

Kate Ellis: But you were just going to say that there was something else?

Olivia Williams Cook: I don't know what to tell you, child.

Kate Ellis: I was afraid that you might forget.

Olivia Williams Cook: I don't remember what I was about to tell you. But I have a long time. Well, I tell you about the festivals at the different schools. We have that.

Kate Ellis: The festivals?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: You said that they were called May festivals and—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: —you played at the schools. Then the project, you said, that was music that you would play for different groups that the local union would pay you for?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, in for instance, like mental hospitals and the hospitals in general and the homes for the aged and all like that. Now they've even changed that now.

Kate Ellis: Yeah. You don't really do that anymore?

Olivia Williams Cook: No, the homes have to pay so much and then they pay so much. Not the same thing.

Kate Ellis: Well, I'll rephrase my question since the interview is coming to a close. Maybe it'll jog your memory then to think of what you were going to tell me. Are there things that I haven't asked you about that stand out in your mind, as far as coming up in New Orleans and playing—I don't know, in a sense, the question is your thoughts on how the segregation that we've talked about, the Jim Crow, affected your musical career?

Olivia Williams Cook: It really affected mine, just I was strictly working to be a concert pianist. That was my desire. That really affected me. I had to say I couldn't do it. I had to do what I had to do.

Kate Ellis: At what point did you realize that that wasn't going to be a possibility?

Olivia Williams Cook: Well, after I got to be a girl about seventeen, eighteen years old, I said it wasn't going

to happen.

Kate Ellis: How did you realize that that was—

Olivia Williams Cook: Because of the things you'd read in the paper, things that was happening, how they were acting with Colored people, killing you and lynching you and doing everything. So you don't really need to push something like that.

Kate Ellis: Yet you said you weren't going to push it?

Olivia Williams Cook: No, no, no.

Kate Ellis: When you say things—I mean, yet—

Olivia Williams Cook: No, man.

Kate Ellis: —there was killing and lynching, but you could—Blacks were allowed to play jazz music. So I guess what I'm—how did you know that you couldn't play—

Olivia Williams Cook: Who's going to hire me? Who's going to hire me? See what I mean?

Kate Ellis: Yeah.

Olivia Williams Cook: Who's going to hire me?

Kate Ellis: And it was just clear that you would not be hired?

Olivia Williams Cook: No.

Kate Ellis: If you went to—I don't know where you'd go, who would you—If you went to somebody hiring a concert pianist, what would they have said to you?

Olivia Williams Cook: Let me give you an example.

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry?

Olivia Williams Cook: Let me give you an example. One morning, I had a look at the paper and I liked to work for the kindergartens, eighth grade—I always liked to work for children. Dance reviews. There was one day I called the lady. "Oh," she said, "Yes, come on out." That was like the front part of town around Constance Street. I think that was where that was.

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry, where?

Olivia Williams Cook: Constance Street. Anyway, it was around—You know where Loyola?

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: Around that section.

Kate Ellis: Really? And Tulane, that area?

Olivia Williams Cook: That's St. Charles area.

Kate Ellis: Yeah. Okay.

Olivia Williams Cook: So I went on to answer. So I was walking and the lady evidently, she was looking over the fence to wait to see somebody coming. Well, I ain't know who I was going to. I looked, I see she doing this.

Kate Ellis: You looked and she shook her head?

Olivia Williams Cook: She shook her head. "Oh," she said, "No, don't do that." She said, "Come. I should have been frank with you that I wanted a White person." Oh, she says, "No." But she was kind enough to give me cab fare.

Kate Ellis: After she said she would only hire a White person, she gave you cab fare?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Cab fare. So you know.

Kate Ellis: That's how you realized?

Olivia Williams Cook: I know what I seen.

Kate Ellis: And this was for what kind of job again? For a—

Olivia Williams Cook: Kindergarten.

Kate Ellis: To play music for kindergartners?

Olivia Williams Cook: For the kids, yeah.

Kate Ellis: I see.

Olivia Williams Cook: For the kindergartners.

