alone. I'll tell you, she's got a revolver that she'll use it on you." Oh, and they would try to keep you from the jobs, the Colored women. They tried to keep me from the jobs.

Kate Ellis: Who would?

Olivia Williams Cook: The musicians. Male musicians, they'd try that.

Kate Ellis: How would they—What would they do to keep you from the jobs?

Olivia Williams Cook: Well, sometimes they'd ask for you and somebody might tell them, "She said such and such and such." This lady, just about ten, twelve years ago, someone asked for my band, twice it's happened. And that person told I was dead. They went that far to get the job.

Kate Ellis: And this was ten years, this was not that long ago?

Olivia Williams Cook: Not that long ago.

Kate Ellis: Was this something that you faced all through your musical career, as far as men trying to keep you from—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. They were hard. You really had to be stable, you know. Stand up for your rights.

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: And the way I carried myself, I was able to do it more so, because I kept my self esteem and my respect.

Kate Ellis: How did you do that?

Olivia Williams Cook: I let them know I had a family. I was not there for foolishness.

Kate Ellis: You were there to make a living.

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right. That's what I was there for, make a living. It was kind of rough out there for awhile.

Kate Ellis: When you were working in the striptease, now again you didn't work in the striptease before the 1960s?

Olivia Williams Cook: No.

Kate Ellis: no. Okay. Did you enjoy the music you played? Once you were playing the music, did you enjoy—

Olivia Williams Cook: The music, that's why I went for the music. Because at that time, they had really melodious music, Nocturne, and beautiful music we used to play for those girls—

Kate Ellis: You did. Stripping.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Many musicians would hire me because I was a learned musician. Sometimes they had charts they had to follow. They didn't know how to read. I read. So lots of jobs. That's why I was able to get so many jobs.

Kate Ellis: Because you knew how to read music.

Olivia Williams Cook: I had one gentleman [indistinct 00:14:23] many, many, many years, William Houston, he had a son, William Houston Jr. Well, you remember when we had the second world war? When was that?

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry? The second?

Olivia Williams Cook: World war.

Kate Ellis: In the 40s?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Way back then. He called me. He said, "Look, I want to tell you something. I have to start this way." I said, "Well, just tell it to me." He said, "I don't like a woman to work in my band." I said, "Well, I didn't send for you. You sent for me." He said, "I realize this, but these men don't want learn the music. They want everything by ear. But I know your ability." At that time, he had a 15 or 16 piece. They had orchestras then.

Kate Ellis: This was in the 40s? Uh-huh.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Orchestras. And his boy had to go into the service for two years. And I worked that band for two years, in that band. And after his son got out and he formed his group, I used to work with



his son.

Kate Ellis: What was their name?

Olivia Williams Cook: William Houston.

Kate Ellis: William Houston.

Olivia Williams Cook: Senior and junior.

Kate Ellis: In the 1940s, when you played with this band—

Olivia Williams Cook: At that time, they also had a lot of balls and most of the fairs. The orchestras, at that time, it was very—

Kate Ellis: Do you need to get that phone—let me unhook you for a second.

Olivia Williams Cook: [INTERRUPTION 00:16:13]

Olivia Williams Cook: —they would hire an orchestra. Now you had four to six pieces and whatnot like that. But how much are we getting a night? You played four hours for fifteen dollars

Kate Ellis: Yeah. I was going to ask you about that. Fifteen dollars—

Olivia Williams Cook: For four hours. It actually wasn't even four hours. You had a half hour break, so your actual work was three and a half hours.

Kate Ellis: Fifteen dollars. Huh.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: How about when you were playing in the strip clubs? Well in general, clubs on Bourbon Street, how well did that pay?

Olivia Williams Cook: Well at that time, we might have gotten 100 dollars a week.

Kate Ellis: A week?

Olivia Williams Cook: A week.

Kate Ellis: That doesn't sound much better than fifteen dollars for four hours?

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right.