Kate Ellis: That would have been, I see, concert music?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. It was—

Kate Ellis: Concert piano for kindergartners.

Olivia Williams Cook: See, I still had—I studied and trained all different types of music. I had all that.

Kate Ellis: Right. She just shook her head.

Olivia Williams Cook: As a matter of fact, like you take like the fellows like to make these little bands, a lot of them, they don't know nothing how to read no music. They just pick it up. But actually I was a read musician.

Kate Ellis: Yeah.

Olivia Williams Cook: I studied. And for a while I was disgusted. I said, "Oh no." I said, "Something will break after a while."

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry, you said?

Olivia Williams Cook: I said, "Something will break after a while." And after a few years, see my family coming. I didn't get married until I was twenty-three. My first kid was born when I was twenty-seven. So I said, I really want [indistinct 00:06:18].

Kate Ellis: I'm sorry, you're—

Olivia Williams Cook: I probably [indistinct 00:06:23]. But after I see I got a lazy husband. Lazy husband.

Kate Ellis: Oh, your husband?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, my husband. Not this one, the first husband.

Kate Ellis: No, the first husband.

Olivia Williams Cook: This man comes around me, take care of my children.

Kate Ellis: Really? So he helped raise them?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. So I said, "Well, I just got to do what I got to do." I had good common sense, I had a job to do. Well, I had no time to be out there fooling around with men, all the crazy stuff.

Kate Ellis: You mean traveling as a musician? What do you mean fooling around with men?

Olivia Williams Cook: No, no, I mean—

Kate Ellis: You mean like—

Olivia Williams Cook: In the streets at night drinking and all that stuff. At that time, no.

Kate Ellis: Because you had to raise your family?

Olivia Williams Cook: Uh-huh. That's right. Once you [indistinct 00:07:21]. At that time, if you were living [indistinct 00:07:25] to bring manuscript [indistinct 00:07:26] together, it stopped. Well, at that time, you had a lot of manuscript. That's written music.

Kate Ellis: Yeah.

Olivia Williams Cook: And as soon as they see me, a lot of White people go, "Hire her."

Kate Ellis: A lot of White people would say?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. "Hire her."

Kate Ellis: You mean for—

Olivia Williams Cook: I'd be the Colored band. They'd come for the band, I'd be there. A lot of them. We would go and see who was going to get hired.

Kate Ellis: Wait. Say it again.

Olivia Williams Cook: We would go to see if we were going to be hired. You would go for an interview. So I told them, as soon as they'd see me, they'd say, "We want that lady. Can she sing?" I said, "Yes." "Hire her."

Kate Ellis: So you got hired because of your talent?

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right.

Kate Ellis: By a lot of different White—

Olivia Williams Cook: That's right.

Kate Ellis: —White people who needed—

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, yeah.

Kate Ellis: But you said around the time when you were, I guess, a sort of older teenager, young woman, thinking about having a career as a concert pianist, before you realized that that wasn't going to be a possibility. Did you just say that you gave it—I mean, there was like a two or three year period when you were trying to get jobs in that—

Olivia Williams Cook: What for?

Kate Ellis: —as a concert pianist?

Olivia Williams Cook: Oh, no, no. As long as that, I thought they would give after a while.

Kate Ellis: Okay, that's what I was—Okay.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: Can you think of other examples where you would be turned away like that? I mean, what happened with that woman who turned you away and gave you the cab fare, was that something that you experienced a lot?

Olivia Williams Cook: After I was careful.

Kate Ellis: After that, you said?

Olivia Williams Cook: I was careful of neighborhoods. I saw the addresses and went no.

Kate Ellis: You wouldn't—

Olivia Williams Cook: Or if I'd call, I'd tell them, "I'm Colored." "Oh, thank you very much. Thank you for calling, but no."

Kate Ellis: And that would be it?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. Yep.

Kate Ellis: That must have hurt?

Olivia Williams Cook: Oh, yeah. But you learn to live through those things. You learn to live through it.