Kate Ellis: But we're talking about later. You said that was like the 1960s—

Olivia Williams Cook: A little later. Yeah, that was. A little later one, we'd begin to get 250, like that.

Kate Ellis: A week. How many days a week would you play in the clubs on Bourbon Street?

Olivia Williams Cook: We had one day off.

Kate Ellis: One day off? So you played six days a week, seven, eight hours a night. I mean, alternating bands but still, you're out for seven or eight hours?

Olivia Williams Cook: No, and I'll tell you. As we graduated up to the '70s and '80s, the union decided to cut that amount of time. Then we began to work five hours, you see?

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: They'd work for five hours.

Kate Ellis: Now, you mentioned the union. I guess we're going to jump around a bit here. When did you first join a musicians union?

Olivia Williams Cook: I'm eighty-one now.

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry?

Olivia Williams Cook: I'm eighty-one now. And I joined the union about thirty-five years old.

Kate Ellis: Age thirty-five. So almost forty years.

Olivia Williams Cook: When I was playing and they still had those orchestras, that was strictly unionized. You couldn't work in the orchestra unless you brought into the union. We had what was known as union houses. If they said they wanted to be a union house, they would send union musicians. If they hired non-union musicians, they would black wall them.

Kate Ellis: Nobody would work for them?

Olivia Williams Cook: No. No union musicians.

Kate Ellis: So a union house was a club or a performance area that hired union musicians?

Olivia Williams Cook: Musicians, that's right. That's right.

Kate Ellis: I see. So you joined in the '40s and you worked in these orchestras. Now the orchestras, they were all African American musicians?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. I didn't see no segregation was there.

Kate Ellis: So you would never have—

Olivia Williams Cook: No. No. Just after, after, you know when the civil rights come about, just around the time that was, they began to—At that for a long time, then eventually some of the White musicians wanted to play with Colored, and ask. After awhile, a time we'd have more and more get together.

Kate Ellis: So the White musicians would ask to play with you sometimes—

Olivia Williams Cook: Sometimes, yeah.

Kate Ellis: You had belonged, I guess it was to the Black musicians union. I mean it was called—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yes. I belonged to local 496.

Kate Ellis: Local 496.

Olivia Williams Cook: The White musicians was 174. Now in the later years, I can't tell you exactly when, but they passed a rule that the musicians—after the civil rights business, that the White and Colored musicians had to merge.

Kate Ellis: Now this was a federal law that made it that they had to merge—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: So they didn't merge until after the civil rights?

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right.

Kate Ellis: Now, was the Black musicians union, was it an affected union? Did they protect you as a musician?

Olivia Williams Cook: Well, they protect you. Of course, you had to get your own jobs. Now, if you had some trouble with getting your money, they made to see it that way.

Kate Ellis: They'd help you get your money if—

Olivia Williams Cook: Tried to. They tried. Sometimes it was something. And sometimes they wouldn't. Something else I was going to tell you about during that time. The prime objective known—we had was known as the Dixieland music and traditional jazz. That's strictly from the Black bands, strictly. Well after awhile, the White musicians began to get interested. We knew what they wanted. They wanted to be around us, to learn how to play. It was one, two, one, two. Strictly two beat music. But you could do anything you wanted. That's right.

Olivia Williams Cook: And even today, I'm very broad minded, people are people. What you take, like the other night we had a program here, and they had Dizzy Gillespie and [indistinct 00:22:31]. There is a certain feeling a Negro musician has. I don't think they'd ever get that feel. They didn't go through the things we went through, and the slavery. Ain't nothing like that. And certain feels, they'll never get.

Kate Ellis: They just won't ever be able to play it quite like that.

Olivia Williams Cook: Quite like that, no. It's the feeling. If you, for instance, take an example. Amazing Grace. Now that really came from, that's way back, through slavery. You can't get, I'm sure if you get anybody and sing Amazing Grace like a Negro could sing. Just anybody. That's right. They played and all this but there's certain little turns and whatnot, they just don't get it. That's right.

Kate Ellis: As you were saying, you knew, you were saying what the Whites wanted. When they'd come by, they'd want to pick up that music.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. They'd come, many of them. I met many of them. They'd get very friendly with you to learn. As soon as they learned what they thought they'd learn, they'd give you a kick in the pants. They wouldn't work with you no more.

Kate Ellis: What would they do, once they'd learn what they want—

Olivia Williams Cook: They'd go about their business. They might tell you hello, they might not. (laughs)

Kate Ellis: They might acknowledge you, they might not.

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right.

Kate Ellis: Has that created bitterness among Black musicians?

Olivia Williams Cook: No, no, no.

Kate Ellis: No?

Olivia Williams Cook: We just went right on. I know what I have in me. Can't take it from me. I know what I

got now.

Kate Ellis: As far as the Black union and then there was the White union, did members of each union get paid the same amount for gigs or was—

Olivia Williams Cook: No, no, no. The White musicians, way back then, they were getting more money than we got. Them White people were paying more. But I was lucky, and a few others, I worked in an orchestra with Herbert Larry, a long time. And he was a customs officer. And most of our work we got was from the White people. We always got paid a little more.

Kate Ellis: What kind of gigs would those be for the White people?

Olivia Williams Cook: Weddings, balls, dances. Receptions, you know? Things of that nature.

Kate Ellis: When you performed for those folks, how did they treat the band members?

Olivia Williams Cook: That's the thing that opened my eyes. I said them people, they're only fooling themselves. I said, until we get out and play for them, they're doing, almost embrace you. People are people. They just put on things, like all this segregation, all this stuff, that's all a put on. That's all. All of them kidding themselves. When they get with you, and you're doing what they enjoyed you doing, they'll forget all of those things. Everything. I was taught that, way back then, that old man you see [indistinct 00:27:11] don't get angry with him. Just move right along. Carry yourself like a lady. Go right along.

Kate Ellis: That's what your grandfather—

Olivia Williams Cook: Uh-huh. And my grandmother was a graduate nurse, and a licensed midwife. Yeah. She brought all my children into the world, well three of them in the world. Yeah, three. Because my grandmother had came before but she was declining. I had my children right here in this house.

Kate Ellis: Really?

Olivia Williams Cook: I had the windows open, people next door didn't know I was having children. Now in the hospital, they have one baby, they wake up the whole hospital—

Kate Ellis: Wait, you said the windows open, the neighbors didn't know that you were having a baby?

Olivia Williams Cook: No.

Kate Ellis: You kept your mouth shut?

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right, and the midwives do a better job than the doctors. They really do.

Kate Ellis: So your grandmother was a good midwife?

Olivia Williams Cook: Real good one. At that time, she was working with—They had segregation real bad, and the doctor, I think his name was Dr. Williams, I can't be sure. But some people tell him, they'd send for him, you know? Colored people would send for the White doctor, because they hadn't been Colored doctor. And he'd tell them, "What did Mel tell you?" "Said that—" "Well if Mel tell you that, she knows what she talking about, I don't have to come." My grandmother at that time, we had Italians, used to live around here, poor White class, you know. My grandmother brought all those children in the world. I have it somewhere, birth certificates and different things.

Kate Ellis: Of theirs?

Olivia Williams Cook: Of theirs [indistinct 00:29:13].

Kate Ellis: You still have those things.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. I have those things. I have her last card for a midwife. 1936. And my grandfather was a Pullman porter.

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry, was a?

Olivia Williams Cook: Pullman porter.

Kate Ellis: And this was the grandfather was the same grandfather that taught you how to—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, that's right.

Kate Ellis: Okay. Right. They'd be on your mother's side. They're your mother's parents?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: Okay. So he was a Pullman porter—

Olivia Williams Cook: A Pullman porter.

Kate Ellis: —and a piano player or—

Olivia Williams Cook: An organ player.

Kate Ellis: Organ player.

Olivia Williams Cook: And he sang well. He played for, at that time, two of the largest churches here.