Kate Ellis: It's really striking to me that Whites had in their mind the music that Black people could play and

not play. That jazz was something that they wanted to see African Americans perform and they wanted to learn from, but classical music was off limits.

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

Kate Ellis: Did you ever find that curious?

Olivia Williams Cook: Well, for the first thing, they had this Philharmonic Orchestra and all that type. Well, the public as a whole, more White attended that, you see?

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: So that cut me out right there.

Kate Ellis: The fact that—But Whites would also attend jazz concerts?

Olivia Williams Cook: Oh yeah, they liked that. They liked that.

Kate Ellis: But because those who attended Philharmonic concerts were predominantly White—

Olivia Williams Cook: That was the White.

Kate Ellis: What?

Olivia Williams Cook: They were those that attended the Philharmonic halls? They were White. Whites.

Kate Ellis: And because it was only Whites attending—

Olivia Williams Cook: In fact, we couldn't. We couldn't go there.

Kate Ellis: Like to the, what was it called? The Municipal Auditorium?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, it just [indistinct 00:11:28]. Municipal [indistinct 00:11:29] We couldn't go there. Oh, no, no, no. We couldn't go there. [indistinct 00:11:37] the theaters, they had downstairs for the White and upstairs for the Colored. Yeah. That's right. Well, through it all, I've enjoyed it. I had some good times. And like, going overseas, there was one place I didn't like, and that was Finland.

Kate Ellis: Finland.

Olivia Williams Cook: Everywhere you turn they would watch you.

Kate Ellis: Oh really?

Olivia Williams Cook: But they wouldn't watch you because you were Colored, now.

Kate Ellis: They weren't watching you because why?

Olivia Williams Cook: You were Colored. They were watching you because you were American.

Kate Ellis: Oh, really? But they weren't like that in Norway?

Olivia Williams Cook: Oh no, no. I see one night we went out to play and all the places there, things closed early. We were in Oslo, Norway. It was after twelve o'clock I think so. The hotel, the proprietor of the hotel, on the way flying he had somebody make us all kind of sandwiches and whatnot [indistinct 00:13:01]. They were very nice.

Kate Ellis: They looked after you?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, oh yeah. Looked after us. Yeah. Well, I tell you, traveling like that, it's so educational to you. So much education. A lot of the stuff you read and stuff, your books, it's nothing like seeing it yourself. It was fascinating to me what I seen. I see it look like this over in—Where were we? One part of Spain. You know what time it was? Eleven o'clock at night.

Kate Ellis: And it was this light outside? Uh-huh.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. And at a certain time—Where was that? Finland, it never really get dark. Now in Norway, a certain time of year, you just go to bed, pull your shades down and go to bed.

Kate Ellis: Get it dark—

Olivia Williams Cook: No darkness. Another thing you learn anyhow, are people in the school, education, whatnot, it was really fascinating to see how the fowl, chickens and all that, little things, short things, apples, like that.

Kate Ellis: Small.

Olivia Williams Cook: And the pears, all them all small.

Kate Ellis: You see a lot.

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah. When I was in Spain, I used to see the Spaniards come along and they wanted those, what you call those things now? Not mussels, not the oysters. Clams. They'd buy them, open them while they're raw. Ugh.



Kate Ellis: Throw them in their mouth. (laughs) That wasn't appealing to you?

Olivia Williams Cook: Oh, no, no, no, no. And I wanted—What did I want? Something I wanted. Oh, I asked, I wanted a salmon salad. I didn't know. Now that's when they guys had been over there. They try to make a fool out of you. They laugh at you, order those things. Then they would come with that salmon, it was raw fish. Oh, no, no, no.

Kate Ellis: That didn't work for you either?

Olivia Williams Cook: No, no, no.

Kate Ellis: Do you have old photographs?

Olivia Williams Cook: Yeah, I have photographs. I have one I can give you right—with my band. You want one of those?

Kate Ellis: Mm-hmm.

Olivia Williams Cook: All right.

Kate Ellis: Let me check this out.