Kate Ellis: Which were they?

Olivia Williams Cook: Plymouth Rock Baptist Church, and Mount Moriah Baptist. They're still standing out there, over the avenue there. At that time, he always used to have to pump, you know?

Kate Ellis: One of those really big—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah and then they made the large Hammonds and the others, and you had smaller sizes too, but you had to pump them. Yeah. I used to play in here, down at the other house.

Kate Ellis: At the other house.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: Now, since we're on the topic of your neighborhood, you said that you were born on this street.

Olivia Williams Cook: Right on this street.

Kate Ellis: Can you tell me about this neighborhood, what it was like when you were coming up?

Olivia Williams Cook: When I was coming up, this was one of the best neighborhoods. So many nights, I didn't know where he was, but my children would get sick. 1:00 in the morning, I'd leave out my gate with my baby, walk all the way, five blocks to Calton Avenue. Nobody would bother you.

Kate Ellis: Safe streets.

Olivia Williams Cook: Safe, safe. You can't walk nowhere now.

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: Can't walk nowhere now.

Kate Ellis: Now, if your baby was sick and you'd take her out to Calton, what was out on Calton?

Olivia Williams Cook: The streetcar [indistinct 00:31:43]. Sometimes I'm just waiting around a for streetcar. They ran a little slow at night.

Kate Ellis: And where would you go on the streetcar?

Olivia Williams Cook: To take her to Charity Hospital.

Kate Ellis: Okay. And you said that you didn't know, your husband was out.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. [indistinct 00:32:01].

Kate Ellis: Yeah. Was this is a racially—You mentioned that there were Italians in the neighborhood, poor Italians who your grandmother helped bring into the world, or whose children your grandmother helped bring into the world.

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right. That's right.

Kate Ellis: Who else was around here?

Olivia Williams Cook: Colored people. It was mixed, you know?

Kate Ellis: It was mixed, but mostly Italian and African American—

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right. There were a few Chinese here and there, you know?

Kate Ellis: What were people's livelihoods around here?

Olivia Williams Cook: We had a lot of laborers and of course, a few like my aunt, a few schoolteachers, you know?

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: The Colored doctors were scarce.

Kate Ellis: Are you saying they lived around here?

Olivia Williams Cook: [indistinct 00:32:57] lived around here. Yeah.

Kate Ellis: Just as far as, you said you're Catholic.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: Which church did you attend?

Olivia Williams Cook: Now, I wasn't always Catholic. I was born Methodist. When I reached fifteen years of age, I took instructions, nobody knew. Because I liked those kids, they were better acting kids.

Kate Ellis: At?



Olivia Williams Cook: At the Catholic church. I turned Catholic.

Kate Ellis: Did you say 15 years of age?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yes, sir. And I've been at that same church ever since.

Kate Ellis: Which is? The name—

Olivia Williams Cook: Saint Joan of Arc.

Kate Ellis: Saint Joan of Arc?

Olivia Williams Cook: Uh-huh. And I've been always in that church for 60 years or more.

Kate Ellis: For 60? Wow. Now, was there segregation in that church?

Olivia Williams Cook: No. At that time, we had Colored Catholic churches.

Kate Ellis: Okay. So it was—

Olivia Williams Cook: White Colored Catholic churches. [indistinct 00:34:15] it was Colored. Now, Dellarosa was right there on Calton and Plumber. And if they let you come in, they had a screen.

Kate Ellis: A screen?

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right. You had to sit behind that screen.

Kate Ellis: Wow. I've heard of people having to sit in the back behind a rope. That's amazing that there was a screen.

Olivia Williams Cook: They had built a bunch of the seats like that, where you sit, they had something built up about that high, you know?

Kate Ellis: So you couldn't see?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, I could see [indistinct 00:34:51]. As you consume those two seats [indistinct 00:34:58] nobody else could come in. Just like the street cars. I don't care where you were sitting, if the White guy came in and they needed a seat, you had to get up. Now, I experienced all that. I experienced all that. It's so much, you know? I'm only glad that God let me live this long to see these changes, you know?

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. I never once thought that I'd see the day when you can go into restroom, you know?

Kate Ellis: Yeah. So as you were coming up, it seemed intractable.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: This was the way it was and this was the way it was going to stay.

Olivia Williams Cook: Stay, yes.

Kate Ellis: That's the feeling. It's interesting, as far as it sounds like, as you say, it sounds like it was all around you in the buses, the segregation in the church and—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. [indistinct 00:36:16].

Kate Ellis: And yet, you said that—

Olivia Williams Cook: If you were very thirsty you wanted a bottle of pop, it was called pop then in them days, they had a little window. You had to go to the window. Don't go in. They had the restroom labeled for White and Colored. [indistinct 00:36:46] all that.

Kate Ellis: And you had even segregated orchestras. It's just interesting that you were saying when you played for White people though—

Olivia Williams Cook: They enjoyed the music. Bought you everything, treated you so nice.

Kate Ellis: They'd be—

Olivia Williams Cook: Now and then you might meet up with some of them weren't real nice. That's right.

Kate Ellis: What about the people who would hire you for gigs? Whites would hire you for gigs, were they respectful as well?

Olivia Williams Cook: They do what?

Kate Ellis: The White people who might hire you for a performance, were they respectful as well?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Uh-huh. They were all right. They were all right. I tell you, they were nicer to you, but they had a way about them. They were nice but you knew how far to go. [indistinct 00:37:50].

Kate Ellis: What do you mean you knew how far to go?

Olivia Williams Cook: Well, you knew that you were supposed to be in a certain place, versus when we had our thirty minutes off, you couldn't go walk around that hall. You could sit on the bandstand, or have a place in the back where you'd go.

Kate Ellis: I see. You couldn't mill around or get a drink at the bar or something.

Olivia Williams Cook: No, no, no, no, no. You couldn't do anything like that. No. No. Couldn't do anything like that. [indistinct 00:38:36].

Kate Ellis: I'd like to hear more about your experiences as—I know, this is what we had started to talk about off tape. This is what I wanted to ask you about. You said that originally you were trained as a concert pianist.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yes. [indistinct 00:38:54] you see that Rachmaninoff's prelude in C sharp, minor, I used to play all that. Now I can't do much because I have arthritis [indistinct 00:39:05]. I used to play all that.

Kate Ellis: And what you had said before we started the tape was that, you said there wasn't a place for a Colored musician or a Colored—

Olivia Williams Cook: No, no, no, no. Playing for the opera and houses and whatnot, [indistinct 00:39:21] they hired nobody of Color. Way, way back then, I was young, I'd say I was going to Marian Anderson.

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry, you were?

Olivia Williams Cook: Marian Anderson, she was an opera singer. And she sang many years, just for [indistinct 00:39:46]. Just a little while, I guess before she died, a few Whites would have her, you know? Not like Leontyne Price. Leontyne Price. I had another lady [indistinct 00:40:05] she was at school with me. She was teaching school there at the New Orleans University. Name was Lillian Hubbard.

Kate Ellis: Lillian Hubbard?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. She was a very fine singer too. But same for all people, that's all.

Kate Ellis: So she was really shut out from most opportunities?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Yeah.

Kate Ellis: All opportunities or?

Olivia Williams Cook: Just about.

Kate Ellis: That's a shame.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. See at that time, [indistinct 00:40:45] there's so many places, Colored people, they enjoyed that type of music, you know? They enjoyed their classics. They'd have concerts.

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry. You're saying that Black people, you said enjoyed that music?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Yeah.

Kate Ellis: But they didn't have an opportunity—What are you saying?

Olivia Williams Cook: I mean, that they would hire the Colored people, the vocalists and whatnot, pianists, and then they'd give big concerts. It doesn't cost, you know? The artists would be Colored and—

Kate Ellis: The performers would be. I see. But you could never—Whites would never hire them for that kind of music?

Olivia Williams Cook: No.

Kate Ellis: Now why is that?

Olivia Williams Cook: Way back then, that was just supposed to be for them, I guess.

Kate Ellis: So that music was White people's music?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. I guess that's what they called it. We were able to get, as far as we bought the music and learned it ourselves. But for performances—

Kate Ellis: They'd hire you for a jazz performance or an orchestra performance, or jazz orchestra performance, but not for a classical music or opera performance.

Olivia Williams Cook: No. No. No, no, no, no. See, like the philharmonic orchestra, [indistinct 00:42:07]. Way back then, I think the first man, Paul Robeson, way, way back. You remember? You ever hear about him?

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: He went to Russia, he was there for awhile I believe. But I used to always sit down. My mother was a [indistinct 00:42:36] run the street or nothing.

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry?

Olivia Williams Cook: Didn't let me run the streets like that.

Kate Ellis: Your parents did—

Olivia Williams Cook: No. No—

Kate Ellis: She wouldn't?

Olivia Williams Cook: No. Uh-huh. Always had a yard like this. And sometimes I used to ponder and wonder, as a small kid, would it ever change?

Kate Ellis: Really?

Olivia Williams Cook: Would it ever change? Yeah.

Kate Ellis: Sounds like—I'm sorry. Were you going to say something?

Olivia Williams Cook: No.

Kate Ellis: It sounds like—I asked this in a sense, but you were trained as a concert pianist—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yes, I started, and after I seen there was no way for me to keep going on, there was nothing for me. So I converted to jazz, not that I really cared that much about it.

Kate Ellis: You didn't? I guess that's what I was going to ask in a sort of—

Olivia Williams Cook: I never really cared that much about it, but I had to make a living, you know?

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm. So you did what you had to do.

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right.

Kate Ellis: When you say, in other words, it was okay with you to switch from concert music to jazz.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. I used to love that concert music.

Kate Ellis: I guess that's what I meant. Did it pain you to not be able to be—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. It pained me.

Kate Ellis: I guess that's what I wanted to—

Olivia Williams Cook: It pained me—

Kate Ellis: To not be able to play that kind of music for audiences.

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right. Yeah. It pained me. I really wanted. I was always a girl that liked to be seen doing things.

Kate Ellis: Sounds like you were very talented.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. [indistinct 00:44:32].

Kate Ellis: When you have that kind of talent, I think it must be very difficult to not be able to—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, it is. You had to sit and watch the other fella do it, and you knew you could do the same thing, but you can't get up there.

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: Will you tell me more about how male musicians responded to you as a female musician?

Olivia Williams Cook: Well, they would act up to a certain extent. If they seen they couldn't get fresh with you, you know what I mean by that when I say fresh—

Kate Ellis: I do. Yeah.

Olivia Williams Cook: Well, they didn't have too much time for you. Some jobs, they might, some would say "Oh I'll hire you for this job, I know you can do it," but such and such. I'd say "But such and such, keep your job."

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry. They'd say what to you? They'd say I know you can—

Olivia Williams Cook: This job, but will you let me such and such thing to you?

Kate Ellis: So there was kind of an extra part of the job that they wanted you to perform, so to speak.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: So you'd say keep your job.

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right. Keep your job.

Kate Ellis: I want to see if I got your meaning when you said this a minute ago, if they tried to get fresh with you, and you told them to keep their hands off, then would they—were you saying that they would ignore you, or were you saying that they would just leave you alone?

Olivia Williams Cook: They wouldn't hire me too much.

Kate Ellis: They wouldn't? So they—

Olivia Williams Cook: No.

Kate Ellis: So how difficult did it make your job to—

Olivia Williams Cook: As time went on, I found my own band.

Kate Ellis: You did?

Olivia Williams Cook: Certainly. Certainly. I found my own band I worked with many, many years.

Kate Ellis: And who would you hire, I mean also.

Olivia Williams Cook: I'd hire men. Men who knew I wouldn't take their foolishness. Just play your job.